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Putting in Work: Qualitative Research on Substance Use and Other Risk Behaviors Among Gang Youth in Los Angeles

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Abstract

Gang youth are notoriously difficult to access for research purposes. Despite this difficulty, qualitative research about substance use among gang youth is important because research indicates that such youth use more substances than their nongang peers. This manuscript discusses how a small sample of gang youth ($n = 60$) in Los Angeles was accessed and interviewed during a National Institute of Drug Abuse-funded pilot study on substance use and other risk behaviors. Topics discussed include the rationale and operationalization of the research methodology, working with community-based organizations, and the recruitment of different gang youth with varying levels of substance use.

Keywords

community-based organization; drug risk level; gang youth; gang specialist; in-depth interview; risk behaviors

Introduction

Studies on youth gangs have a long tradition of using quantitative and qualitative methodology to examine behaviors such as crime and drug use associated with these groups (Bursik and Grasmick, 1995; Hughes, 2005). As with crime and violence, quantitative research has found that gang youth are more likely to report drug and alcohol use compared to their nongang peers (see Sanders and Lankenau, 2006 for a review). Qualitative studies have identified the significance of substance use in the lives of gang youth and contextualized the interrelationship between substance use, violence, and unsafe sexual behaviors. In recent years, qualitative studies about gang youth have examined the significance of cannabis (MacKenzie, Hunt, and Joe-Laidler, 2005), the relationship between substance use and violence (Valdez, Kaplan, and Cepeda, 2006), the connection between using and selling drugs (Valdez and Sifaneck, 2004), and substance use amongst female gang youth (Cepeda and Valdez, 2003; Miller, 2001). Similar studies are needed of

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the relatively novel topics that have emerged in research about substance abuse¹ such as nonmedical prescription drug use (e.g. Lankenau et al., 2007) and polydrug or multiple drug use (e.g. Sanders, Lankenau, Jackson-Bloom, and Hathazi, 2008). This article identifies qualitative strategies that facilitate conducting research about drug use among youth in gangs.

“Putting in work” is an expression used by gang members in Los Angeles to describe committing criminal activity, such as selling drugs. Putting in work is also an accurate expression to describe the efforts of accessing and interviewing gang-identified youth in Los Angeles for research purposes. This manuscript discusses how a sample of gang youth ($n = 60$) aged 16 to 25 years from various areas in the City of Los Angeles was recruited into a National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)-funded qualitative pilot study about substance use and other risk behaviors. Topics discussed include the rationale and operationalization of the research methodology, working with community-based organizations, and the recruitment of different gang youth who use varying levels of alcohol and drugs.

Original Research: Aims, Plans, and Rationale

The aims of the research were exploratory in nature, intending to fill critical gaps in the existing research literature about gang youth. For instance, although gang youth are more likely to use drugs and alcohol, very little is known about the extent that such youth suffer from negative health outcomes in relation to substance use behaviors (Sanders and Lankenau, 2006). Moreover, research about addiction, overdose, and cognitive impairment related to substance use among gang youth is relatively scant. Also of importance was the extent to which gang youth were exposed to HIV as a result of their drug and alcohol use. To date, the first and only study specifically regarding HIV among gang youth had recently emerged in Los Angeles. The study indicated that such youth had high rates of participation in risk behaviors and many instances when they may have been exposed to HIV (Umanm, Urman, Malloy, Martinez, and DeMorst, 2006).

The original research plan was to gather data about risk behaviors (e.g., substance use, violence, sexual practices) through in-depth interviews and direct observations with 50 youth, aged 16 to 25 years, who self-identified as gang members, in areas of Western Los Angeles, including Culver City, Venice, Mar Vista, and Santa Monica. The goals were to enroll a fairly equal number of males and females and gang members from a variety of racial/ethnic backgrounds, including Caucasian youth. Moreover, the intention was to recruit gang youth from various locations within Western Los Angeles, which inevitably would result in drawing youth from several different gangs. Western Los Angeles was chosen because of the overall lack of data pertaining to gang youth within these areas despite their longevity and levels of serious violence there (see e.g., Umemoto, 2006). Moreover, gang activities appeared to be paradoxical within these areas, since particularly Venice and Santa Monica are regarded as affluent beach communities, and not necessarily gang territories. For instance, in April 2006, median housing prices in Santa Monica were approximately \$980,000, and median housing prices in Venice were approximately \$1,000,000,² which is in sharp contrast to what is generally known about the environments that give rise to gangs.

The research plan was to recruit gang youth into the study for interview purposes through the assistance of community members who work directly with such youth. Also, the plan was attempted to directly observe gang youth inject drugs in order to identify any potential

¹The journal's style utilizes the category substance abuse as a diagnostic category. Substances are used or misused; living organisms are and can be abused. Editor's note.

²California's home sale price median by city recorded in April 2007. Available at www.dgnews.com/ZIPCAR.shtm.

windows of exposure to HCV/HIV through risky drug-injection practices. This methodology was based both on the research strengths of the investigators and the protocols followed in previous and/or current research exercises on high-risk youth, including gang youth (Clatts, Welle, Goldsamt, and Lankenau, 2002; Lankenau et al., this volume; Sanders, 2005; Sanders and Lankenau, 2006). The in-depth interviews would gather rich data on the patterns of substance use, violence, and unsafe sexual behavior, particularly regarding initiations, frequencies, administrations (for substance use), and contexts (e.g., significance, environment). The interviews would also collect data on the interrelationship between these risk behaviors. The direct observations would attempt to validate information gathered during the interviews on gang youths' drug-injection practices, and better understand the environment in which injection drug use occurred.

The research plan did not include “hanging out” with gang members. Some investigators have researched gang youth where they live, work, and play—the street, the home, and the neighborhood—and collected the data through close and consistent interactions in these locations over time (Brotherton and Barrios, 2004; Fleisher, 1998; Moore, 1978; Padilla, 1992; Venkatesh, 2008; Vigil, 1988). These remarkable studies are relatively rare, even within the field of qualitative gang research. Moreover, such studies are time-consuming and usually focus on individuals from one specific gang. Following those examples was deemed infeasible given the limited time and other commitments of the research team (see Lankenau et al., this volume).

Chronology of Research Methodology

The research timeline was September 1, 2005 to June 30, 2007. The first four months of the project were dedicated to developing and programming research questions, obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, and pilot-testing the interview questions and protocols. A Federal Certificate of Confidentiality was also obtained specifically for this research exercise to further protect the research participants. Data collection was intended to occur from June 2006 through March 2007, leaving the last 3 months for data analysis.

The data collection unfolded in two phases, though not as originally intended. During phase one, various community members who had worked in some capacity with gang youth were interviewed between January 2006 and June 2006. During phase two, 60 gang identified youth were interviewed between June 2006 and December 2007.

Phase One: Interviews with Community Members

Gang youth constitute a “hidden population” to the extent that their numbers and whereabouts may not necessarily be known (Sanders and Lankenau, 2006; Valdez and Kaplan, 1999; cf. Clatts, Welle, and Atillasoy, 1995). Previous qualitative research on gang youth in Los Angeles is scant, reflecting national trends. The most recent investigation of gang youth in Western Los Angeles is based on a decade-old data (Umemoto, 2006). So how do researchers get a sense of the target population without their own prior investigations, and where does qualitative research start with youth who are notoriously difficult to recruit?

A way to overcome the difficulties of qualitatively researching gang youth is through interviewing community members who work with them. These interviews are an important first step toward both locating gang youth within a particular area and finding out more about their involvement in risk behaviors. Within an area known to have gangs, a variety of organizations and individuals are likely to work in some capacity with gang youth. Such individuals would have varying levels of knowledge about such youth and interact with them in a range of ways. An important part of interviewing community members is to

identify those who are “wise” (Goffman, 1963) about gang youth in the research area. This term refers to those who, due to their close working proximity, could provide intimate details about the lives of gang youth. Moreover, such “wise” individuals, due to this proximity, might be able to assist the researcher in accessing such youth for interview and observational purposes (cf. Sanders, 2005).

Who works directly with gang youth in Western Los Angeles? What level of details are these individuals able to provide about such youth? An important mindset when interviewing community members is to assume nothing, contact as many people as possible who may work with gang youth, and listen carefully to what knowledge these individuals have about such youth. From here researchers should gain a better understanding of gang youth in the area and identify other individuals who work closely with them.

A total of 25 adults from various organizations in Western Los Angeles were interviewed, either in person or by phone. Contact details for these individuals and organizations were gathered from publicly available listings of service providers in the target area, as well as referrals from service providers themselves. The adults interviewed included homicide detectives within a local police division; probation officers; personnel within mental health and sexual reproductive clinics; personnel at relief centers for homeless and substance-using youth; counselors at substance user treatment centers; high school administrators; administrators and outreach workers at delinquency diversion programs, counseling centers, and education and employment programs; personnel at youth activity centers; and adults working at programs tailored for “gang intervention.” At times, some overlap existed between these individuals and organizations. For instance, counseling centers and youth activity centers served as formal delinquency diversion programs, whereby juveniles arrested for nonviolent offences would be required, as part of their probation, to attend classes on anger management or life-skills building. Some adults worked with youth “on the street,” away from the community-based organizations that employed them, and such individuals were often acknowledged as doing something similar to conducting “outreach” work.

By the end of June 2006, all organizations and individuals in Western Los Angeles known to work with gang youth were either contacted or attempt was made to contact them. Of the 25 adults interviewed, only four were able to offer any detailed information about gang youth’s participation in substance use and other risk behaviors. These adults may be considered as “gang specialists” because they worked directly with youth in terms of attempting to steer them away from gang participation and/or reducing their involvement in risk behaviors. The gang specialists worked at a youth and community center, a counseling center, an outreach program for homeless and substance use, and a substance user treatment center. Their ties proved crucial in establishing links between the investigator and gang youth within the research area (Sanders, 2005).

Many of the gang specialists were former gang members who made no attempts to hide this fact. Some of them still considered themselves as “gang members,” but had desisted from offending. One of the gang specialists was heavily tattooed, and, upon our initial meeting, showed the investigator old photos of himself and his former gang friends posing with an assortment of firearms, as well as pictures of “dead homies” in their coffins. Another talked about once drinking alcohol, “getting high,” and then, while heavily intoxicated, carrying out drive-by shootings with shotguns and rifles in rival gang territories. Others talked about being shot, shooting others, selling drugs and guns, being incarcerated, and their past lives in the gang. The combination of stories, appearances, and their current working conditions left little doubt over their past gang ties.

During the course of the research, several gang specialists working in various parts of Los Angeles were arrested for serious criminal acts. Two of these incidents were reported in local newspapers, and an additional one was revealed to the investigator by the specialist. In one case, a gang specialist was arrested with a large amount of crystal methamphetamine. Another was arrested on weapon charges, and his children, who worked along with him, for violence charges. Another gang specialist confided to the investigator about his arrest for multiple violence charges. In his words, he had “relapsed” back into gang life, if only temporarily.

Other gang specialists were seen with suspicion by the members of the community. Several individuals from various organizations across Los Angeles suspected one intervention program for its involvement in criminal activities. Below is a field note based on the conversation with a probation officer, who had been working near the suspected intervention program for over 12 years:

Also, she told me she believed that [gang intervention program] was a front for gang activity. She thought that the [community] center on [location] acts as a safe haven where gangsters sell drugs (crack), but that it’s viewed as a youth center aimed at gang intervention. She was a bit upset that the City had allocated themoney to the center, and then see it turn into such a haven. She also told me that the big guy who I met last month at the [organization’s] meeting was, in fact, a member of [adult criminal syndicate]. She said that he was able to skirt around the gang injunction—where two members of the same gang cannot meet up—by saying that he is doing counseling for gang youth. . .She doesn’t believe any of it.

On two occasions, organizations that worked directly with gang members declined requests to assist recruiting youth into the study. In one instance, the head of a youth service organization indicated that time constraints or concerns about the interviews conflicting with their working schedules were the reasons for their refusals. She offered encouraging remarks about the research and apologized for her helplessness. In another instance, the head of a gang intervention program refused to help unless paid thousands of dollars as a “collaborator” on the project, as indicated in the field note given below:

I talked with [specialist] today. He essentially said that his organization is not going to put me in touch with any gang youth unless they get paid. He kept on saying ‘collaboration’, meaning that I should’ve created some way to put [their organization] on payroll.

The four gang specialists who agreed to help in the recruitment of gang youth worked at four different locations within the selected research area. The specialists agreed to contact gang youth and to arrange interviews. Based on these commitments, the second phase of the research commenced.

Phase Two: Interviews With Gang Youth, Part One

Between June 2006 and October 2006, 15 interviews with gang youth from various parts of Western Los Angeles were completed. All interviews were digitally recorded and scripted using Questionnaire Design Studio—a computer program that manages interview responses. The interviews were straightforward, without any incident, and were conducted in secure and private locations, where the gang specialists worked. All interviews were anonymous, and neither the youths’ name nor the names of their gangs were recorded. Interviews normally lasted from 1 hr to 90 minutes, though some were slightly longer. All youth signed consent forms and were read their rights as research participants. All interviewed youth received \$20, a packet of five condoms, a referral sheet listing various services within the research area, and the investigator’s contact information.

The interviews with 15 youth in Western Los Angeles was a very slow process, which lasted for over 4 months. During this period, three of the four gang specialists who agreed to help were able to assist in the youth recruitment. Part of the data collection lag stemmed due to relatively small number of youth who met the enrollment criteria. For instance, in several cases, the youth were gang-identified, but too young (under the age of 16); were former gang members; were not gang-identified, but had friends who were part of a gang; grew up in a family of gang members; or a combination of these. Finding youth who currently self-identified as gang members and could have their age and gang identification verified by adults who had worked with them proved difficult. Given the current pace of data collection, the goal of interviewing 50 gang youth within the remaining protected research time appeared improbable. Therefore, the decision was made to expand the research, and an attempt to interview gang youth in other areas of Los Angeles as well.

Change in Research Plan

The new research plan was to increase the sample size to 60 and to interview an equal number of gang youth from the four different areas: Western Los Angeles; Eastern Los Angeles (Boyle Heights, Lincoln Heights, East Los Angeles), Southern Los Angeles (Inglewood, Compton, South Los Angeles); and areas of the neighboring San Fernando Valley (e.g., Pacoima, Canoga Park).

Between July 2006 and October 2006, approval was sought from NIDA to expand the research, and the IRB was informed of the new protocols. During this time, various individuals and organizations, known to work directly with gang youth, were contacted in Eastern and Southern Los Angeles. Gangs are associated much more with these new research areas in comparison to the parts of Western Los Angeles (see Advancement Project, 2006). Concomitantly, many more individuals and organizations were found to be working directly with gang youth in these areas. Attempts were made to establish links with individuals and organizations in the San Fernando Valley, but a series of problems precluded research relationships, and the plan to collect data was eventually abandoned there.

Five organizations in Eastern and Southern Los Angeles and two additional in Western Los Angeles agreed to assist in the recruitment of gang youth into the study. As with the initial four, who agreed to assist in data collection, the individuals from these organizations could be considered “gang specialists” to the extent that their work was largely directed toward gang-involved youth. Three organizations contacted in the new research areas refused to assist in data collection, and offered reasons very similar to those in Western Los Angeles: They expressed either having little time to help, but offered encouragement and support, or required substantial payment for their cooperation. Below is a field note excerpt regarding the latter type of refusals:

[Name] of [organization] has decided not to help me. He said he wouldn't do the interviews for anything less than \$100.

The new revised research plan was to enroll an equal number of youth per area—20 in each of the three general research areas of Western, Eastern, and Southern Los Angeles—as well as an attempt to have a sample diversified by age, gender, and race/ethnicity. By November 2006, data collection with the youth was resumed.

Interviews with Gang Youth, Part Two

Data collection took longer than originally anticipated, and a 1-year, no-cost extension granted by NIDA allowed for the continuation of data collection and analysis until June 2008. In early December 2007, the 60th and the final interview was completed. Similar to

the initial 15 interviews, the remainder of the interviews were straightforward and without incident. All interviewed youth received the same incentive and followed the same protocols.

In the end, 14 individuals from 11 organizations that had worked in some capacity with gang youth helped enroll 60 youth into the study: 20 gang youth from Western, 19 from Eastern, and 21 from Southern Los Angeles areas. While gang youth generally resided nearby the agency referring them, in some cases they lived relatively far away. For instance, one gang intervention program in the Eastern Los Angeles worked with gang youth from the Southern area. Likewise, the anti-violence program in Southern Los Angeles worked with some gang youth from the Eastern Los Angeles. Data collection in the Western area recruited some youth from the Eastern and Southern locations.

All of the youth recruited into the study had some sort of relationship with the service-providing organization, some of which stemmed from the youth's desire for a change. Authorities required others to participate as a result of being caught for criminal offences. Table 1 shows by research area the type of organization that helped enroll gang youth, the number of youth recruited from there, and whether the youth volunteered or were court-ordered to attend the organization. Overall, six different types of agencies helped with the study, and nearly equal numbers of these youth either had volunteered to participate in these organizations ($n = 31$) or were court ordered to do so ($n = 29$).

Organizations from which youth volunteered to participate employed adults who interacted with the youth "on the street," and attempted to steer them toward positive life-style choices. Others were youth and community centers, where youth came to the centers for recreational purposes (e.g., playing sports, writing music, rapping). The final one was an employment center, generally established for youth seeking to leave the gang.

In other instances, youth were court-ordered to attend programs offered by organizations. Essentially, the counseling center and the intervention organizations were all linked to youth probation. Youth who attended these programs were enrolled in delinquency diversion programs. Such youth had been arrested for nonviolent offences and were enrolled in these programs as a substitute to more punitive penalties (e.g., incarceration). The alternative school enrolled youth as a result of their previous involvement in the juvenile justice system. Also, the youth at the treatment center were court-ordered to attend through California's Proposition 36, which mandates some form of drug user treatment³ for those arrested for nonviolent drug-related charges.

Observations

Direct observations were not recorded among gang youth for a couple of reasons. For one, none of the recruited youth were injection drug users. Watching the processes of drug injection, with a focus on identifying any windows of exposure to HIV and HCV, was a driving reason behind attempting direct observations. Also, attempts to interact with gang youth in their own environments were unsuccessful. Youth and community organizations invited the investigator to several barbeques and sports events held at local parks with the idea of potentially contacting gang youth directly. At such events, some gang members were approached, but they would not talk about their participation in risk behaviors, let alone

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³Treatment can be briefly and usefully defined as a planned and goal-directed change process of necessary quality, appropriateness, and conditions (endogenous and exogenous), which is bounded (culture, place, time, etc.) and can be categorized into profession-, tradition, and mutual-help-based (AA, NA, etc.) and self-help ("natural recovery") models. There are no unique models or techniques used with substance users—of whatever types—which aren't used with nonsubstance users. In the West, with the relatively new ideology of "harm reduction" and the even newer Quality of Life (QOL) treatment-driven model, there are now a new set of goals in addition to those derived from/associated with the older tradition of abstinence-driven models. Editor's note.

about their lives in the gang. Moreover, the gang specialists generally advised against the idea of attempting direct observations. The specialists said that the youth would unlikely to share such experiences with relative strangers. They also indicated, how such associations might arouse suspicion among other gang members in the area. Specifically, they believed the investigator would be misidentified as a police officer, and that, for these youth, being seen with any police connection could seriously jeopardize their well-being.

Other observations, however, did contribute to the research in important ways. One of these concerned the location of service providers within the areas where gang youth reside. Such observations were beneficial during the interviews, when asking the youth about their knowledge of such providers. For instance, during an interview, one youth, when asked about sexually transmitted infections, admitted that he had been suffering from one for the past 2 years. At that point the interview was stopped and the youth was informed that a reproductive health clinic was approximately 100 yards away, and that he would be eligible to receive free treatment because of his low socioeconomic status. An appointment was arranged, and the youth's infection got cured. In other cases, youth were unaware of substance user treatment centers, counseling centers, or job-placement programs within their local area. If no time had been spent within the communities recording details about such service providers, the youth might have continued to remain unaware of such services. Such details were recorded in field notes, transferred into a Word document on a computer, and utilized in the development of the referral sheets given to each youth enrolled in the study.

Being Reciprocal

When interviewing adult community members, those who work with gang youth expressed how researchers often “take” but do not necessarily “give.” More importantly, after the research is completed, individuals who had helped the researcher access the gang youth rarely see the research results. “What good is research? You guys have everything you need to know,” was occasionally expressed. In order to counter this issue in the current research, reciprocity was attempted. Reciprocity here refers to efforts made to give back time and effort to the centers or individuals who had helped access gang youth. This occurred in several ways. One was to conduct workshops for youth regarding crime, violence, substance use, and unsafe sexual behaviors at intervention and delinquency diversion programs, and for adults at community centers. Another was writing letters of support for intervention programs renewing or starting their charters, or letters of character reference for the gang specialists regarding the importance of their work. Finally, the investigator “hung out” at youth centers, counseling centers, and gang intervention programs to offer general assistance (cf. Valdez and Kaplan, 1999). Attempts were also made to clarify the intentions of the research, and acknowledge that, while gang research has accomplished much, a great deal of information about such youth is simply lacking⁴. For instance, certain issues related to substance use among gang youth discussed earlier are unknown. Such explanations and interactions establish and foster relationships and trust between academics at universities and individuals at community and service provision centers.

Maintaining Safety

Interviews for this project were primarily conducted indoors, in private settings, usually in some unused room or space in the center, where the adult who referred the youth worked. Several of the interviews, though, were conducted in restaurants within the immediate vicinity of such centers due to lack of available space. On occasion, interviewing youth outside these centers became somewhat problematic.

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⁴See Katz and Jacob-Jackson (2004) and Short and Hughes (2006) for a discussion on the progress of gang research.

One thing many of the youth talked about was the omnipresence fear of violent death and having to constantly “watch their backs” for attacks by rival gangs. Public settings were where these killings might occur. One youth, for instance, discussed his reluctance to take the bus because, as he rationalized, by sitting at a bus stop on a main road he could be targeted by rival gang members who might shoot him:

I can't take the bus. I never take the bus because I don't like sitting at a bus stop. That's the one way you can get shot. If you're sitting at a bus stop, someone is going to drive-by, they're going to see you waiting at the bus stop and what happens? You're a sitting duck. They're going to run up on you. . . You have no idea, they ain't going to tell you nothing. They probably already know who you are because you put yourself out there, you've been to jail. So they just be like *boom*, smooth run up and that's it. You're dead [Interview #4]

Restaurants, too, are public settings where a gang youth might be seen by those who wish them harm. For instance, a gang youth might be observed being interviewed by a researcher at a restaurant by rival gang members. Then the rivals might decide to commit a drive-by shooting against that youth placing the researcher at unnecessary risk of injury or death. The safety of both the researcher and gang youth is better ensured if interviews are conducted in private settings in secure locations. The centers where the gang specialists work were ideal locations for this research.

An additional benefit of conducting interviews with gang youth in private and secure locations concerns avoiding curiosity generated by the interview process and the antagonism that might arise out of such curiosity. The interviews with gang youth were conducted with the aid of a laptop and were recorded digitally. Gang specialists often worked from the centers that were located within the areas known for gang activity, and the restaurants where some of the interviews occurred were near such centers. Interviewing a gang youth in a restaurant in the area having a long tradition of gang activity, with both a laptop computer and a digital recorder, in plain view during the interview itself might draw unnecessary attention. This is compounded when the investigator is a 6 feet tall, bald Caucasian male in his early thirties (as is the case with the investigator), and the interviewee an African American or Latino teenager, who often appeared to be a gang member (i.e., baggy clothes, tattoos, etc). In a couple of instances, arguments ensued. The field note given below captures one such instance:

I went and interviewed [#43] today at a [restaurant] near his home. He was keeping an eye on others coming in, and one of these people was a middle-aged woman who seemed a bit out of it, perhaps on drugs. She was commenting about the interview to the respondent. The respondent then said, 'Do you know where you are? Do you know who I am? I can make a couple of calls.' – something like that. She then made some more comments, left the restaurant, and then went wandering out across the street against traffic.

Nothing physical transpired during these events, but the potential was obvious. Again, such experiences suggested, in-depth interviews with gang youth should be conducted best in more private settings, so as to avoid the possibility of dangerous curiosity and altercations with random third parties.

Accessing Gang Youth With Various Levels of Substance Use

The methodology was able to unveil some relatively unexplored topics on substance use among gang youth. For instance, many were found to have used a variety of prescription drugs nonmedically, especially Vicodin and Codeine. Many also discussed mixing substances together, particularly cannabis and alcohol, but also these two and one other

illicit drug (see Sanders, Lankenau, and Jackson-Bloom, 2007). Smoking cannabis joints containing crack cocaine, referred to as “P-dogs” among Latino gang youth, was also common.⁵ Some polydrug combinations were more extreme. For instance, one youth discussed the combination of a variety of drugs into what he referred to as a “ghost buster.” This was “a [cannabis] joint, with [crystal], heroin, coke, some [crack], roll it up and dipped . . . in PCP.” Substance use was also linked to violence, particularly individual and collective fighting, as well as unsafe sexual practices, particularly “group sex.” Such sexual activities involved three (and often more) individuals simultaneously or sequentially. Substance use was also related to the youths’ arrest histories. Over one-third (35%) of the youth have been arrested for substance use possession, which at times was associated with more serious arrests. Below, one youth discusses how smoking cannabis was related to his arrest on weapon charges:

I was riding in a car. . . and [the police] stopped us and I was kind of tripping because I had weed on me and [my friends] were smoking. And then I was like ‘Damn, we’re going to get arrested and shit.’ And then [the police] come and they see the whole smoke come out [of the car] and shit. Then they get us out and they start checking us and they find the weed. They find three of the blunts in other people’s pockets and they start searching the car. They found a .357 Special, a .38, a .22, and a Tech 9, too. [Interview #6]

Within hours of each interview, details about the youth were recorded on a tracking sheet. The purpose of this tracking sheet was to keep brief notes about the youth, such as their age, ethnicity, gender, and general area of residence (e.g., West, East, or South), as well as the community-based organization who assisted in recruiting that particular youth. The sheet allowed any unique characteristics about the youth that emerged during the interview to be recorded. Additional purposes of the tracking sheet were to obtain an overview of their reports of substance use and participation in other risk behaviors. This data assisted in determining the association of certain behaviors with the type of community organization that helped recruit them into the study.

Each youth was scored on a scale between zero and four checks on the tracking sheet based on the investigator’s immediate impression of how the youth answered questions about risk behaviors. No check was equal to none or minimal participation, and four checks were equal to the extreme participation. Table 2 is a modified version of the tracking sheet that indicates the youths’ self-reported drug and alcohol use by area and type of organization that helped recruit them into the study. Regarding alcohol and drug use, no check refers to youth with any history of substance use, or those who had experimented with alcohol and cannabis once or twice in their lifetime. One check refers to occasional (e.g., once or twice a week) use of alcohol and/or cannabis and having tried “hard” drugs (e.g., crystal methamphetamine, ecstasy, crack, and powder cocaine) once or twice in their lifetime. Two checks refer to youth who frequently used cannabis (i.e., more than three times a week) over the past 30 days, and had tried a variety of other drugs, including prescription drugs, more than three times in their lifetime. Youth who reported regularly mixing of cannabis and alcohol use were also given two checks. Three checks refer to gang youth who used cannabis daily over the previous 30 days, and reported occasional but consistent use of other drugs over their lifetime. Such youth also reported occasional use of alcohol and/or cannabis alongside “hard drugs” simultaneously or sequentially (i.e., polydrug use). Four checks refer to youth who reported seeking treatment for substance use, previous and/or current daily alcohol and

⁵Crack cocaine has been referred to as “rock.” The word “rock” in Spanish is “piedra,” hence the term “P-dogs,” when referring to cannabis joints containing crack.

cannabis use, and the consistent use of a wide variety of other drugs over their lifetime, including polydrug use.

Table 2 indicates the impression of the investigator about the respondents' drug risk level by the geographical location and the type of community-based organization. Several general observations were made. Gang youth recruited from the alternative school program, employment center, and the substance user treatment center had relatively extensive histories of high-drug risk behavior compared to those recruited from the youth and community centers. Geographical location also has an association with the level of drug risk behavior. Outreach recruitment in Southern Los Angeles yielded considerably more gang youth with extensive drug histories than it did in Western Los Angeles. Furthermore, youth recruited in intervention programs in Eastern Los Angeles and Southern Los Angeles had similar levels of drug use-related risk behavior histories. In overview, both the type of community-based organization and its geographical location are associated with the level of drug use-related risk history of the gang youth that were recruited.

Qualitative Research on Gang Youth in Los Angeles

The difficulty of conducting qualitative research with gang youth in the City of Los Angeles is best reflected by its relative scarcity. Despite the longevity and significance of gangs in Los Angeles, this research is one of the handful of qualitative studies ever conducted in the region that directly speaks to gang members about their substance use (e.g., Harris, 1983; Fagan, 1989; Moore, 1978; Vigil, 1988).

The research team has now generated its presence in the area, and relationships have been established with various individuals and organizations throughout Los Angeles that work directly with gang youth. This pilot study, while important in its own right, was also intended to be one in series of public health-related research on gang youth. Future studies surely will benefit from the relationships established in the course of the current project.

An important aspect of the research was the attempts made to ensure that the youth enrolled into the study were bona fide gang members, as well as targeted within the appropriate age range (i.e., 16 to 25 years). All youth enrolled self-identified as gang members, and this identification was confirmed by the adults who helped to recruit them. Those adults also confirmed the youths' age. The assistance of various community members allowed for the recruitment of gang youth from a variety of gangs throughout Los Angeles, gang youth of different ethnicities, and gang youth with differing experiences of life in the gang.

Study's Limitations

The limitations of the methodology employed in this project are inherent in many qualitative studies. Findings from the sample cannot be generalized and do not claim to be representative. The 60 gang youth are a convenience sample, being both somewhat connected to a service-providing organization and also agreeing to be interviewed. As with other studies on sensitive research topics, particularly those in which the youth may feel ashamed of their previous behaviors, socially desired responses might have emerged, somewhat skewing the research findings (although see Webb, Katz, and Decker, 2006).

The study failed to obtain the desired variability in age, gender, and race/ethnicity of the sample. Out of the 60 youth, only 10% ($n = 6$) were women, 18.3% ($n = 11$) were aged between 20 years and 25 years, and largely identifying as African American or Latino with a few identifying as Latino/Caucasian or African American/Caucasian. Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander, and other gang youth were not recruited into the study because the investigator was not introduced to any, and the only Caucasian gang male located

declined to be interviewed. In this and other aspects, both refusals and recruitment locales somewhat shaped the sampling biases, as some gang youth were more difficult to recruit than others. For instance, four of the six refusals from community organizations were from those that conducted “outreach” work with gang members. The outreach workers that refused to assist with the research had contacted “older” (i.e., 20 to 25 years old) gang youth, who generally had relatively higher histories of substance use and participation in risk behaviors. Also, one of the community organizations that declined to assist with the research worked specifically with young women involved in gangs. Had these organizations agreed to help the project, the sample would have contained youth with more serious histories of substance use, in older age range, and more gang-identified young women.⁶

Without the help of gang specialists, this research would not have been possible. Most of the gang specialists who helped recruit the youth into the study were former gang members or current gang members who had desisted from offending. These individuals were not “snitches” working alongside law enforcement, but rather former “felons,” many of whom have been to prison. In fact, some of them related their experiences in prison as being central to the reasons they were now trying to steer youth away from gang participation. Some mentioned this being a way to redeem themselves for prior criminal and violent acts. Moreover, these adults now work in the areas where they grew up, often with the younger gang members from their previous gang, in communities where they still resided. In this respect, such adults have a vested interest in helping local gang youth because often both the adults and youth are living in the same neighborhood.

Interview responses are only from gang youth with some sort of connection to a service provider, and findings may be different among gang youth with no such connection. But where the gang youth with no service provider connection are to be found? The literature on gang youth indicates their increased likelihood to commit crime and participate in risk behaviors compared to their non-gang peers. This suggests, in turn, that there is a high likelihood that gang youth at some point in their lives will come in contact with some sort of service provision, whether through court or on voluntary basis. Consequently, it seems unlikely to recruit gang youth aged 16 to 25 years who have never received some sort of service provision into a study. The research methods employed here simply captured such youth at these particular stages in their gang careers.

Conclusions

The manuscript has outlined the operationalization of a qualitative study on substance use and other risk behaviors in a sample of 60 gang-identified youth from various parts of the City of Los Angeles. Data collection and its progress were shaped by constraints and prior research commitments and refusals and particular recruitment possibilities when sampling. Despite the long history and the sheer number of gang youth in Los Angeles, accessing active gang youth aged 16 to 25 years for interview purposes proved very difficult. Gang specialists, most of whom were former gang members, were the most efficient at recruiting active gang youth into this research. Without their help, data collection likely would not have occurred. Establishing trust and working relationships with such individuals and organizations is important and requires additional time and effort on the researcher’s part. Researchers willing to put in work may be able to negotiate inroads to qualitatively investigate this hidden population.

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⁶For instance, Uman et al. (2006) were able to interview gang males and females in Los Angeles in the 17–26 years age range about substance use and other risk behaviors through the assistance of outreach workers.

Despite all the difficulties, the project accomplished its aims. Moreover, valuable lessons were learned and relationships established that surely would benefit future research plans. One of the most salient lessons pertaining to the research methods, and concerned how the recruitment of gang youth with varying experiences of substance use and participation in other risk behaviors, was somewhat linked to the type of organization that helped recruit these youth. Future gang research might benefit from these insights.

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Jennifer Jackson Bloom received her MPH with a specialization in epidemiology from the University of California, Los Angeles. She works in the Community Health Outcomes, and Intervention Research Program at Children's Hospital Los Angeles. Her research interests include behavioral risk in substance-using populations, modeling longitudinal change in substance use, and the application of geography to drug use(r) research.

Glossary

Community-based organization	A nonprofit organization, which works to serve those in the community in which it is located
Drug-risk level	An individual's level of self-reported drug and alcohol use
Gang specialist	An individual who works directly with gang youth, helping steer them toward more positive lifestyle choices
Gang youth	A youth who self-identifies as being a member in a gang
In-depth interview	A face-to-face interview that asks a series of semi-structured open- and closed-ended questions

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Table 1

Recruitment of gang youth by organization type, location, and volunteer status

Organization type	Volunteer/court-ordered	Recruited (<i>n</i>)
Western		
Youth/community center	Volunteer	1
Youth/community center	Volunteer	1
Outreach work	Volunteer	3
Treatment center	Court-ordered	4
Counseling center	Court-ordered	7
Youth/community center Eastern	Volunteer	12
Intervention program	Court-ordered	6
Alternative school	Court-ordered	7
Employment center Southern	Volunteer	7
Intervention program	Court-ordered	5
Outreach work	Volunteer	7

Table 2

The investigator's post-interview impression of respondents' level of substance use by area

R	Drug risk	CBO	R	Drug risk	CBO	R	Drug risk	CBO
1		Outreach	16	xx	Employment	38	xx	Outreach
2			17	x		39	xx	
3	x		18	x		40	xxxx	
4	xxxx	Treatment	19	xxx		41	xx	
9	xx		20	x		43	x	
10	xx		21	x		56	xx	
11	xxx		22	xxx		59	xx	
12		Youth/com.	30	xxx	Alternative	45	x	Intervention
13	x		31	x		46		
14	x		32	x		47	xx	
15	x		33	xxxx		48	xx	
51			34	x		49		
54	x		35	xxxx				
55	x		37					
58	x		24	xxx	Intervention			
60			25	xx				
61	xx		26	x				
62			27					
63	xxxx		42	xx				
5	x	Counseling	52					
6	xx							
7								
8	x							
50	x							
53	xx							
57	xx							
28		Youth/com.						
29	xx	Youth/com.						

Note: R = respondent number; CBO = community-based organization; Outreach = outreach work; Youth/com. = youth and community center; Counseling = counseling center; Alternative = alternative school; Intervention = intervention program; Employment = employment center. Respondents are numbered to 63 as three respondents were excluded from the study.

x = one check, xx = two checks, xxx = three checks, xxxx = four checks.

R	Drug risk	CBO	R	Drug risk	CBO	R	Drug risk	CBO
Western			Eastern			Southern		