

# **RACE AND GENDER DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GANG AND NONGANG YOUTHS: RESULTS FROM A MULTISITE SURVEY\***

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Most examinations of youth gangs have been limited to a single city or a single state. In this article we examine gang affiliation in a multisite survey of 5,935 eighth grade students in 42 schools located in 11 cities across the United States. We use this diverse sample to examine two related issues: the demographic composition of gangs and the level of delinquent activity of gang members compared with nongang members. Our findings call into question the validity of prevailing notions about the number of girls in gangs and their level of delinquency involvement, and the number of white youths active in gangs and the extent of their illegal activities.

In the past 100 years, volumes of research have been produced describing gangs, gang members, and gang activity. Currently there is heightened concern that although the American violent crime rate is declining, the juvenile violent crime rate is increasing (Fox 1996). Some commentators attribute this increase to the increased role of juvenile gangs in drug trafficking and other illegal activities (Spergel 1995). Combined with the stereotypical image of gang members (e.g., an African-American or Hispanic male), this belief about gang-based drug sales reinforces the myth that the American crime problem is a "minority" problem. On the basis of findings reported in this paper, we are led to question how closely

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gang affiliation and associated criminal activity are restricted to minority males.

### METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Juvenile gangs have often served as the focal point for delinquency research and theoretical development (e.g., Cloward and Ohlin 1960; Cohen 1955; Miller 1958; Short and Strodtbeck 1965; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, and Chard-Wierschem 1993). Historically the study of gangs has been descriptive (e.g., Asbury 1927; Campbell 1991; Hagedorn 1988, 1994; Moore 1978; Puffer 1912; Spergel 1966; Thrasher 1927; Vigil 1988); it has relied chiefly on observational methods, thus providing a wealth of information about specific gangs and their members. In spite of some excellent descriptive accounts provided by recent gang researchers (e.g., Campbell 1991; Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Hagedorn 1988, 1994; Harris 1988; MacLeod 1987; Sullivan 1989; Vigil 1988), we have little information about the composition of gangs relative to the adolescent population as a whole. Bursik and Grasmick (1995:154) summarize gang research by stating that the "emphasis has been on the depth of data, rather than the breadth."

More recently, social scientists have turned to two types of quantitative data. First, some gang researchers rely on law enforcement records to describe gang offenses and gang members (e.g., Curry, Ball, and Decker 1996; Curry, Ball, and Fox 1994; Maxson and Klein 1990; Spergel 1990). This body of research parallels the general picture of gang members as disproportionately male and members of ethnic/racial minorities, an image often reinforced by the popular press. Because of enforcement strategies that tend to target individuals with these characteristics, in conjunction with a general reluctance to accept the notion that girls<sup>1</sup> can be gang members, this finding is not surprising.

A second quantitative approach employs survey methods to study gang behavior (e.g., Esbensen and Huizinga 1993; Esbensen, Huizinga, and Weiher 1993; Fagan 1989; Thornberry et al. 1993; Winfree, Backstrom, and Mays 1994). Regardless of study design or research methodology, there is considerable consensus about the high rate of criminal offending among gang members, including crimes against person and property, substance use, and drug distribution and sale.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper we consciously use the term *girls* rather than *young women* in support of young women's movement to reclaim their power as girls, absent the negative connotations of the past. In her recent address to the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, Christine Alder (1997) introduced us to this new perspective.

In spite of this consensus on behavioral traits, the demographic characteristics of gang members remain the subject of considerable disagreement. The primary purpose of the current study is to review the literature and to provide a descriptive account of the differences and similarities between gang and nongang members based on one of the largest general surveys undertaken to assess the American gang problem. We are interested in four questions related to the gender and ethnic composition of gangs:

- What percentage of gang members are female?
- Are girls in the gang as delinquent as boys in the gang?
- What is the ethnic composition of gangs?
- Are members of ethnic minorities in gangs involved disproportionately in delinquent activity?

### **GENDER AND GANG MEMBERSHIP**

The nature and extent of female delinquency and gang membership is poorly understood. Throughout the history of criminology, female involvement in crime has been a neglected research topic, largely because of the belief that women's level of participation and seriousness of offending are too insignificant to warrant serious attention. For instance, females are not considered in the works of Cohen (1955), Cloward and Ohlin (1960), or most criminological theory and research before 1970. Even in more recent conceptualizations of female delinquency (e.g., Chesney-Lind and Shelden 1992; Triplett and Meyers 1995), female involvement in gangs is largely ignored or presented as an insignificant issue. Chesney-Lind and colleagues (1996:194) refer to girls in the gang as "present but invisible."

Estimates of the prevalence of females in gangs vary greatly, as do descriptions of their involvement in gang activities (e.g., Bjerregard and Smith 1993; Cohen et al. 1995; Curry et al. 1994; Esbensen and Huizinga 1993; Goldstein and Glick 1994; Huff 1997; Klein and Crawford 1995). Most estimates place the figure in the single digits and perpetuate the stereotype of girls as auxiliary members relegated to gender-specific crimes (i.e., seducing males, concealing weapons, and instigating fights between rival male gangs).

Researchers, however, have begun to question this view of female delinquency. As early as 1967, Klein and Crawford (1995) reported that their caseworkers' "daily contact reports" identified 600 male and 200 female gang members. In other words, 25 percent of the Los Angeles gang members identified by caseworkers in the 1960s were female!

This estimate is consistent with results from recent general surveys. Bjerregard and Smith (1993) report that 22 percent of

girls in their high-risk sample (i.e., from socially disorganized neighborhoods) were gang members. These 60 girls accounted for 31 percent of the self-reported gang members in that survey. Cohen and her colleagues (1995) interviewed approximately 520 youths (age 10 to 18) in their evaluation of 13 drug and gang prevention programs. When program and nonprogram youths were combined, girls accounted for approximately 21 percent of self-proclaimed gang members. Esbensen and Huizinga (1993), during their four years of interviews with high-risk youths in Denver, reported that girls made up 20 to 46 percent of the gang members. When the ages of their longitudinal sample ranged from 11 to 15, 46 percent of the gang members were female. When the sample had reached the age range 13 to 19, girls accounted for only 20 percent of the gang members. These findings tend to support the belief that girls age in and out of gangs earlier than boys.

In contrast to these figures, which are derived primarily from adolescent surveys, other researchers (e.g., Curry, Ball, and Fox 1994; Goldstein and Glick 1994; Huff 1997) report that females account for fewer than 10 percent of the gang members in their studies. For example, a study of 61 large and small police departments yielded a total of 9,092 female gang members, representing less than 4 percent of the total (Curry et al. 1994). Similarly, Goldstein and Glick (1994:9) state that "males continue to outnumber female gang members at a ratio of approximately 20 to 1."

We can identify two main sources of the discrepancy between these two sets of estimates: the research methods utilized to produce the data, and the age of the sample members. Case studies, observational studies, and studies relying on law enforcement data tend to produce lower estimates of female involvement than do general surveys. This difference may well be an artifact of differential recording policies for males and for females. In the operating manual for the Los Angeles Sheriff Department, a youth is classified as a gang member when he or she admits to gang membership. The manual, however, questions the validity of female self-nomination: "These same females will say they are members of the local Crip gang; however, evidence has shown that this is not so" (Operation Safe Streets 1995:40).

The second methodological issue, the age of the sample, may be more significant. The Esbensen and Huizinga (1993) study reported a lower percentage of girl gang members as the sample aged. Additional evidence suggests that girls mature out of gangs at an earlier age than males (e.g., Fishman 1995; Harris 1994; Moore and Hagedorn 1996; Swart 1995). According to Harris (1994), girls are most active in gangs between the ages of 13 and 16. She suggests

that "by 17 or 18, interests and activities of individual members are directed toward the larger community rather than toward the gang, and girls begin to leave the active gang milieu" (p. 300). Thus gang samples consisting of older adolescents or gang members in their twenties tend to produce a substantially different picture than studies focusing on youths of middle school and high school age.

### *Female Delinquency and Gang Membership*

Are girls as delinquent as boys, especially in gangs? The prevailing view is that girls account for very little of the violent crime in society; and this also applies to gang crime. Law enforcement data continue to report female delinquency as considerably less prevalent and less violent than male delinquency. In 1995, for example, girls under age 18 accounted for only 14.6 percent of juvenile arrests for violent crimes and 26 percent of juvenile arrests for property crimes (U.S. Department of Justice 1996:217).

With respect to female gang activity, the Denver Youth Survey reveals that girl gang members account for only a small percentage of all active offenders but commit more violent crimes than do non-gang boys (Huizinga 1997). The stereotype of the girl as sex object and limited participant in the gang's delinquent activity apparently requires reexamination. For example, in Rosenbaum's (1991) study of 70 female gang members who were wards of the California Youth Authority, none of the females mentioned sex as playing a role in her gang involvement. Several of the girls in Huff's (1997) study, however, reported that they were forced to engage in sexual activity with male gang members. In a clarification of these opposing findings, Miller (1997) states that the girl's status in the gang determines whether she will be subject to forced sex with the gang boys. Thus it may be that this stereotype of gang girls as sex objects is more an artifact of the data-collection technique and of the age of the youths sampled than of the actual distribution of the behavior in the targeted population. Furthermore, the traditional focus on girls' sexual activity may have distracted attention from their "other" delinquent pursuits.

Anecdotal observations in the mass media suggest that females have become more violent and more crime-oriented in recent years. Evidence supporting such increases, however, is largely missing (see the critique of the media construction of girl gangs by Chesney-Lind, Shelden, and Joe 1996). In an attempt to address this issue of a "new violent female offender," Huizinga and Esbensen (1991) compared self-reported data from the 1978 National Youth Survey with 1989 data from the Denver Youth Survey; they found no evidence of an increase in violent offending by females. Moreover, in

his comprehensive review of the literature, Spergel (1995:58) concludes that "there is no clear evidence that female gang members are increasingly involved in serious gang violence." Chesney-Lind and her colleagues (1996:189) note similarly that the "rise in girls' arrests more or less parallels increases in arrests of male youth."

### **RACE, ETHNICITY, AND GANG MEMBERSHIP**

In spite of questions about the generalizability and reliability of ethnographic gang studies, such studies have proved to be a rich source of information about the ethnic and racial composition of gangs (e.g., Campbell 1991; Hagedorn 1987; Moore 1978, 1991; Vigil 1988). This depth of coverage, however, may have engendered one of gang researchers' greatest racial myths: One consequence of these studies is an assumption that gang members are youths from ethnic or racial minority backgrounds (e.g., Fagan 1989; Spergel 1990). Police-based studies often support these conclusions. In the national survey conducted by Curry and colleagues (1994), approximately 90 percent of gang members are African-American or Hispanic. Spergel (1995:59) concluded his review by stating that the "dominant proportions of blacks and Hispanics identified as gang members based on police reporting seem hardly to have changed, although the numbers have increased in the past twenty years."

As with gang research in general, much of what is known about ethnicity and gangs is derived from case studies of specific gangs or cities. Yet even the more general surveys of youths do not include diverse enough samples to adequately address the race/ethnicity composition of gangs. The Denver and Rochester longitudinal studies (e.g., Bjerregard and Smith 1993; Esbensen and Huizinga 1993; Thornberry et al. 1993) were concentrated in high-risk neighborhoods; such neighborhoods, by definition, include disproportionate numbers of racial and ethnic minorities. In the Denver Youth Survey, for instance, African-American or Hispanic youths accounted for almost 80 percent of the entire sample and approximately 90 percent of gang members (Esbensen and Huizinga 1993). Such samples hardly permit examination of gang membership by ethnicity.

The emergence of the underclass concept (Wilson 1987) as an explanation for the apparent increase in gangs (Hagedorn 1988; Vigil 1988) has focused attention on ethnic and racial minority gang membership. This perspective can be seen as an outgrowth of social disorganization theory (Shaw and McKay 1942), historically the dominant social structural explanation for gang activity. Covey, Menard, and Franzese summarize the effect of ethnicity on gang membership:

Racial differences in the frequency of gang formation such as the relative scarcity of non-Hispanic, white, ethnic gangs (Campbell 1984) may be explainable in terms of the smaller proportion of the non-Hispanic European American population that live in neighborhoods characterized by high rates of poverty, welfare dependency, single-parent households, and other symptoms that characterize social disorganization. (1997:240)

The early gang studies by Thrasher (1927), Puffer (1912), and Asbury (1927) were a rich source of information about white urban gangs. These gangs were described according to nationality, not race or ethnicity; not until the 1950s did commentators identify gang members by race or ethnicity (Spergel 1995:8). This apparent change in gang composition is tied closely to the social disorganization of urban areas and the research focus on urban youths. As researchers expand their efforts to include a more representative sample of the general population, the problem is likely to be redefined. The 1995 National Youth Gang Survey, a survey of law enforcement agencies, illustrates how expanding the sample can affect the apparent parameters of the problem. That survey, which included nonurban law enforcement agencies, found gangs to be present in communities with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants (National Youth Gang Center 1997). With this wider coverage, it seems inevitable that the description of the demographic (especially racial) composition of gang members will change.

### *Gang Membership, Ethnicity, and Rates of Offending*

In addition to the ethnic composition of gangs, another important issue is the extent of involvement in delinquent activity within the gang. Are minority gang youths more delinquent than white gang members? Among the researchers who have examined differential rates of adolescents' offending by race/ethnicity (e.g., Curry and Spergel 1992; Elliott and Ageton 1980; Huizinga and Elliott 1987; Lyons, Henggeller, and Hall 1992; Sellers, Winfree, and Griffiths 1993; Winfree, Mays, and Vigil-Backstrom 1994), relatively few have explored whether differences in offending exist within the gang. Two studies that compared Hispanic with Caucasian gang members produced mixed results. Lyons, Henggeller, and Hall (1992) found slightly lower rates of self-reported offending among Hispanic youths; Winfree and his colleagues (1994) found no difference between the two groups. In their comparison of African-American with Hispanic gang members in Chicago, Curry and Spergel (1992) found higher offending rates among African-American males.

Most investigations of gang offending have been restricted to ethnically or racially homogeneous gangs. Therefore, the issue of ethnic differences in offending has rarely been explored. Many ethnographic and case studies of gang members, as discussed above, tend to have limited generalizability. Similarly, some of the general surveys reported recently have been restricted to "high-risk" areas and thus limit the ability to examine ethnic differences in offending.

In the current multisite study, considerable population and geographic diversity allows for closer examination of the gender and ethnic composition of gangs. We use this diverse sample from 11 cities to examine the demographic characteristics of gang members in relation to nongang members and to investigate behavioral differences and similarities between males and females and four ethnic groups (whites, African-Americans, Hispanics, and Asians).

### RESEARCH DESIGN

This investigation of demographic and behavioral differences between gang and nongang youths is part of a larger evaluation of the Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) program, a school-based gang prevention program. Therefore, evaluation objectives dictated site selection and sampling procedures. Because the G.R.E.A.T. program is administered to seventh-grade students, we surveyed eighth-grade students to allow for a one-year follow-up while at the same time guaranteeing that none of the sample members were currently enrolled in the program. We conducted this multisite, multistate cross-sectional survey in spring 1995. Site selection was limited to cities in which the G.R.E.A.T. program had been delivered during the 1993-1994 school year, when the targeted students were in grade 7.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Site Selection*

We used records provided by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, the federal agency supervising the G.R.E.A.T. program, to identify prospective sites that met two criteria. First, only agencies with two or more officers trained before January 1994 to teach G.R.E.A.T. were considered eligible.<sup>3</sup> Second, to increase the

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<sup>2</sup> In another paper, Esbensen and Osgood (1997) examined program effects, and included preexisting differences between the G.R.E.A.T. program students and the comparison group. They found no systematic demographic differences between the two groups.

<sup>3</sup> Officers interested in becoming certified G.R.E.A.T. instructors apply for training through the G.R.E.A.T. office at the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms headquarters. Currently there is a waiting list, but in the early years officers were trained within a few months of their initial inquiry. Our selection of sites was influenced by the number of officers who had been trained at each site. This site



geographic and demographic diversity of the sample, we excluded some potential cities from consideration.<sup>4</sup> We made exploratory contacts with more than 30 different law enforcement agencies to determine whether adequate numbers of students were participating in the classroom-based program.

Fifteen of these sites met this preliminary requirement. Reasons for exclusion at this stage varied: Some cities had not yet implemented the program; not all of the sites had processed enough students through the program in the previous year to allow for the retrospective data collection planned; and in some situations, the police had instructed *all* seventh-grade students, making it impossible to construct a comparison group of students who had not received G.R.E.A.T. Subsequently we submitted formal proposals requesting participation to the public school districts at these 15 sites.

We reached agreements with 11 of the sites. Three districts declined participation; at the fourth site, it was determined on closer scrutiny that all of the seventh-grade students in the district had participated in the program during the previous year. The eleven cross-sectional sites selected were Las Cruces, NM; Omaha, NE; Phoenix, AZ; Philadelphia, PA; Kansas City, MO; Milwaukee, WI; Orlando, FL; Will County, IL; Providence, RI; Pocatello, ID; and Torrance, CA. These sites provide a diverse sample. One or more can be described by the following characteristics: large urban area, small city, racially and ethnically homogeneous, racially and ethnically heterogeneous, east coast, west coast, midwest, inner-city, working-class, and middle-class.

At the selected sites, schools that had offered G.R.E.A.T. during the past two years were selected and questionnaires were administered in groups to all eighth-grade students in attendance on the specified day.<sup>5</sup> Attendance rates varied from a low of 75 percent at

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selection was not dictated either by the funding agency or by others involved in the G.R.E.A.T. program.

<sup>4</sup> Because the program originated in Phoenix, cities in Arizona and New Mexico were overrepresented in the early stages of the G.R.E.A.T. program. Thus cities such as Albuquerque, Tucson, Scottsdale, and other smaller southwestern cities were excluded from the eligible pool of potential sites. At most sites it was possible to identify schools in which the G.R.E.A.T. program had been administered to some but not all of the students as seventh-grade pupils. In Will County and Milwaukee, however, it was necessary to select entire schools as the treatment and control groups because G.R.E.A.T. instruction had been delivered to or withheld from all seventh-grade pupils in those schools.

<sup>5</sup> We wish to acknowledge the following research assistants for their contribution to the data-collection process: Karen Arboit and Lesley Harris from California State University at Long Beach; Danette Sandoval Monnet and Dana Lynskey from New Mexico State University; Lesley Brandt, Jennifer West, and Annette Miller from the University of Nebraska at Omaha; and Leanne Jacobsen from Temple University.

one Kansas City middle school to a high of 93 percent at several schools in Will County and Pocatello.

We obtained a final sample of 5,935 eighth-grade students representing 315 classrooms in 42 different schools. Passive consent procedures (i.e., a procedure requiring parents to respond only if they do not want their child to participate in a research project) were approved everywhere but at the Torrance site. The number of parental refusals at each school ranged from zero to 2 percent (at one school). Thus participation rates (the percentage of students in attendance on the day of administration who actually completed questionnaires) varied between 98 and 100 percent at the passive consent sites. Participation rates in Torrance, where active consent procedures were required, ranged from 53 percent to 75 percent of all eighth-grade students in each of the four schools.<sup>6</sup>

This public school-based sample has the standard limitations associated with school-based surveys: exclusion of private-school students, exclusion of truant, sick, and/or tardy students, and the possible underrepresentation of "high-risk" youths. With this warning in mind, the current sample is composed of all eighth-grade students in attendance on the days when questionnaires were administered in these 11 jurisdictions. The sample includes primarily 13- to 15-year-old students attending public schools in a cross-section of communities in the continental United States. This sample is not random, and generalizations cannot be made to the adolescent population as a whole.

Students from these 11 jurisdictions, however, represent the following types of communities: large urban areas in which most of the students belong to a racial or ethnic minority (Philadelphia, Phoenix, Milwaukee, and Kansas City); medium-sized cities (population ranging between 100,000 and 500,000) with considerable racial and/or ethnic heterogeneity (Providence and Orlando); medium-sized cities with a majority of white students but a substantial minority enrollment (Omaha and Torrance); a small city (fewer than 100,000 inhabitants) with an ethnically diverse student population (Las Cruces); a small, racially homogeneous (white) city (Pocatello); and a rural area in which more than 80 percent of the

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<sup>6</sup> Five weeks of intensive efforts to obtain active parental consent in Torrance produced an overall return rate of 90 percent (72 percent consents and 18 percent refusals). In spite of repeated mailings, telephone calls, and incentives, 10 percent of the parents failed to return the consent form. Ninety percent of students with parental permission completed the questionnaires. (For a discussion of active parental consent procedures and their effect on response rates, see Esbensen et al. 1996.)

student population is white (Will County). This diversity in locations and sample characteristics permits exploration of the distribution of gang affiliation and delinquent activity in an age group generally excluded from "gang research."

### *Measures*

The questionnaires given to students consisted of demographic, attitudinal, and behavioral measures. In this paper we examine only demographic variables (gender, age, race/ethnicity, and family composition) and behavioral traits (self-reported delinquency and gang membership). Self-reported delinquency and gang affiliation were asked of respondents toward the end of the questionnaire. This reporting technique has been used widely during the past 40 years and provides a good measure of actual behavior rather than a reactive measure of police response to behavior (e.g., Hindelang, Hirschi, and Weis 1981; Huizinga 1991; Huizinga and Elliott 1987). Respondents were asked whether they had ever engaged in any of 17 distinct delinquent acts, whether they had ever used any of five different types of drugs, and whether they had ever been in a gang. Students indicating that they had engaged in these behaviors then were asked to report how many times during the past 12 months they had committed each offense. Students indicating that they had belonged to a gang were asked to answer additional gang-related questions.

We created four different measures of self-reported delinquency for the analyses reported here: property offenses, crimes against persons, drug use, and illegal drug sales (see appendix). To correct for the skewness of self-reported data, we truncated individual items at 12. Upon creation of each composite score, we truncated the score again at 12.<sup>7</sup>

Gang membership was determined through self-identification. As with most social phenomena, issues of definition arise.<sup>8</sup> By relying on self-definition, we adhere to law enforcement officers' primary criteria for identifying "official" gang members. In the

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<sup>7</sup> The skewness of self-report frequency data presents analytic problems. Various approaches can be used in attempts to remedy this problem, including transforming the data with the natural log, truncating at the 90th percentile (Nagin and Smith 1990), or truncating the high-frequency responses according to some conceptual reasoning. We chose to truncate items at 12 on the premise that monthly commission of most of these acts constitutes high-frequency offending. Thus we can examine these high-frequency offenders without sacrificing the detail of open-ended self-report techniques.

<sup>8</sup> For further discussion of this definitional issue, see Decker and Kempf-Leonard (1991), Maxson and Klein (1990), or Winfree et al. (1992). We agree with Klein (1995) that the illegal activities of gangs are a matter of research and policy interest. For this reason we restrict our definition of gangs to include only youths who reported that their gangs are involved in illegal activities.

current research, two filter questions introduce the gang-specific section of the questionnaire: "Have you ever been a gang member?" and "Are you now in a gang?" Given the current sample, in which almost all the respondents are under age 15, even an affirmative response to the first question followed by a negative response to the second may indicate a recent gang affiliation.

In an attempt to limit our sample of gang members to "delinquent gangs," we employed a restrictive definition of gang status: We classified as gang members only those youths who reported ever having been in a gang and who reported that their gangs engaged in at least one type of delinquent behavior (fighting other gangs, stealing cars, stealing in general, or robbing people). This strategy resulted in identification of 623 gang members, representing 10.6 percent of the sample.

## RESULTS

In this paper we focus on gender and ethnicity. To put results in perspective, however, we first provide a demographic description of the whole sample. Approximately half of the sample is female (52%). Most of the respondents live in intact homes (62%); that is, they indicated that both a mother and a father (including stepparents) were present in the home. The sample is ethnically diverse: Whites account for 40 percent of the respondents, African-Americans 27 percent, Hispanics 19 percent, Asians 6 percent, and other groups 8 percent. As would be expected with an eighth-grade sample, most of the respondents are between 13 and 15 years old; 60 percent are 14 years old. According to data provided by the school districts included in this study, the sample characteristics are similar—indeed, virtually identical—to the districts' student profiles. In Las Cruces middle schools, for example, 36 percent of the students are Caucasian, 61 percent are Hispanic, and 4 percent are classified as "other." Our Las Cruces sample is 34 percent Caucasian, 57 percent Hispanic, and 9 percent "other." In Milwaukee, our sample contains 27 percent white and 56 percent African-American students, compared with 25 percent and 61 percent respectively in the district.

At the beginning of this paper we posed two questions about the gender and ethnic composition of gangs. Table 1 reveals that (1) there are more girls in gangs than is commonly assumed and (2) that whites account for a larger portion of gang members than official reports suggest. In agreement with much of the emerging gang research but contrary to prevailing stereotypes about the male-dominated nature of gangs, fully 38 percent of the gang members in this eighth-grade sample are females. This figure still indicates

that females are underrepresented among gang members, but to a far lesser extent than is commonly assumed when older samples are studied.

**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Gang and Nongang Youths**

	Nongang			Gang			Total Sample	
	N	Row%	Col%	N	Row%	Col%	N	Col%
<b>Sex*</b>								
Male	2,412	86	46	380	14	62	2,792	48
Female	2,793	92	54	237	8	38	3,030	52
	5,202	89		617	11			
<b>Race*</b>								
White	2,187	94	42	150	6	25	2,337	41
African-American	1,339	88	26	188	12	31	1,527	27
Hispanic	924	86	18	153	14	25	1,077	19
Asian	317	92	6	28	8	5	345	6
Other	389	81	8	94	20	15	483	8
	5,156	89		613	11			
<b>Family Structure*</b>								
Single-parent	1,559	86	30	249	14	40	1,808	31
Intact	3,301	92	64	292	8	47	3,593	62
Other	336	81	7	78	19	13	414	7
	5,196	89		619	11			
<b>Age*</b>								
13 and under	1,585	94	31	101	6	17	1,686	29
14	3,119	90	60	367	11	61	3,486	60
15 and over	468	77	9	138	23	23	606	11
	5,172	89		606	11			

\*  $p < .001$

Also, contrary to popular perception, 25 percent of the gang members are white. Although minority youths account for most gang members, white youths are not as absent as "official" estimates suggest. As discussed previously, much of the previous gang literature relied on case studies of gangs or surveys limited to predominantly minority samples. This sample reveals that white youths are less likely to be involved in gangs than are African-American and Hispanic youths, but not to the extent suggested by past research. In fact, if we include some of the "other" category, which includes white youths who identified themselves as American, Italian, German, Portuguese, and the like, the ethnic difference in gang membership is reduced even further.

In keeping with earlier assessments of the demographic characteristics of gangs, this sample reveals that younger youths are underrepresented in gangs and that gang members are more likely than nongang members to live with a single parent. Even in this limited age sample, the youths age 13 and under account for only 17

percent of gang members but represent 31 percent of the nongang sample. At the other extreme, 23 percent of gang members but only 9 percent of nongang members are 15 or older. A minority of all youths live in single-parent homes, but gang members report living in single-parent homes more frequently (40%) than do nongang youths (30%). These demographic characteristics suggest possible qualitative differences between gang and nongang youths' living situations.

Table 2 reports the mean annual rates of offending for male and female gang and nongang members. The appendix lists the individual items constituting each subset of delinquent activity. In agreement with past research, girls report lower rates of offending than do boys, with one exception: The male-female difference in drug use among gang members is not statistically significant at the .001 level. The ratio of male to female offending within the two groups (gang and nongang) is in the general range of 1.5:1; the actual range is from 1.15:1 for drug use among gang members to 2.53:1 for drug sales among nongang youths. More interesting perhaps, is the ratio of gang girls' self-reported offending relative to nongang boys' delinquency rates: For each comparison, the gang girls are considerably more delinquent than the nongang boys. For crimes against persons, the gang girls commit 2.34 offenses to every one for the nongang boys. Evidence for a link between gang membership and drug dealing (with a ratio of 5.24:1) is found in the comparison of gang girls' involvement in drug sales with that of nongang boys.

**Table 2. Self-Reported Delinquency (SRD) by Gender, Controlling for Gang Membership<sup>a</sup>**

	Nongang		Gang		Ratio of Female Gang to Male Nongang
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Property <sup>b,c</sup>	.79	.47	3.15	1.99	2.5:1
Person <sup>b,c</sup>	.80	.50	2.76	1.87	2.34:1
Drug Sale <sup>b,c</sup>	.38	.15	3.27	1.99	5.24:1
Drug Use <sup>b</sup>	1.08	.93	4.03	3.49	3.23:1
<i>N</i> =	2,412	2,793	380	239	

<sup>a</sup> The SRD scores reflect the average number of offenses for respondents in each of these categories. To control for extreme scores, all items were truncated at 12. All composite scores were also truncated at 12.

<sup>b</sup> Differences between male and female nongang members were statistically significant at  $p < .001$ . Separate-variance  $t$ -tests were used.

<sup>c</sup> Differences between male and female gang members were statistically significant at  $p < .001$ . Separate-variance  $t$ -tests were used.

Table 3 presents results from an analysis comparing annual offending rates by ethnicity while controlling for gang affiliation.

Among nongang members, we found no differences for rates of property offending. For crimes against person, drug sales, and drug use, the Asian youths reported the lowest levels of activity. The African-American youths reported the highest levels of crimes against person; while the white, Hispanic, and "other" youths indicated the highest levels of drug use. These figures suggest the possibility of a slight degree of offense specialization by ethnicity.

A different picture emerges among the gang youths. We found relatively few statistically significant differences between the self-reported delinquent acts across the ethnic subgroups. African-American gang members reported lower levels of drug use than the other groups; the Asian gang members indicated less involvement in drug trafficking than white and "other" adolescents. Overall, however, the similarities between the different groups are quite remarkable, especially in light of the ethnic differences found among nongang youths.

**Table 3. Self-Reported Delinquency (SRD) by Ethnicity, Controlling for Gang Membership<sup>a</sup>**

	White	African-Am.	Hispanic	Asian	Other
<b>Nongang</b>					
Property	.67	.55	.61	.57	.68
Person <sup>b,c,d,e,g,h,i</sup>	.59	.86	.53	.35	.70
Drug sale <sup>c,e,g,i</sup>	.24	.29	.26	.03	.36
Drug use <sup>b,c,d,e,f,g,i</sup>	1.15	.74	1.10	.48	1.22
N =	2,187	1,339	924	317	389
<b>Gang</b>					
Property <sup>h</sup>	3.07	2.47	2.21	3.04	3.49
Person <sup>i</sup>	2.45	2.53	2.22	1.70	2.77
Drug sale <sup>a,i</sup>	2.99	2.62	2.57	1.10	3.79
Drug use <sup>b,d,f</sup>	4.51	2.65	4.32	3.64	4.47
N =	150	188	153	28	94
<b>Ratio of Gang to Nongang Offending, by Ethnicity</b>					
Property	4.58:1	4.49:1	3.62:1	5.33:1	5.13:1
Person	3.64:1	2.94:1	4.19:1	4.86:1	3.96:1
Drug sale	12.46:1	9.03:1	9.88:1	36.67:1	10.53:1
Drug use	3.92:1	3.58:1	3.93:1	7.58:1	3.66:1

<sup>a</sup> The SRD scores reflect the average number of offenses for respondents in each of these categories. To control for extreme scores, all items were truncated at 12. All composite scores were also truncated at 12.

The following comparisons were statistically significant at the .01 level using separate-variance *t*-tests.

- <sup>b</sup> White/African American
- <sup>c</sup> White/Asian
- <sup>d</sup> African-American/Hispanic
- <sup>e</sup> African-American/Asian
- <sup>f</sup> African-American/Other
- <sup>g</sup> Hispanic/Asian
- <sup>h</sup> Hispanic/Other
- <sup>i</sup> Asian/Other

Table 3 makes clear that the gang members are significantly more delinquent than their nongang peers. Within each ethnic group, the gang youths report three to 36 times more delinquency

than the nongang youths. The smallest ratio of gang to nongang activity is crimes against persons among the African-American youths. The greatest difference (36.67:1) is found between Asian gang members and nongang members with regard to drug sales.

### SUMMARY

We posed four research questions at the beginning of this paper, and attempted to address each one. First, what percentage of gang members are female? With our finding that 38 percent of gang members in our sample are female, this study contributes to the growing body of research reporting greater rates of female participation in gangs than was previously acknowledged (e.g., Bjerre-gard and Smith 1993; Cohen et al. 1995; Esbensen and Huizinga 1993; Thornberry et al. 1993). Is this involvement of females in gangs a new phenomenon, or have females been systematically excluded from gang research? Although we will probably never know the answer, we contend that much of the discrepancy in estimates of female gang participation is attributable to two related methodological issues: the data-collection method and the age of the sample.

Field research, as Campbell (1991) suggests, has tended to be conducted by male researchers on male subjects; thus it has failed to identify female participants except through the eyes of male gang members. This has posed problems not only in identifying gang girls but also in describing girls' role in gangs. Older adolescents and young adults frequently serve as objects of field studies. Hagedorn (1988), for example, studied the "top dogs" in the formation of Milwaukee gangs. Campbell (1991) reports on case studies of three gang "girls," one of whom did not join the gang until her late twenties. Vigil's (1988) gang boys were 16 to 23 years old. These older samples fail to identify gang girls captured in general surveys of younger samples because the girls "mature out" of gangs earlier than boys (e.g., Harris 1994; Moore and Hagedorn 1996). Decker and Van Winkle (1996) include a much wider age range in their St. Louis study of gang members (from 13 to 29), with a mean of 16.9). Their snowball approach, however, produced only seven female gang members, compared with 92 males. Also, these gang girls "were often recruited in groups of two or through their boy-friends" (Decker and Van Winkle 1996:57). Field studies, through a combination of relying on older respondents and reliance on snowball sampling techniques, have systematically excluded girls from field studies.

The current study introduces its own limitations. The eighth-grade sample may exclude some high-risk students—that is,



truants and expelled students—whose absence biases the estimates of gang membership provided in our analyses. In addition, in view of some evidence that girls exit gangs at an earlier age than boys, this young sample may overrepresent the actual distribution of girls in gangs. Our purpose here is not to claim that one method or one estimate is better than the other, but to clarify the great disparity in estimates of female participation in gangs. In this spirit, we encourage future researchers to include not only multiple methods but also diverse age groups, and to consider the possibility that gangs are not the exclusive domain of young males.

Our second research question concerned the relative delinquency levels of girls and boys in the gang. Our findings do not support the notion that gang girls are mere sex objects with no involvement in the violent acts that the gang boys commit. The gang girls commit the same variety of offenses as the boys, but at a slightly lower frequency. Further, the gang girls are two to five times more delinquent than the nongang boys. These findings are consistent with recent longitudinal analyses from the Denver Youth Survey (Huizinga 1997) and Miller's (1997) fieldwork in Columbus, Ohio. It is time for a conscientious inclusion of females in the study of gangs—not only for academic reasons, but also for identifying and designing gang prevention programs that include girls in the target population.

Analyses assessing the ethnic composition of gangs confirmed the stereotype that gang members are disproportionately members of ethnic and racial minorities. Although our findings are consistent with prior research, white involvement in gangs in this sample is greater (25% of gang members) than has generally been reported. One problem is that much of the research conducted during the past 30 years simply has been unable to address the race/ethnicity issue. Field studies are often unsuccessful in identifying white gang members or, by design, are limited to studying specific racial or ethnic groups. Decker and Van Winkle's (1996) St. Louis study, in which they found only four white gang members, is representative of field studies that fail to "recruit" white gang members. The authors state: "The racial composition of our sample merits some comment. We are aware of white gangs in the city of St. Louis that have been in existence for several years. However, we were not able to gain access to members of these gangs through our street contacts" (Decker and Van Winkle 1996:57). They add that the same limitation applied to their identification of Asian gang youths in the city.

Exclusion of white youths from gang research is not limited to field research. Surveys also tend to oversample minority populations (e.g., Esbensen and Huizinga 1993; Fagan 1989; Thornberry et al. 1993). In their study of gang affiliation in "high-risk" Denver neighborhoods, for example, Esbensen and Huizinga (1993) had a sample containing 90 percent minority youths, a disproportionate representation. This kind of sample bias does not permit a realistic assessment of the racial composition of gangs. Our research identifies a need for more surveys of the general adolescent population to clarify the extent of gang activity among different racial and ethnic groups.

The fourth research question raised the issue of differential involvement in delinquent activity by ethnicity. Although we found ethnic differences in rates of offending among nongang members, gang membership seems to be an equal opportunity promoter of delinquent behavior. All gang members, regardless of ethnicity, reported considerably higher levels of delinquency than their nongang ethnic counterparts.

By answering these four questions, we believe we have accomplished one final, critical goal: We have identified several unintentional biases inherent in most of the current gang research strategies. These biases have the potential to overestimate the male and minority composition of gangs while concurrently underestimating or ignoring female and white involvement. Other methods, however, may lead to overestimation of females' involvement in gangs and illegal activity. We believe that to contextualize the American gang problem as completely as possible, we must incorporate results from these methodologies and diverse samples. We hope that our analyses of data from this sample of eighth-grade students attending 42 public schools in 11 very different settings has contributed to an understanding of American youth gangs at the end of the twentieth century.

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**Appendix. Self-Reported Delinquency Scales and Items**

Property Offenses: Stole or tried to steal something worth less than \$50; stole or tried to steal something worth more than \$50; went into or tried to go into a building to steal something; stole or tried to steal a motor vehicle.

Person Offenses: Hit someone with the idea of hurting them; attacked someone with a weapon; used a weapon or force to get money or things from people; shot at someone because you were told to by someone else.

Drug Sales: Sold marijuana; sold other illegal drugs such as heroin, cocaine, crack, or LSD.

Drug Use: Used tobacco products; used alcohol; used marijuana; paint, glue, or other things you inhale to get high; used other illegal drugs.