



Gang Risk Factors among Urban Jamaican Youth: A Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

Jamaican gang scholars attribute youth gang membership primarily to criminogenic conditions of the family and community contexts but sometimes neglect micro-level characteristics. While social factors are salient contributors of youth gang involvement, they do not encapsulate the multiple risk factors and the interactive processes through which an individual decides to join a gang. This study seeks to explore the multidimensional precursors of gang membership. Data were gathered by semi-structured interviews of gang members in areas of West Kingston, Jamaica. The findings reveal that risk factors of gang membership rest on the multidimensionality of neighborhood conditions, broken homes, antisocial peers and negative personality traits. The study contributes to the gang research literature by presenting a cross comparison of gang risk factors found in the US based literature to the urban Jamaican context.

Keywords: Risk Factor; Jamaican Gangs; Youth.

Introduction

Youth gangs are pervasive worldwide and are particularly pronounced in societies with weak governance structures. Over the years, gangs have expanded to more sophisticated leadership, political agendas and organized roles (Sullivan, 2006). A fearsome aspect of gangs is their propensity to engage in violent and property crimes and commission of drug offences (Spergel, 1995). Studies in the United States revealed that gang members engage in a disproportionate amount of violent crimes and juvenile homicides, with more than 25 percent of homicides being gang related in 65 percent of US largest cities (Block, 1985). Cities with population of 250,000 tend to be adversely affected by gang related crimes than smaller cities. Most gang related crimes are facilitated using lethal weapons, such as firearms and the use of vehicular transportation provide quick access to and from target destination. Gang members tend to have greater arrest records, longer criminal participation and higher rates of recidivism than non-gang involved youth (Spergel, 1995). In comparison to non-gang members, gang members are three times more likely to be involved in drug sales, twice as likely to carry a firearm (Bjerregarrd & Lizotte, 1995), and are more likely to be a homicide participant or victim (Spergel, 1995). Law enforcement officers and criminal justice practitioners have often stressed the fiscal and social cost of youth crime and related disorders in society, citing significant concerns for existing

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policies and appropriate responses to the gang problem. Due to the correlated problems of gang membership, it is imperative to empirically understand the motivations and causes for gang involvement among youth. Doing so will increase appropriate responses to intercept criminal behaviours and to weaken malignant factors that fuel gang membership. The current study serves to investigate risk factors of gang membership among urban Jamaican youth to determine the applicability of risk factors noted in the extant literature, primarily US based, to that of the Jamaican context. Due to the small amount of studies that have been conducted on gang precursors in Jamaica, the author primarily look toward the US based literature for information concerning gang risk factors.

Risk Factors for Gang Membership in the United States

A concrete definition of “gang” remains elusive due to widespread disagreement in the literature (Esbensen, Tibbetts, Gaines, 2004). Definitional inconsistencies stem from the changing nature of gang activities and the dominant prevailing ideology (Spergel, 1995). This discrepancy creates difficulties to discern gang-related crimes versus crimes committed by other groups, and for comparative purposes among police departments (Klein, 1995). Experts that have attempted to define the concept have either employed a behavioural or symbolic component (Spergel, 1995). The behavioural aspect encompasses the range of the gang’s criminal activities, such as the sale and distribution of drugs, gang-related homicides, and instrumental and expressive violence; the symbolic component may include the individual’s identification as a gang member, idiosyncratic manner of attire, colors, and turf demarcations (Spergel, 1995). Ball and Curry (1995), purported two primary means of gang definition, termed implicative and denotative. The implicative method view gangs as a group of adolescents with common interest sharing a social space (see Moore, 1978; Vigil 1988). And, the denotative method standardizes the key properties of the gang (see Knox, 1991). A universally accepted definition of gang has been offered by Klein, but not without criticisms (see Bursik & Grasmick, 1993). He conceptualized gangs as “any denotable adolescent group of youngsters who (a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in the neighbourhood, (b) recognize themselves as a denotable group (almost invariably with a group name) and (c) have been involved in enough delinquent incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighbourhood residents and/or law enforcement agencies” (as cited in Spergel 1995, p.11). Klein has been criticized because his first two criteria of gang can easily be met by other social groups and fraternities (Esbensen, Tibbetts, Gaines, 2004).

Community characteristics

Neighbourhood conditions such as perceived access to drugs, feeling unsafe in the neighbourhood, low levels of attachment, high arrest rates, and neighbourhood disorganization have been shown to correlate with gang membership (Hill, Howell, Hawkins, Battin-Pearson 1999). Community-level predictors of gang membership have been examined by Gilman, Hill, Hawkins, Howell and Kosterman (2014) at different time periods and found that measures of neighbourhood conditions, such as crime, drug sales and abandoned buildings were predictive of gang membership and for each unit increase in this variable, the hazard of the youth joining a gang increased 2.4 times (p.212). Communities that are disadvantaged are often precluded from legitimate access to resources to generate economic and social capital for their communities. Resource deprivation, in return, fosters low levels of collective efficacy and causes fear and

demoralization among residents (Skogan, 1990). It can be postulated that the accumulation of poor neighbourhood condition fosters youth participation in gangs by forcing youths to develop alternative means of economic viability—though short term—through the gangs' criminal activities.

Family dynamics

Gang memberships have been linked to the structure of the family and family process variables (Thornberry, 2001). Youths who experience a family transition and reside in a non-intact home have a heightened probability of gang membership. The impact of family structure on gang membership extends to the family the youth creates; youth raised by a teenaged father and whose parents engaged in criminal acts also have an increased risk of being a gang member (Thornberry & Khron, 2003). Social process family variables relate to gang membership includes parents' attitudes toward crime, financial stress, sibling anti-social behaviour, family conflict, victimization (Vigil, 1988). Poor family management practices in childrearing, disciplining and bonds, are key family process variables that impact gang membership (Thornberry, 2001). In addition, low parental attachment, low levels of supervision and child maltreatment predicted male gang membership (Thornberry & Khron, et al. 2003).

School factors

Parental engrossments in their children's education and aspirations for their children have been shown to have a positive effect on children's educational performance across subject areas and cumulative GPA (Fan & Chen, 2001). Conversely, youth that are less committed to school and have low aspirations are likely to become delinquents (Thornberry, 2003). Further research has shown that parental aspirations for the child and negative labelling by teachers are factors related to gang involvement (Thornberry and Khron, 2003). Other studies have linked low commitment and poor achievement on test scores to gang membership (Hill, et al., 1999; Thornberry et al. 2003 as cited by Bjerregaard & Cochran, 2012). Youth who feel unsafe at school are also more likely to become gang involved for the protective benefits (Esbensen et al. 1993).

Peer factors

Delinquent peers are thought to provide medium for group delinquency (Hawkins, Smith, Hill, Kosterman, Catalano, & Abbott, 2003). Youth that are exposed to delinquent peers are more likely to hold delinquent beliefs than youth with little or no exposure (Akers, 1966; Sutherland 1947; Thornberry et al. 2003). It is presumed that as youths enter the adolescence stage, the influences of parents are diminished (Mounts & Steinberg, 1995; Johnson, Marcos & Bahr, 1987) and the influence of peers becomes paramount. As adolescents begin to spend an increasing amount of unsupervised time with their peer group, the peer group begins to function as a resource for providing short term goals and social protocol concerning adolescents' behaviour (Mount & Steinberg, 1995), as well as social pressure to engage in deviance (Johnson, Marcos, & Bahr, 1987).

Negative peer influence is a consistent predictor of gang membership noted in Trinidad (Katz & Fox, 2010), the United States (Klein, 1995; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Spergel, 1995; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, Tobin, 2003) and Jamaica (Brathwaite, 2009). Associating with negative peers increases the risk of gang involvement and other forms of

delinquent behaviours. This association is also linked to additional precursors of gang involvement, such as weapon carrying, alcohol and marijuana use, and early sexual intercourse (Braithwaite, 2009).

Individual factors

Studies have identified individual factors as potent precursors of gang membership. Youth who have been exposed to or partake in early forms of delinquency are at an increased risk of later gang membership (Eitle et al. 2004). Correlated with early delinquency, personal victimization increases the risks of gang membership (Decker and Van winkle, 1996; Thornberry & Khron, 2003). Individuals identified as learning disabled, hyperactive and having poor refusal skills have a significant chance of being gang involved (Hill, Howell, Hawkins, Battin-Pearson, 1999). Dupere, Lacourse, Willms, Vitaro, Tremblay, (2007) found an association between negative personality traits and residential instability, noting that youth with negative traits and who lived in concentrated disadvantage have an increased risk of becoming gang involved.

Cognitive factors

Few studies have been conducted on youth moral disengagement and crime. The studies that have measured the “moral compass” of deviant members show that youth rescind moral standards if it permits acceptance among their peer group. Disengagement of morality generally occurs within setting that fosters and rewards the behaviour antithetical to dominant moral standards (Emler & Reicher, 1995). Due to a failure of self-regulation guiding actions and thoughts, youth are more apt to engage in deviant behaviours (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Kiriakidis, 2014). Moral disengagement, then, is posited to account for a part of the youth social-cognitive process that increase risk for gang membership.

Jamaican Context

Jamaica is classified as the third largest island in the Caribbean with an area of 10,991 square miles and a population of 2.7 million people. The country is comprised of 14 parishes, divided into 3 counties: Cornwall, Middlesex, and Surrey. Comparatively small to other nations, Jamaica holds a historic recording for having one of the highest murder rates in the Caribbean and the world (CIA World Fact Book). Much of the crime in the country has been attributed to gangs. Per law enforcement reports, more than 80 percent of murders are gang related and more than half of assaults and robberies are committed by gang members (Gang Assessment 2012; Harriot, 2001; Lemard & Hemingway, 2006).

Gangs in Jamaica are predominantly located in the southern part of the island, particularly in the historic region of West Kingston where the earliest political gangs were formed. West Kingston is noted as the bedrock of gang activity as it holds the most violent and longstanding gang communities, such as “Tivoli, Rema, and Jungle”. These communities have historic gang membership linked to the political era of the 1960s, even though much of what exists now are non-political in nature. Gangs that originate in these communities are hardened, organized and structured and members engage in variegated crimes both locally and internationally (Charles, 2002; Harriot, 2001, Price, 2004, Sive, 2002). These gangs are much more difficult to reach and dissolve due to entrenchment in their communities of origin. Nonetheless, there are also areas of West Kingston that has

varying levels of gang organizations, ranging from social gangs, community and criminal gangs (Harriot, 2004, 2007, Leslie, 2010; Mogensen, 2005).

Gangs' identity in Jamaica emerged through fierce competition among party lines and spatial localities. Communities were geographically and socio-politically divided based on political allegiance. This meant that individuals in a community would vote exclusively for a political party. The two parties are the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) and the People's National Party (PNP). Per Charles (2002) explanations, "Rival identities become salient in the electoral competition as we-they antipathies set in where the in-group members see the out-group members as threats to be eliminated to maintain support for their party and hence their economic survival" (p. 32). The propensity for violence is amplified during election season because the consequences of defeat are monumental not only for the political candidate who will lose his/her seat in parliament but also for communities that are dependent on state resources. Consequently, gang members would incite violence against opposing community members to ensure political dominance; voter fraud and intimidation were effective means used by partisan thugs to gain political leverage (Charles, 2002).

The development of "politicized ghettos", proverbially termed the "garrison", created a haven for the development and sustenance of organized crime groups. Political leaders assume a critical role, albeit a tacit one, in the sustenance of dons² in inner city areas by concentrating state resources within the ambit of the don's control. This is illustrated by the government disbursement of funds estimated at 3.1 million JMD to dons in 2001. The funds were to be used to refurbish the downtown markets, implement security procedures, and relocate vendors in West Kingston. The actions of the state actors unambiguously illustrate that politicians are a formidable element of the criminal subculture and that the state affords the means to buttress the strongholds of the dons (Johnson & Soeters, 2008). The benefits procured by the dons are large. It is estimated that dons earn an average of 400 million per year. Most of the income is acquired through extortion, money laundering, robbery, illegal gambling, and state contracts (Johnson & Soeters, 2008).

Based on the National Gang Assessment Report (2012) there are estimated to be more than 300 gangs in Jamaica. Gangs have increased from 213 in 2011 to 247 in 2012; this reflects 34 new gangs within a one year time frame. An even greater proliferation of gang membership is evident within the months of January 2009 to September 2010 whereby more than 100 gangs emerged in various cities across the country³. Much of the gang growth is evident in transient and migratory gang parishes, such as St. James, Westmoreland, and Clarendon. The accelerated growth in gang membership is partially a representation of the re-organization and regeneration of gang factions due to police targeting (National Gang Assessment, 2012).

² A don is the leader of a criminal organization and who exerts tremendous social, economic, and political influence over members of his community and gangs/gang members.

³ The author partially attributes the increase in gang numbers to the extradition of Christopher "Dudus" Coke in the year 2010. The extradition fueled a backlash from gang members in the West Kingston region who violently fought the national security forces to prevent his arrest. The numbers represent gang members' recruitment and extension of membership from surrounding areas to better combat the police force.

There is a need for a comprehensive theoretical framework guiding Jamaica's criminological discourse on gangs. Much of the literature is inundated with various sociological explanations as to why youth become gang members, citing factors such as negative peer influence, poverty, and a delinquent subculture, among other sociological antecedents. Despite the general principles behind these explanations, sufficient attention has not been devoted to the exploration of micro precursors and the integration of these factors to provide a useful framework to understand the gang phenomenon. Due to a theoretical deficiency, the extant literature is heavily drawn from U.S criminological theories on gang formations.

Method

The current study employed semi-structured interviews to explore gang risk factors among Jamaican youth and to understand how said factors coalesce to contribute to gang membership. The sample relied on 10 individuals who: (1) self-identified as gang members (2) had been a part of a gang for at least one year, (3) directly participated in gang activities; (4) and, as a group, had held different leadership roles/statuses in the gang. These criteria were selected in order to create some amount of sample variation and to ensure that the participants interviewed had direct knowledge and experiences of gang activities.

The research entails the non-probability techniques of criterion and snowball sampling. In this type of sampling, the units were selected on the basis that they have features needed for further inquiry. Participants were selected on pre-defined criteria that align with the study's purposes. However, the criteria were comprehensive to include individuals from different background and statuses; the purpose of this selection is to gain diverse experiences. Existing participants helped to refer additional participants.

Access to certain individuals, such as gang members, poses challenges to researchers due to the nature of their activities, the high degree of secrecy in certain criminal organizations, and the participant's status. Therefore, a facilitator with extensive knowledge and experience with gang members was employed to help seek out participants. Upon permission of the prospective participants, they contacted the researcher directly or provided her with permission to initiate contact. Interviews were done in a semi-public location in participants' community. Alternative semi-public places included the park. Participants were given \$10 CAD or (1000 JMD) as remuneration.

Research questions

1. What are the risk factors of gang membership among Jamaican youth?
2. How do these risk factors motivate gang membership?

Informed Consent

Informed consent was achieved by explaining the purpose of the study and reading a statement of consent to the participants. Their consent to participate was verbally recorded and was subsequently noted on the consent sheet. In adhering to SFU REB guidelines, participants were advised of their right to withdraw participation at any point during the research without any form of repercussions.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is one of the hallmarks of qualitative research. Given the sensitive nature of the study, earnest efforts were taken to ensure confidentiality which included the removal of identifiers. A pseudonym was chosen at the beginning of the interview and all personal and geographical identifiers were removed during the transcription process. The original recordings and handwritten notes were kept in a secured cabinet. No identifying information was disseminated in any public outlets. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and notes were taken for participants who preferred not to be recorded. Data analysis was performed by examining the transcripts and identifying themes that were uniform as well as highlighting negative or contradictory cases. Themes were analyzed by hand as well as the Nvivo software. Interviews were conducted in the authors' native language – patois – and translated into English.

Results

1. Economic Necessity

Inner city communities in Jamaica are marked by high levels of poverty, unemployment, broken homes and social decay. These communities are also affected by a disproportionate amount of serious and violent crimes, especially violence stemming from gang warfare. Most individuals who reside in inner city communities are not gainfully employed and persons who are employed work in the secondary labour markets. Ricardo described his community as "...an inner-city community, people who do basically just the norm, domestic work, sweep the street, site works, all of those things, clean the gully, those are the average work inner-city people will do". Because of broader societal restraints and lack of viable employment opportunities, people resort to the gang to earn an income from criminal activities. Karl illustrates:

You have some people who do not have any food so the gang members or the don would provide food...and clothing, and send children to school. A gang leader is about providing for people around him. Because unemployment is high in the garrison, people don't really oppose the gang thing.

Troy stated that:

Plenty of people in the garrison have no work, barely any food to eat so we just must do anything to survive...sell on the streets, drive taxis or rob people. Most people decided that some jobs don't give you enough money to live off so if they can make more money doing crime then that's what they will do.

2. Peer Influence

All the participants noted the influence of deviant peers in contributing to their gang involvement. Peer influence led to gang membership through two main modes: (1) peer influence through existing ties, and (2) peer influence as protection. Peer influence through existing ties occurs through a process of informal socialization where youth who reside in the same community and attend the same high school naturally cluster together and form a peer group. Familiarity with each other is the premise upon which friendship ties are based.

Karl described how his gang evolved from a peer group:

It originally started off as a crew, just me and my friends hanging out since grade seven. We grew up together from the same community, we grew up fighting for each other, like any outsiders, anyone who violate. We used to eat together, walk in a group together, and hang out together after school. We would go to Port Royal and cook. You find that some girls wanted to flex with us; girlfriends, friends, everybody until we decided to call our self [P. Crew]. It got big, something like 20 of us, so when we got older, we started doing a whole heap of wrongs and things started getting serious with guns and illegal things.

Gangs are sometimes selected on their ability to protect their members. Ricardo explained that after being physically attacked on numerous occasions by gang members from the rival community, he decided to join a gang for his protection:

In 1994, I used to work good and do everything good. In 1994 three of us got shot, I got shot in my right foot, a female and another male got shot. So, from that day I really looked at things differently. When I got shot in that same month I was going up half way tree and saw six youth on a bus and all six of them jumped me, so I had to defend myself. I grabbed a knife and tried to run off the bus but they kept running after me...they didn't know I was from down the road they thought I was from a rival community. Mark's brother swore that it was a man from my side that killed his father and I didn't know anything about that shooting. Mark came with the intention to kill anybody, just to shoot up our corner, luckily the police came and catch them even though the police wanted to arrest us too thinking that we were involved. It was community members that told the police 'no, they are the ones being attacked', so since that day, I said to myself that I'm not going to risk my life again. I'm going to choose a side.

A sense of immediate danger or threat to one's life causes youth on the corner to solidify and organize into gangs. The need for protection not only increase gang membership but serve to create new gangs.

Mark explained that:

Our community has always been involved in shooting, that's just the way it is since the political days because it is the politicians that gave us guns and that's how it started out. Now, my community and the next community have been at war since forever so if they kill somebody here then we will have to retaliate. We just have to come together and get in the gang thing to protect our own life.

3. Family influences

The dynamics of family life can serve as an impetus for gang membership and occurs in two modes: (1) intergenerational influence where gang membership is deemed inevitable and where rank in the gang is transferred from father to son, uncle to nephew, or brother to brother, and (2) family instability that creates a hostile environment for the youth.

Barry noted the overwhelming impact of intergenerational influence on his gang involvement:

My family has been around since 1980 until this day. They have been reigning and [are] still in power. My uncle, who is really the known one passed away...given that my father is back, the power still stays in the family.

Barry credited the influence of his uncle in stimulating his desire to participate in the gang:

I just became who I wanted to be, I wanted to be a don so much because I grew up beside of him. I grew up hearing him tell people that he is going to keep a dance and he gave orders to the men. I grew up listening to those orders he gave out and wanted to pass out those orders, what kept me from doing that was the amount of money I had to spend.... I cling to my uncle and a lot of things I know now he taught them to me.

Outside of intergenerational influences, family hostility serves to push youth into gangs. Family hostility often arises when parents in inner city communities are not bonded to their children in an affectionate and prosocial manner. Many parents neglect to demonstrate love and understanding to their children. Ricardo revealed:

I have a father but it seems like I don't have a father. I don't know if I should call him daddy or what, is not only me, my brothers and sisters have the same problem...you see my mother now, it's five of us and when we do something wrong she doesn't come to us and say 'please I'm begging you not to do such and such' all she does is to bad us up so I would just walk away. If she had made me listen to her that would have made a difference.

Dennis illustrated how the harsh disciplinary practices of his father forced him to act out at an early age during football games with his friends:

My daddy was a firm, firm man, with that firmness he had, I had a fear for him. I always think that I wouldn't mind if he just goes away and never comes back so that I could have my freedom to go to the ball ground and play with my friends. He never gave us time to watch TV or have any fun...the amount of vengeance I would have in my heart for him, I would go to the ball ground and show it. I had a lot of rage in me so I would really play rough with the other youth, I would tackle them too hard and kick them too hard.

While criminogenic forces at the meso level are paramount risk factors of gang membership, it would be imprudent to postulate that all youth faced with similar neighbourhood or family characteristics will seek out gangs. In fact, some participants noted that they were raised in nuclear families but seek out gang membership in high school as they yearn to get respect in their neighbourhood. As such, it is important to delineate individual differences that contribute to a heightened risk of youth participation in gangs. Micro-level factors uncovered in the analysis included fearlessness, early delinquency, and rebelliousness.

4. Rebelliousness

Individuals who demonstrated rebelliousness during childhood have an earlier onset of gang membership; they tend to have a leadership position in the gang structure and an intense desire for the gang lifestyle. Barry provides a poignant illustration of the rebelliousness-gang nexus. Barry became a don at the age of nineteen by overstepping his uncle's authority.

How I rose to power was when I stood up to my uncle and say 'I'm not taking any more handouts, you cannot give me that'. Other persons felt the same way but was too afraid to say anything. They came to me and I just took it up on myself and say that we are going to do it our way.

5. Early Delinquency

At the age of 12-15, prior to the youth official involvement in gang activities, participants self-reported the commission of delinquent acts. Ricardo recalled aspects of his anti-social behaviour during adolescence:

As a youth you do little things, not bad man things, just break a glass, throw a stone or something, nothing really great until it reaches a stage where it started to include badness. Plenty of times I used to fight in school. I would fight for any and everything. We (me and my friends) wanted people to fear us. We wanted to show them that we cannot be messed with.

Similarly, Dennis recalled his delinquent acts prior to gang involvement:

Alright, I have a dirty mouth. I used to be like 13, 14 and hanging with youth age 18, 19 so they are going to treat me like the foolish one; so, I used to tell them to suck their mothers, not because I am the youngest means that you are going to take advantage of me...countless times I used to fight.

Individuals with rebellious traits tend to be driven more by an intense desire to prove themselves and to exact power and control over their peer groups and affiliates; these individuals tend to demonstrate early deviant tendencies, such as throwing stones, engaging in school fights, and theft.

6. Fearlessness

Participants noted the lack of fear in conducting criminal activities and a sense of apathy toward death. Fearlessness is compacted by a nonchalant outlook on life demonstrated by the gang member's cognizance of the dangerousness of his activities and knowledge that one day he may be killed. Barry elucidated:

I made up my mind that I was not going to run away, badman don't run away. I always have a saying [that] it's a good day to die. I always repeat it to myself, 'today is a good day to die'...From the age of 13 I never fear death, at that age I stole my uncle's bike and ride it along windward road, I lost control of the bike, cracked my head at the left corner—that gave me sixteen stitches, broke my arm, fracture my foot but that didn't stop me

Chris stated that

You can't fear nothing, really. Everybody has to die eventually but I'm not going to let anyone take my life so easily. Fear is useless. I've never been afraid of no one, police, teacher...even my parents couldn't tell me what to do...I wanted to be bad and I loved being bad.

7. Power and Respect⁴

Power is an integral objective for gang members, especially for individuals that seek a leadership role in the organization. Power as an intangible asset provides benefits such as money, guns, and the autonomy to create and/or recreate subcultural codes. As Dennis illustrates:

Power! Power is the main one. Financially the money is good but power! Lots of power! I can be at home and decide to tell a youth to kill Tom Jones and they kill him free of cost, extortion is my main priority because they know I have the power when I check a business man, they would pay up quickly.

Ricardo illustrates how his role as a don afforded the power and respect to implement informal laws in his community:

A lot of things used to happen before I became a leader, you would have a man at a dance that sees a girl and she looks sexy and bring in his friends to sex her off. I have sisters and I would never want that to happen to any of them, because of the respect I had from the elders and community members, I stopped those things from happening.

Individual risk predictors, as mentioned above, are contributory influences of gang membership. The factors are evidenced at an early age and prolong throughout adolescence. These precursors, however, do not operate unitarily. Environmental conditions and structural disadvantages exert a profound influence on micro characteristics and the outcome behaviour of the youth.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study illustrates the varying risk factors of gang membership in the Jamaican context. Environmental characteristics in the United States, such as unemployment and poverty have similar effects on youth involvement and motivation to become a gang member in Jamaica. Structural conditions of poverty and disorganization are embedded features of the Jamaican society rooted in inequality and most pervasive among the working class. In 2001, 16.9 percent of the Jamaican population (i.e. marginalized poor) were still living in poverty (Henry-Lee, 2005) and in 2012, 14.2 percent of persons were unemployed. The highest levels of unemployment are in the inner-city regions of West Kingston.

Individuals precluded from mainstream employability reroute themselves to gang membership in these communities (Harriot, 2000; 2003). In a similar manner to the

⁴ These constructs are combined because they are highly related to each other.

United States, illicit income-generating activities serve as a motivating factor for Jamaican gang membership (Hill et al. 1999); (Skogan, 1990). The structural disadvantages evident in the United States are more severely pronounced in Jamaican inner city communities as access to basic amenities, including housing, clean water, sanitary conditions, and welfare provisions are limited and sometimes nonexistent in garrison areas. Such structural blockages to economic viability (Skogan, 1990); Thornberry (2001) have been repeatedly shown to foster youth participation in gangs.

The U.S literature has demonstrated a negative effect of poor family structure on deviance (Cherlin, Furstenberg, Chase-Linsdale, Kiernan, Robins, Morrison, & Teitler, 1991). Non-traditional households, headed by a single parent, increases the likelihood of youth gang membership due to lower levels of supervision of youth and lower likelihood to engage in adequate family rearing practices. In the communities of West Kingston, non-intact homes can foster a social space that engender violent behaviours of parents, inadequate child care, and exposure of children to criminal and anti-social behaviours at an early age (Gayle, 2009). These behaviours are then emulated (directly or indirectly) in broader social domains. Boys, especially, are prone to these influences. When parents are harsh in discipline and low in responsiveness, this accelerates negative behaviours of the youth and serves as an impetus for criminal behaviours and gang involvement (Gray, 1991; 2004; Smith & Mosby, 2003).

Peer influence is one of the most consistent predictors of gang membership (Katz & Fox, 2010) Trinidad, (Klein, 1995; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Spergel, 1995; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, Tobin, 2003) the United States and (Brathwaite, 2009) Jamaica. The results of the study reveal that such influence operates through the mechanisms of *protection* or *existing ties* or a through a combination of both conduits. The peer protection focuses on the ability to create formidable group to protect the interest of its members from outsiders. Youth who come together for protection usually reside in the same community and occupy the same block, colloquially termed “lane”. These peer groups later morphed into gangs and gang factions to prevent further victimization or to solidify its group against rival gang members.

The second conduit of *existing ties* involve the formation of peer groups, usually from the same community, that later matured into more formal gang structures. This structure is often expanded to include youth from similarly situated neighbourhoods. Peer association is particularly important as it involves not just group association but an emotional investment of such association which makes it difficult to sever the group relationship.

The research also shows that negative affective traits, such as fearlessness and rebelliousness are strong contributors of youth becoming gang involved. For example, a youth that was raised in a hostile family environment and experienced harsh parental discipline are more likely to develop negative traits early on in life that may later escalate to more serious criminal involvement. The U.S. literature illustrates that youth who demonstrates negative affective traits, on average, participated in early forms of delinquency prior to gang involvement (Thornberry, 2001). Individual traits, however, are weaker predictors of gang membership and are reinforced by criminogenic neighbourhood conditions. These traits developed because of prolonged exposure to disorganized structural conditions and encountering negative social experiences.

The propensity for gang involvement, linked to early forms of badness and rebelliousness, is also influenced by the subcultural context in which the youth reside. The

subcultural context is a development or response to systematic marginalization. PerObika Gray (2003) work, inner city youth develop specific modes of adaptation to structural oppression and stigmatization from members of the general society. In return, they reproduced their own forms of values, material consciousness, and reality that garners self-expression and creation of a distinct identity. Within this subculture, certain values are heightened such as badness, toughness, and fearlessness. Youth raised in this culture generally have a heightened need for power and respect. The most viable way to attain power and respect is through gang membership and occupying a leadership role in the gang that generates the space for expression of these characteristics. Though these traits provide a defence mechanism for inner city youth marginalization, it nonetheless generates a subculture of deviance that fuels gang membership (Gray, 2003).

Policy Implications

Policies targeting the gang problem should engender a hybrid approach that focuses on social intervention as well as crime control. Most crime control approaches have had tentative impact on gang reduction primarily because suppression tactics often negate the root causes of the issues. Suppression alone is inadequate to control the breeding of new gangs and gang members. A hybrid approach would incorporate social services into existing crime control policies. Such services include, but are not limited to, the provision of community centers, after school programs, family interventions and crisis intervention services to deal with the high rates of conflict and violence in the garrison communities. Providing employment opportunities and education/skills training to marginalized youth in the inner city will help to avert gang membership. Social cognitive therapy and counselling targeting negative behaviours, such as fearlessness and rebelliousness, will be vital in addressing underlying personality traits that exacerbate the likelihood of gang involvement.

One of the programs that have had measurable success in reducing gang membership and subsequent violence is the longstanding Peace Management Initiative (PMI) and the Citizens Security and Justice Project launched in 2008 that aimed to “reduce and prevent the incidence of crime and violence, improve delivery of judicial services and strengthen crime management capabilities” (Youth Opportunities Limited, 2008, p.1). The Peace Management Initiative funded by the Ministry of National Security seeks to avert and reduce gang violence through consultations with key stakeholders (both legitimate and illegitimate) in the community involved in the delivery of law and order. PMI underscores the importance of community development and social interventions in volatile garrison constituencies. As such, the thrust of the program is concerned exclusively with the prevention of gang related violence and the provision of social services for at risk youths (Leslie, 2010).

PMI work to defuse hostile situations that may generate gang rivalry, negotiate peace among conflicting gangs, and respond to residents’ needs. Counselling and leadership development opportunities are provided to at risk youth and gang members. Civil society plays an integral role in the operation of the program as the committee is comprised of church representatives, faculty members at the University of the West Indies and Members of Parliament. The initiative is currently active in more than 50 communities in the Kingston Metropolitan regions and in a few volatile communities in Montego Bay (Leslie, 2010).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite the applicability of the study's findings to other contexts where gangs have emerged, there are a few limitations that need to be addressed. The perils of snowball sampling caused the sample to be restricted to gang members who are familiar with each other as some members reside in the same community and are apart of the same gang. This technique created a homogenous sample that may have shared views and experiences. While the homogenous sample is useful for identifying similar cases, traits and characteristics for the study's inquiry, it can limit the types of participants sought after. A larger sample is useful to generate greater variation and diversity.

A larger sample size would also be useful to determine how well the risk factors relate to different types of gangs. Also, given that some of the participants were inactive or former gang members, their perspective may differ from active gang members as time has elapsed since their direct participation in gang activities. The participants may also have been reluctant to discuss more intimate issues concerning their gang membership.

A mixed method approach would be useful to further explore and substantiate the findings. Data triangulation (i.e. observations, interviews, and police statistics) can serve as an effective tool in lending further credence to the antecedents of gang membership. Future research should explore themes, such gender to broaden the direction of the study. Despite the study's methodological limitations, this project represents a strong exploration into the life of gang members and brings us a little closer in understanding the precursors and motivations that fuel gang membership among urban Jamaican youth.

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