

## Long-term Consequences of Adolescent Gang Membership for Adult Functioning

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### MISSION of SDRG

To understand and promote healthy behaviors and positive social development among diverse populations, we:

- ◆ Conduct research on factors that influence development
- ◆ Develop and test the effectiveness of interventions
- ◆ Study service systems and work to improve them
- ◆ Advocate for science-based solutions to health and behavior problems
- ◆ Disseminate knowledge, tools, and expertise produced by this research

**Adolescent gang membership** is known to have short-term adverse consequences, including criminal behavior such as violent offending and drug activity, difficulties in school, and violent victimization. Less is known, however, about the long-term effects of gang involvement on adult functioning. Research from the University of Washington Social Development Research Group (SDRG) investigated the broader, long-term public health consequences of gang membership. This is the first article on gang membership ever published in the *American Journal of Public Health*.

### Gang Membership

Gang involvement was assessed among the 808 participants in the Seattle Social Development Project (SSDP). The project began in 1985, when participants were age 10, and has continued into their adulthood. The questions about gang membership

were asked several times throughout adolescence and into adulthood. Later, to assess adult functioning, participants were asked about a broad range of topics including illegal criminal behaviors, educational and career achievements, and physical and mental health. To reduce the likelihood that other pre-gang adverse conditions experienced by gang members were not the source of poor outcomes, a type of analysis known as propensity score matching was used to ensure that there were no differences with regard to a broad range of childhood risk factors between those who joined a gang and those who did not.

### Results

About 21% of the SSDP sample ( $n = 174$ ) reported ever being a member of a gang. Researchers performed logistic regression analyses to compare adult functioning of gang members and non-gang members. Table 1 shows the

### Key Messages

- About 21% of the original SSDP participants recruited from schools serving high-crime neighborhoods reported gang membership between age 13 and 19.
- Those joining a gang in adolescence were significantly more likely to report criminal behavior, receipt of illegal income, incarceration, and drug use problems in adulthood than those who did not join a gang.
- Those who joined a gang in adolescence were also significantly more likely to report poor health and welfare receipt in adulthood, and less likely to have graduated from high school on time.
- Findings suggest that effective gang prevention efforts may result not only in reductions in adolescent problem behavior but also in healthier, better functioning adults.

**Table 1. Results of Logistic Regression Analyses Assessing Whether Adolescent Gang Membership Predicts Adult Functioning at Age 27–33: Odds of outcomes in adults who as adolescents belonged to gangs**

Adult Outcomes	Odds ratio*
Illegal behavior	
Self-reported crime	2.94
Receipt of illegal income	3.66
Incarceration	2.37
Educational and occupational attainment	
High school graduation	0.58
Welfare receipt	1.69
Health and mental health	
Poor general health	1.72
Alcohol abuse or dependence	1.13
Drug abuse or dependence	2.77

\* All effects are statistically significant except for alcohol abuse or dependence. Results are shown after propensity score matching.

differences in adult functioning after statistical matching (the pre-matching results can be found in the article). Results indicate that adolescent gang membership has negative long-term consequences on adult functioning, even after controlling for a broad range of related risks. Those involved in a gang during adolescence were nearly 3 times as likely to report committing a crime in the past year and were 3.6 times more likely to report receiving income from illegal sources. In the area of educational and occupational attainment, those belonging to gangs in adolescence were almost 40% less likely to graduate from high school and almost 1.7 times more likely to have received welfare. The study also found that adolescent gang membership predicted poorer physical and mental health in adulthood. Specifically, those who had joined a

gang in adolescence were about 1.7 times more likely to report poor health at age 27, 30, or 33 than those who had never joined a gang. They were also nearly 3 times more likely to meet the criteria for drug abuse or dependence in the preceding year. This is noteworthy because, prior to this article, gang membership had been seen mostly as a criminal justice concern. This study shows that it is a broader public health issue.

### Conclusion

Gang involvement during adolescence resulted in significantly worse functioning in adulthood. Such negative adult functioning has considerable public health implications. Effective gang prevention efforts may result not only in reductions in adolescent problem behavior but also in healthier, better functioning adults.

For additional information on this topic, please refer to the original article:

Gilman, Amanda B., Hill, Karl G., Hawkins, J. David (2014). **Long-term consequences of adolescent gang membership for adult functioning.** *American Journal of Public Health, 104(5), 938-945.*

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