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Moving beyond the gang–drug–violence connection

Karen Joe-Laidler¹ and Geoffrey P. Hunt²

¹Centre for Criminology, University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong, China

²Institute for Scientific Analysis, 1150 Ballena Boulevard, Alameda, CA 94501, USA

Abstract

The aim of this article is to reflect on the conceptual and methodological developments of our gang research over the past 20 years. We have conducted a large number of consecutive qualitative studies on youth gangs, drugs and alcohol in one urban locale for over two decades and have amassed a data set of over 2000 qualitative interviews. We have kept pace with the social changes in San Francisco as they have impacted and shaped youth gangs and their members' lives. However, these changes have not only occurred in the social context of gang members' lives, but have also occurred in our own thinking about how to conceptualize research on gangs. We have broadened our analysis of gang members' lives and incorporated new theoretical developments from research outside of the gang field. In addition to this shift in emphasis, our overall aim has been to redirect the research focus on youth gangs from a social problem and criminological perspective to a more sociological approach in which these youth are situated within an everyday perspective. With these overall issues in mind, we see this discussion as taking stock of the nature of gang research in the past, present and future.

INTRODUCTION

Recent attention on the 'gang phenomenon' in the UK – on the streets and in the British academy – serves as a poignant reminder of the development of gangs as a social problem in the US and the American response in academia and the state. It is unclear what lessons will be shared with Prime Minister Cameron's call for advice from ex-police chief of Los Angeles and New York, Bill Bratton. In tracking America's gang research history, researchers generally agree that the tradition began with Thrasher's (1927) classic field study of 1313 gangs in Chicago which documented the development and social processes of 'play groups' transitioning to 'gangs'. This transition was framed within the context of social disorganization – a social ecological bi-product of rapid urbanization and immigration. This pioneering work is often credited for later work, including Whyte's (1943) flipping the focus to the social organization of a Boston street corner. This was a period in which youth groups, including gangs first in Chicago and later on the West Coast, were connected to local political machinery and racial segregation. As juvenile crime rates began to rise in the latter 1950s, gang research began in earnest, and in keeping with the broader theoretical and methodological concerns in social sciences, gang researchers developed numerous theoretical typologies, from 'focal concerns' (Miller, 1958) to 'reaction formation' (Cohen, 1955), 'criminal, conflict and retreatist' gangs and 'near groups'

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Correspondence: G. P. Hunt, Institute for Scientific Analysis, 1150 Ballena Boulevard, Alameda, CA 94501, USA. Tel: (510) 865-6225. Fax: (510) 865-2467. huntgisa@ix.netcom.com.

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(Yablonsky, 1959). In the 1970s, researchers reached theoretical exhaustion, recognizing that aetiology and typologies required much more empirical rigour (Hagedorn, 1988; Spergel, 1984). For some (Pitts, 2008), gangs were a group by which to focus on broader social, political and economic concerns.

The late 1980s witnessed a resurgence in gang studies, and remarkably after two decades, it remains steadfast. But perhaps, this should not be so surprising given the political turn of the Reagan-Bush administration – its immediate ‘get tough’ on crime assault – and the flourishing of the neoliberal state – its emphasis on punitive welfare and individual responsibility and the collapse of much of the country’s manufacturing industry (Wacquant, 2009). Social processes and causality were set aside as research, drawing at least initially from discussions and records with officials, focused more on crime control (Fagan, 1989; Joe, 1993; Klein & Maxson, 1989). This focus was driven largely by public concerns over the ‘gang problem’ emerging in America’s cities, and migrating to smaller cities, towns and rural communities as well as the emergence of crack cocaine in inner cities (Hagedorn, 1988; Huff, 1989; Klein, Maxson, & Cunningham, 1991).

While gang research was initially grounded in an appreciation for the ‘other’, the changing political and social landscape resulted in a control and corrective backdrop – where prevalence and incidence surveys and risk factor instruments assumed increasing prominence for targeting threats to specific communities through arrests and early intervention. This corrective lens operates then at both the individual and community levels, and remains a key feature of gang research. Recently, the corrective mandate has come to include public health – with the latest research documenting the correlation between gang membership and violent victimization (Taylor, 2008) and the development of longitudinal models to identify points of risk (Krohn & Thornberry, 2008). As the mandate broadens, it should not be surprising that the longstanding debate on the definition of gangs remains a central issue.

In the following discussion, our objective is to reflect on our own work in relation to the developments of the ‘gang research industry’ in the US and to show how our work has followed a trajectory different from the mainstream. In doing so, we will show the key influences in our trajectory over the past two decades. First, ideally, as Krohn and Thornberry (2008) and others suggest, gang research, with few exceptions, has lacked longitudinal depth which is essential to developing a long-term vehicle for identifying areas for intervention to reduce risk. This of course is ideal, but for most researchers, a difficult task to sustain given funding issues. As we discuss below, while our research cannot be considered strictly longitudinal, we have conducted a large number of consecutive qualitative studies on youth gangs, drugs and alcohol and developmental issues from teenhood to adulthood in one urban locale with very diverse ethnic populations for over two decades. In doing so, our work has considered issues of risk (as called for in Krohn and Thornberry’s (2008) work) but our analysis became increasingly influenced by theoretical developments from outside the gang field. This was largely related to our frustrations of an overemphasis on the ‘correctional lens’. Our research continues, and over the years, we have amassed a data set of over 2000 qualitative interviews.

Second, this theoretical influence on our questions and analysis on gangs in San Francisco was shaped by youth cultural studies and feminist theory in the UK. Although there are signs of change with some British scholars examining the key differences between US and UK gangs (Bennett & Holloway, 2004), some British scholars have continued to resist and challenge the notion of ‘gangs’, cognizant of the stigmatizing effects of such labels as well as the significance of youth culture as a meaningful and distinctive part of everyday life among marginalized as well as normative populations (Goldson, 2011; Hallsworth, 2011;

Young, 2009). That is, young people, whether at the margins or in the mainstream – whether ‘resisting’ or ‘negotiating’ – are active social agents in constructing identity. This, we believe, is at the heart of our own theoretical development, and is very much embedded in the Institute for Scientific Analysis’ principles described by Reinerman (2012). Our work shifted from drug and alcohol issues as the primary forces with which to understand the lives of marginalized youth to investigating the ways in which other substantive issues such as ethnicity, gender, cultural identity and life events are negotiated by gang members and the role of drugs and alcohol in that negotiation process.

THE 1980S – GANGS, DRUGS AND VIOLENCE

In the late 1980s, policymakers, law enforcement and local communities became increasingly concerned over the rise in drug-related violence across America. Of particular concern was whether and how youth gangs were involved in the emerging crack cocaine market and the violence associated with the scene. Over the next decade, researchers in a number of different locales, from New York City to Milwaukee to Detroit to Phoenix and Los Angeles (Fagan, 1989; Hagedorn, 1988; Taylor, 1989) uncovered variations in the connection between gangs, drugs and violence. Some scholars found a number of instrumental gangs organized in a corporate fashion to profit from illicit drugs (Skolnick, Correl, Navarro, & Rabb, 1989; Taylor, 1989).

This was the point at which our foray into gang research began in the late 1980s, when Dan Waldorf embarked on the first of our studies, the Homeboy study. While research and public policy targeted youth gangs as responsible for the problem of crack cocaine and violence, for Waldorf, the issue of youth gangs was somewhat incidental to the more important question that he wished to investigate, namely the nature of the relationship between drug use, drug selling and violence.

The Homeboy study was significant in a number of ways. First, it was, at the time, among the first studies to conduct qualitative interviews and field observations of an ethnically diverse sample of 568 young people, including African Americans, Latinos, Asians (Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos), Samoans and Whites.

Second, the findings ran counter to the general public view that gang members were dealing drugs in an organized and structured form. Instead, Waldorf, Hunt, Joe, and Murphy (1993) found gang members involved in dealing drugs as individuals rather than as organized groups. The lack of a formal and hierarchal organization had to do with the history and nature of wholesale drug sales in San Francisco. The city and much of California’s wholesale drug market involved a large number of small-scale entrepreneurs who smuggled drugs into ports and across the Mexican border. This pattern of wholesale deals was established by a large number of independent sellers around heroin and marijuana sales with many of those involved living in migrant worker communities and having regular ties with people in the drug trade in communities in Mexico. Although there are many more independent wholesalers than some 40 years ago, this historical legacy may account, in part, for the lack of hierarchal drug organizations today.

The lack of a hierarchal structure is also related to the supply of drugs. As Waldorf and Lauderback (1993) noted, drug dealing was not like selling legitimate goods such as milk and eggs, the latter of which have a continual supply. Given the ‘slippery’ nature of wholesale drug dealing, independent retail sellers tended to develop many supply sources to compensate for market changes (e.g. political conditions, pressures and priorities, climate change, etc.). Yet another consideration was the fact that despite the media image of gang members at the time as highly sophisticated, most gang members lack knowledge, money and power and hence, generally lack the skills to develop or maintain elaborate drug selling

organizations. In fact, for Latino and Asian gang members especially, drug sales was only one of a variety of illicit activities by which they generated income. This lack of skills and knowledge may also contribute to understanding why at least in San Francisco, gangs here did not move to other communities to establish new drug markets for drug sales.

Still, gang members, as individuals, were found to be selling, but the types of drugs and styles of dealing varied significantly in Asian American, Latino and African American gangs (Joe, 1994; Waldorf et al., 1993). Given the different spatial arrangements of these three ethnic communities, drug dealing took on different styles. For example, African American sellers typically positioned themselves near the main sites of residential and social activity in the African American community – housing projects or ‘mom and pop’ corner stores. As a large number of Samoans live in the housing estates in the African American community, Samoan gang members also sold in the same neighbourhood, adopting a similar style. There is limited commercial activity in these residential areas. These sellers would simply take over a street completely and directly approach customers on foot or by car. Transactions, principally of crack and marijuana, were easily observed as sellers were open and aggressive with minimal if any division of labour. Although gang members sold as individuals, they did have explicit group rules about selling and using, with the main one being, ‘don’t be your own best customer’ when selling crack (Waldorf, 1993). These rules were largely shaped by their observations of crack’s effects. Sticking to them helped these sellers maximize individual profit from sales and avoid problems resulting from drug misuse.

Spatially, the Latino community is organized differently compared to the African American community. As such, Latino drug sellers took advantage of the long stretch of the main boulevard (over 1.5 miles) connecting the commercial and residential life of the Latino community. Latino drug sellers circulated on the streets for business, and blended in with shoppers, store keepers, pedestrians and passengers waiting for public buses. Transactions were conducted in less visible and less open spaces (e.g. sales conducted in shops, markets and restaurants). Neither money nor drugs are exchanged in an obvious manner on the street. A range of drugs were sold given the nature of the Latino market including marijuana, powder cocaine and heroin. Heroin was largely meeting the demand of the ‘older generation’, and connected to the importation of Mexican tar in earlier decades. Latino groups did not have similar rules to those of African American ones, and many Latinos reported using the drugs they sold, but they did not sell crack, identifying it as a drug in the African American community (Waldorf, 1993).

These patterns differed from Asians where drugs were generally not sold in public venues, but restricted to private transactions (arranged by phone or pagers) and principally involved powder cocaine sales. This was largely due to the sprawl of the Asian population in different neighbourhoods of San Francisco. And while there were several commercial areas, the Asian American community resided in many districts. From this, it became clear that the organization of drug sales, largely through individual and independent initiatives, was shaped by the spatial arrangements of the city’s neighbourhoods as well as drug preferences in those communities. Thus large cities typically show variability as drug preference often differs by neighbourhood. Within San Francisco, there have been several different drug scenes. While heroin injection was visible in the Mission District, a Latino community, crack use was not. In the Tenderloin, heroin injection and crack were common among sex workers. PCP was prevalent among young Latinos, but abstained from in all other districts. In African American neighbourhoods, crack and heroin were used but not methamphetamines. And in Asian districts, powder cocaine and tranquilizers dominated but not crack, heroin or methamphetamines (Waldorf & Lauderback, 1993).

Given these findings, what was the connection between gangs, drug and violence in San Francisco?

GANG–VIOLENCE CONNECTION OR MANAGING EVERYDAY LIFE?

In a critical commentary, Katz and Jackson-Jacobs (2004) questioned the assumptions of the ‘criminologists’ gang’, in particular the narrow focus on the causal relationship between gangs and crime. From their observations, the ‘criminologists’ gang’ have developed a tradition, of near mythical proportions, of portraying gang members as more violent than their non-gang peers with rather limited data. It was not until the 1990s that the causal issue became a top priority on the research agenda.¹ And while many contemporary gang observers have held steadfast to the view that gangs are responsible for a significant amount of violent crime, Katz and Jackson-Jacobs (2004, p. 108) challenge us to turn these assumptions on their head, especially with the decline in violent crime rates. For example, it may be that ‘youths who feel threatened and who expect to be in violent conflicts find gangs to be attractive vehicles for coping with risks that are endemic to their social areas. Thus violence causes gangs [or] violence is a critical ‘tipping point’ for turning peer groups into gangs’ (2004, p. 108). Such alternative understandings suggested the need for a more complex and nuanced portrait.

From the Homeboy study, we did indeed find that violence was ever present in gang life, as noted by Katz and Jackson-Jacobs (2004), but it had less to do with drug dealing (lest this bring unwanted police attention), and more to do with gang rivalries (Waldorf et al., 1993). Yet we believed that violence was related to factors other than gang rivalries, especially as we increasingly focused on the everyday life and situations of gang members (Hunt & Joe-Laidler, 2001). For example, we heard repeatedly from gang members throughout many of our studies that much of their time was spent ‘kicking back and hanging out’, and when asked what specifically this meant, they defined it as ‘doing nothing’. Yet while adults might perceive this as wasted time, the everyday practice of ‘doing nothing’ was in fact, an intense period filled with talking, recounting details of previous events, joking, discussing business, defending one’s honour, maintaining one’s respect, handling business, fending off insults, keeping the police at bay, cruising around in cars, doing a few deals, defending turf, gambling and playing sports.

I call my friends up and told them let’s meet somewhere. We got some money and buy beers. Got some beers and kicked back. We played some basketball and talked to some girls. After ... we got some more beer, and kicked back and go meet another friend and go for a ride... Then when night comes, we should be drunk by then. I guess we are all pretty drunk because I was drinking all day long. (Hunt, Joe-Laidler, & Waldorf, 1996, p. 125)

During most of these activities, drinking and smoking marijuana were an integral part of everyday life and worked in symbolic ways. As with many other social groups, drinking in particular can act as a social lubricant, working to maintain group solidarity. Because drinking is integral to everyday socializing in the gang, it creates not only solidarity but also reinforces masculinity and male togetherness (Hunt et al., 1996; Hunt, MacKenzie, & Joe-Laidler, 2005; MacKenzie, Hunt, & Joe-Laidler, 2005).

We found that drinking affirms masculinity in culturally defined ways. While in Latino gangs, drinking facilitated displays of machismo – strength, toughness and locura. The style of drinking and related behaviours among African American gang members was associated

¹Although Katz and Jackson-Jacobs (2004) do not note this, it is worth mentioning that this research priority was in part shaped by political agendas bent on ‘taking back neighbourhoods’ and demands for law and order.

with a ‘cool’ image, and overindulging represented a ‘man out of control’. Among Asian Americans, there was much more variation in use and amounts among and across different Asian ethnic groups.

Yet while drinking was often associated with group cohesion, paradoxically, it also was a source of tension, as gang members, given the lubricating effects they associated with alcohol, felt less inhibited in articulating internal rivalries, which sometimes erupted into violence. These internal disputes were largely over questions of honour and respect – accidental or intentional slights, playing with another’s girlfriend. Drinking also loosened the tension to take on opposing groups. Reasons for such conflict varied, including issues as testing each other, perceptions that they or their areas have been disrespected and fighting over affections of girls.

When we get drunk, we feel the power. Inside, we feel the adrenaline, feel like Superman. Fighting break out when somebody is dissing you, giving you the ‘mean mug’, or bumps you. When you drinking, this makes you more aggravated and you know when you is drunk, you got the Superman effects (H016).

While it was not clear whether alcohol really improved their abilities, drinking typically was involved in confrontations between rival gang members. Moreover, drinking was consistently described as liquid courage for battle. Whether violence is internal or external to the group, we found that the identity of the group is continually reinforced by these conflicts, and at the same time, maintaining the gang’s separateness (Hunt & Joe-Laidler, 2001).

It became clear that, yes, violence was a possibility in the everyday life of gang members, but not because of turf wars over drug sales. Instead, violence erupted in situations in which these young men, in their various activities of ‘doing nothing’ – including regular daily use of alcohol and marijuana – were engaged in contests of honour and respect. So although our initial work was situated within larger debates of the law enforcement frame, our alcohol study was a first step towards extending the analytic boundaries to consider how gang violence was shaped by the nature and context of gang members’ lives on the street and the cultural articulation of masculinity.

THE OTHER – ASIAN GANGS

While much of our gang research focused on the gang–drug–violence connection among African American and Latino gangs, our work also focused on Asian American gangs, a group on which little research has been conducted. At the time, public concern over Asian gangs, specifically Chinese, suggested that this group differed from other ethnic youth gangs. Existing reports drew a portrait of Chinese gang members as being the soldiers of Hong Kong triad groups involved in organized crime, including heroin distribution. However, we found that the social organization of Asian gangs was not conspiratorial but instead framed within individual opportunities and associational networks. In this framework, individuals were involved in drug sales independently of the group, but their membership in the group provided them with a source for establishing connections with other like minded opportunistic individuals who may belong to other, even rival groups. The group merely provided an associational context.

Like gang members in other ethnic groups, these young men were faced with the everyday individual concern of ‘making it’. Many Asian youth encountered difficulties at school and on the street as their parents were absent from home, working long hours. ‘Making it’ meant managing cultural conflicts (e.g. racial and intra-racial tension, family stress and language differences) and victimization by non-immigrant Asians and other ethnic groups. Gang

membership was principally linked to the necessity for protection and retaliation against adversaries. Continued involvement was motivated for the ongoing need for protection and fear of retaliation, as well as lack of legitimate work and education opportunities. Drug sales and crime, like other ethnic groups, was largely organized around individual and small group efforts within the gang. From these analyses, it became clear that these Asian gang members differed significantly from popular portrayals of the Asian gangster who was part of a larger organized crime conspiracy (Joe, 1994; Toy, 1992a, 1992b).

Despite these differences, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, law enforcement authorities and the media identified Southeast Asian gangs as having a new type of gang structure. Southeast Asian gangs were portrayed as particularly 'dangerous', as evidenced by their propensity to violence in home invasion robberies, loose knit organization (i.e. ability to disband and re-emerge with different members) and mobile nature (i.e. ability to move across the state with ease). Yet we found in our Southeast Asian gang study that, like other groups, Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian youth joined gangs for protection against rivals and to counter police harassment on the streets (which included taking photographs on the street for intelligence gathering). Given that the motivations to join and continue in the gang were largely for protection and mutual self-help, it is not surprising that these groups lacked formal leadership and an organizational hierarchy. Moreover, the notion of territory or turf was also absent, very likely due to their recent arrival in the US and the lack of an established neighbourhood (Hunt, Joe, & Waldorf, 1997). For these Southeast Asian young men, the gang operated similar to that of other ethnic gangs in San Francisco. The symbolic markers of their gang identity as Southeast Asian young men and gang members were culturally distinct with their use of particular ways of joining, colours and tattoos.

As we moved beyond the boundaries by looking at the role of alcohol in gang members' lives and deconstructing the Asian gangster, we recognized that the prevailing correctional lens was largely a male one even when considering the case of the 'gangsta girl'.

GIRLS IN GANGS

While the primary assumption and focus of our initial studies was on male gangs, we discovered a group of African American young women who had organized their own gang in response to the inequities in the distribution of profits and labour with their male gang counterparts. The Portrero Hill Posse (PHP) undertook a number of business endeavours, running crack houses and boosting (i.e. shoplifting) operations. Our analysis, among the first in the early 1990s to investigate the role of gang girls in drug dealing and violence, found that the PHP's collective drive to earn money was related to supporting their children and the inability to find legitimate employment. Equally important to this collective drive was a keen sense of sisterhood as few had had positive family experiences and support (Lauderback, Hansen, & Waldorf, 1992). The collective spirit of these young women with parenting responsibilities, limited education and employment opportunities underscores the agency and autonomy of independent female gang groups and in a broader sense, the gender relevance of Merton's (1938) and Cloward and Ohlin's (1960) work on anomie.

Female gangs became the target of much policy debate in the 1990s as the media demonized gang girls as violence prone 'gun packing bad women' (Chesney-Lind, 1993; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995). These 'bad girl' portrayals were especially problematic as they challenged normative gender roles. Yet these characterizations were consistent with and echoed early research on female gang members who, through the male criminological lens, were sexual misfits – sexually promiscuous or tomboys – lost in the male gang landscape (Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995). Both traditional and contemporary conceptions of gang girls' maladjustment, wildness and independence positioned gang girls in relation to their male

counterparts and masculine practices. Still contemporary portrayals of gang girls suggested that they had stepped over the gender boundaries, moving beyond being mere appendages to organizing autonomously from boyfriends, and in some cases, in opposition to their male counterparts (Joe-Laidler & Hunt, 1997). As the case of the PHP girls suggests, however, their autonomy and independence was not about challenging their male counterparts but rather a collective strategy to financially support their families as single mothers.

SITUATIONAL VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

While public concern continued to heighten over the ‘new bad girl’ phenomenon in the 1990s, feminist criminologists challenged gang researchers to ‘unpack’ and contextualize girls involvement in gangs (as in the case of the PHP) (Chesney-Lind, 1993; Irwin & Chesney-Lind, 2008). At issue was whether girls’ gang involvement was a reflection of their growing independence from their male counterparts as well as a wilful challenge to normative femininity. For if girls were gaining independence, would they then become more like their male counterparts? Would gang girls engage in the array of ‘at risk’ behaviours associated with male gang members particularly drug use and dealing and violence? Were we witnessing a re-emergence of Adler’s (1975) liberation hypothesis –where by the mid-1970s, women’s emancipation was interpreted as a convergence of male and female behaviours with women becoming increasingly more aggressive and violence prone? Were gang girls the ‘new liberated crook’ (Chesney-Lind, 1999)?

Following from the original Homeboy study, we explored the links between gang girl violence and drug use, recognizing that not all girl groups were independent like the PHP. Indeed, we found differences in the social organization of girls’ groups with some girls organized independently from males and other girls formed as auxiliary to a male group. As in the Homeboy study, the nature and expression of violence among gang girls was not connected to drug use, but was highly contingent on the interactional situations faced in auxiliary gangs compared to independent gangs (Joe-Laidler & Hunt, 1997).

On the one hand, girls in both types of gang structures described extensive violence in their relationships with boyfriends, the latter of whom demanded that the girls behave according to conventional female roles. Auxiliary girl gang members, however, faced additional pressures to conform to gender standards from their gang boyfriends and male peers. Perceived transgressions – flirting, getting high and hanging out with particular people – resulted in excessive control and abusive practices. In girl centred interactions, both types of female gangs struggled with violent confrontations with girls external to their group typically over rivalries or boyfriends. And while auxiliary gang girls also found themselves in intra-gang fights to protect their reputation from their ‘sisters’, girls in independent groups did not engage in intra-gang fighting due in large part to their collective identity as a ‘sisterhood’ and the associated safety of their fictive kin. Yet their autonomy meant that they had to take precautions against becoming targets of drug fiends and robbers when dealing drugs (Joe-Laidler & Hunt, 1997).

From this study, it became increasingly apparent that while violence is indeed present in the lives of gang girls, its extent and nature are shaped not only by cultural and normative notions of female roles but further heightened and policed within the male-dominated environment of the street. So although media portrayals pointed to girls’ involvement in gangs and violence as indicative of their increasing convergence with the practices and behaviours of male gang members, our respondents suggested that in fact, gang girls’ violence was inextricably connected to their pursuit of normative gender roles in the gang environment.

‘AT-RISK BEHAVIOURS’ – WHAT DOES IT REALLY MEAN? CODES OF CONDUCT

By the late 1990s, the issue of violence was high on the public policy and research agenda and the corrective mandate had broadened with control becoming interconnected to public health. Thus the original target of linking gangs, violence and drugs broadened to focus on the identification of individual behaviours presenting risks to self and the community. For example, violence had to be understood in relation to victimization as well, and as such was one of a number of ‘at risks’ behaviours linked to gangs (Hill, Howell, Hawkins, & Battin-Pearson, 1999; Taylor, Peterson, Esbensen, & Freng, 2007; Thornberry, 1998). Given the male street-dominated environment – where crime, violence and illicit drugs exist – gang girls’ lives were targeted as being particularly vulnerable and ‘at risk’. Several health and social risks were associated with gang girls’ lives especially alcohol and drug use, smoking, truancy and dropping out of school, sexual activity and early motherhood (Simantov, Schoen, & Klein, 2000). At the same time, our work and others began to dispel popular and traditional conceptions of gang girls, showing that gang girl’s lives, far from being wild and oppositional, were in fact, circumscribed and controlled by gendered expectations from male gang members and boyfriends but also by the girls themselves. Or as Harris (2004, p. 26) has succinctly stated, ‘they are simultaneously constrained by their circumstances and “willful risk takers”’.

ALCOHOL AND DRUGS

Just as alcohol was an important feature of male gang members’ everyday life (Hunt, Joe-Laidler, & Evans, 2002; Hunt et al., 2005), our study on the role of alcohol in female gangs suggested that gang girls similarly integrated alcohol into their daily lives on the street, using it not only for enhancing social interaction but also for ‘getting hyped’, (i.e. get excited), improving one’s self-image, dulling emotional and physical pain (from fighting) (Hunt, Joe-Laidler, & MacKenzie, 2000a, p. 350). Yet gang girls’ drinking practices differed significantly from their homeboys as their drinking was scrutinized by male and female peers and themselves. Rarely did they drink in an uncontrolled manner lest they be challenged for being unfeminine, thereby breaking acceptable gender roles. As such, the gangs enforced a series of behavioural boundaries to demarcate acceptable and unacceptable levels of use. To transgress to an unacceptable level meant losing respectability – a dimension which surfaced first in our analysis of violence and later became a central theme in our work.

Like alcohol, drug use played a significant role in ‘hanging out and kicking back’, facilitating male gang members’ work and leisure on the street (Joe-Laidler & Hunt, 1997). For gang girls, however, we questioned the conventional image of female drug use (Ettorre, 1992; Maher, 1997) as being the result of the influence of boyfriends and lovers or as a reflection of the ‘crack whore’ (i.e. girls exchanging sex for drugs) (Hunt et al., 2002). As we found in our analysis of gang girls’ alcohol and drug use, we found a more complex culture of drug use with gang girls developing distinctive gendered norms and practices around drug use.

And I think the girl gets respected when, you know, like when she just don’t be with any guy and she – when they get too stupid in front of guys and they don’t know what to do... that’s not like.... Get yourself some respect and I wouldn’t do... if I were to do any other drug besides weed I wouldn’t do it in front of the guys. (Hunt et al., 2002, p. 405)

This was due to their recognition that the social life of street gangs is governed by the rules of masculinity and to community notions of ‘traditional femininity’. Gang girls’ rules

regarding quantities of use, types of drugs consumed, settings of use and interactions with others while using shaped and constrained their use. This suggested that their norms and practices moderated their drug use rather than facilitated problematic use. As with alcohol, they described a process of learning the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable drug use, in what situations and circumstances they might use, and what behaviours while using helped preserve their reputations. Thus the patriarchal nature of gang culture paradoxically is, on the one hand, a 'risk factor' for alcohol and drug use and, on the other hand, a protective barrier.

CONTESTS FOR RESPECT(ABILITY) AND GANG GIRLS' SEXUALITY

As our work progressed, we increasingly drew from British scholars in youth cultural studies (McRobbie, 1991) and feminist studies (Skeggs, 1997) which challenged the assumptions of deviant categories and instead examined resistance and alternative expressions as identity negotiation. In this way, it became clear that while male gang members faced the constant pursuit of 'respect' as a way of articulating masculinity, gang girls too faced issues of 'respect(ability)' as it is a defining feature of their sense of self and others (Joe-Laidler & Hunt, 2001). A recurring theme in our analysis has been the value gang girls place on respect(ability).

In looking at their interactions with family, male partners and peers and other girls, 'reputation' is one of the most salient markers of their identity as young women, to the point that they would resort to violence to protect their status and honour as their male counterparts did. In family interactions, they are expected by mothers, fathers, siblings, relatives and selves to fulfil normative roles of being a female. In their interactions with each other, they construct and hold others to distinct notions of femininity and sexual reputation. At the same time, confronted with adolescent pressures that run counter to being respectable (e.g. drink and party), gang girls create 'safe' ways to explore adolescence and protect their reputation (e.g. taking turns to cover each others' back when partying).

We got drunk. Fried. We had fun and then we started crying. So we went upstairs and went to bed. We were crying about whatever we was talking about. Now we pitch in, go to one of the girl's house and kick back to drink. If you stay on the street, you'll get picked up. (Joe-Laidler & Hunt, 2001, p. 670)

With male peers and partners, they are cognizant of the expectation to 'behave like a woman' yet define the boundaries of their willingness to 'behave', and in the process, make clear their sense of autonomy. Thus, the idea of respect(ability) is defined in relation to both sexual reputation and independence from the controls of others.

What our respondents told us about the importance of sexual reputation led us to look more closely at sex and sexuality, which is often considered another 'at risk' factor associated with gang girls (Schalet, Hunt, & Joe-Laidler, 2003). Female gang members have long been typed as either too sexual or not (hetero) sexual enough, although there has been little research on how their sexual practices might be placing them at risk (Campbell, 1991; Moore & Hagedorn, 1996). Yet our analysis suggested that female gang members defy these contrasting types, and in fact, articulate different discourses of sexuality, which are shaped by age, ethnicity and normative notions of femininity. For younger members (mid-to-late teens), perceptions of self were largely articulated in relation to sexual respectability, emphasizing sexual purity as distinct and distant from the oppositional 'ho'. Latina gang girls, who typically move within tight knit family units and cultural expectations of purity, similarly describe themselves as sexually respectable. Those in their early to mid-20 s, were more likely to articulate their sexual autonomy – their own sexual needs, choices and practices. African American girls, who more often have had to become economically and

emotionally independent due to family circumstances, were also more likely to perceive themselves as sexually autonomous. The shift from sexual respectability to autonomy with age reflects the resolution of adolescent tensions, where expressing and pursuing sexuality is dictated less by conventions of peers and immediate culture and more by one's own sexual needs.

Our focus on gang girls and 'at risk' behaviours – alcohol and drug use, violence and sexuality – has been at odds with popular conceptions and has pointed to the complexities and challenges these young women face in their daily lives. A key theme linking all of these studies has been gang girls' negotiation of a distinct and autonomous identity. This ongoing process is constrained and actively contested by the girls' desire to experiment as independent adolescents as well as by normative notions of being a young woman. Importantly, the constraints and contestations they describe are similar to the experiences of young women more generally (McRobbie, 1991). And although gang girls' face the added pressures to be a 'good girl' in a 'bad boy environment' – a male dominated street culture – they too must contend with family dynamics.

FAMILY CONFLICT AND SUPPORT

Family conflict has been identified as a 'risk factor' for gang involvement, especially for girls. It is indeed the case that studies, including our own, have shown that many gang members – male and female – report a chaotic family life whereby members grow up in highly marginalized circumstances (Decker & van Winkle, 1996; Hunt, MacKenzie, & Joe-Laidler, 2000b; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Vigil, 1988). According to these studies, gang members report living in chaotic families who are challenged with the everyday problems of unemployment, poor housing, alcohol and drug use and high crime rates. Moreover, the impact of such conditions on the family has resulted in weakening family bonds and young people turning to peers for support. Paradoxically, gang members report that the gang becomes a surrogate family, referencing members as brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts and uncles (Campbell, 1984; Hunt et al., 2000b; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995).

Yet with few exceptions (Decker & van Winkle, 1996; Moore, 1991), little was known within gang research about the meaning of family in these young women's lives, especially their relationships with their mothers. We recognized that the relationship between mothers and daughters differed from that between mothers and sons, as daughters defined themselves in relation to their mothers. We found a spectrum of family situations from the absence of one or both parents and an absence of supervision to highly authoritarian and 'traditional' parental controls. Yet family relationships, particularly gang girls' ties to mothers, sisters, grandmothers and extended kin, were marked less by conflict than by mutual forms of emotional and practical support. For most gang girls, mothers were the most important and respected person in their lives as they could be counted on unconditionally.

EARLY PARENTHOOD

What we learned from gang girls about their relationships with their mothers led to our more recent work on health and early motherhood. From the health literature, we understood that early motherhood was a 'risk behaviour', associated with a myriad of problems, particularly poor perinatal outcomes, child neglect and abuse, dropping out of school, un(der)employment and welfare dependence (Murcott, 1980; Raley, 1999). Yet there was a small body of the literature challenging the view that young motherhood was bad for mother, child and the community at large (Lesser & Koniak-Griffin, 2000; Phoenix, 1991).

Despite the risky lifestyle of gang life, gang girls who became pregnant gradually changed their lifestyle, learning from others about the need to modify their behaviours for their own

health as well as their baby's. The reduction in alcohol and drug use occurred while making other lifestyle changes including spending less time on the streets and with their gang peers. As their pregnancy progressed, they found support, sometimes from unexpected sources. Many girls were surprised to receive their mothers support given the conflict earlier on in their teen life. At the same time, they discovered that their gang peers and in some cases the fathers of their children, whom they had perceived as important sources of support prior to pregnancy, would have a negative influence in the long term. Once their babies arrived, most gang girl mothers' continued to modify their lifestyles, reducing or stopping their alcohol and drug use and often gradually disassociating from street life. In essence, early motherhood was instrumental in mitigating alcohol and drug use, and providing an alternative trajectory for these gang girls. So although early motherhood is conceived as an at-risk behaviour, our analysis suggests that the transition into motherhood can have positive consequences as these young women take on new priorities to care and support their child and develop new definitions of independence.

While the media and policy concerns have focused on young women's participation in gangs as a reflection of increasing convergence with their male counterparts and a divergence from normative femininity (See Irwin and Chesney-Lind (2008) critique), our work thus far, suggests that these girls' 'at risk' behaviours associated with gangs – street culture, using drugs, dropping out of school, sexual activity and early motherhood must be situationally understood, and in doing so, reveals how the pursuit of a distinctive feminine identity operates in their daily lives and in their interactions at home and on the street (Moloney, Hunt, Joe-Laidler, & MacKenzie, 2011).

While motherhood provides an avenue to move away from the gang and brings new opportunities for gang girls, our related study on fatherhood among male gang members found more mixed experiences (Moloney, MacKenzie, Hunt, & Joe-Laidler, 2009). Although most young men described their daily life before fatherhood as centred on the group hanging around the streets – drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana and hustling for drug deals. For some young men, the news of impending fatherhood drove them away from their baby's mother. They continued to maintain the same lifestyle. Others, however, welcomed the prospect of fatherhood, recognizing that though they would now assume adult responsibilities, it was also the beginning of a new future and priorities, and a move away from the gang and involvement in criminal activities. For these young men, illegal income generating strategies such as drug dealing would no longer be possible given their responsibilities to mother and child. Instead, these new fathers sought out legitimate opportunities. Yet the pressures of finding work or actually working – given their criminal records and limited education and skills – along with the pressures to socialize and remain within the gang were difficult to balance with competing family demands. While some fathers were able to eventually move into a conventional life style, many others were unable to make a complete shift away from the gang, relying on drug dealing to supplement their family income. For these fathers, drug dealing was the major source of income to support their family, but for others, selling was a last resort.

CONCLUSION

As we noted at the beginning of this article, the UK provides an interesting comparative case. British scholars had long resisted examining youth group dynamics in terms of 'gangs', preferring instead to focus on youth subculture where crime was one of a number of issues (Aldridge, Medina, & Ralphs, 2008; Campbell & Muncer, 1989; Goldson, 2011; Hallsworth & Young, 2008; Sanders, 2005). With increasing public anxiety over what the British media have defined as an 'American style gang problem' in the UK, scholars there are now confronted with trying to dispel the proliferation of tabloid images while also

working with communities to establish a knowledge base on youth groups with characteristics of street gangs.

While UK scholars must contend with the correctional lens developed so well in the US, our own work moves away from the correctional view in part by drawing from the British tradition in youth cultural studies. Although our work initially focused on males, and was by virtue of the policy agenda at the time, concerned with the gang, drug and violence connection, we uncovered a more complex portrait of gangs and their members. First, we found violence to be less connected to drug dealing and more related to contests and struggles for respect and honour. Alcohol and drug use played a prominent role in male gang members' lives, acting as a social lubricant in those contests for masculine respect among peers and rivals. Second, and perhaps most importantly, through the qualitative tradition advocated in the work at the Institute for Scientific Analysis, we found that gang members' drug use was a way to seek out (short term) pleasure in what most gang members themselves recognized as a (long term) mundane existence on the street away from family conflict, school problems (including discrimination) and few job prospects. Third, drug dealing was one of many individual (rather than collective) ways to generate income in light of such structural constraints, but even within this market, there were clear rules of conduct, including 'not being your own best customer' and a desire to retreat with the assumption of adult responsibilities.

Fourth, our gradual shift to the broader issue of gangs, drugs and health was due partly to the recognition that the 'at risk' behaviours associated with gangs, especially among girls, required closer scrutiny of their lived experiences (Sanders et al., in press). While gang girls were indeed drinking, using drugs, partying and engaging in violence, these behaviours were not attempts to match their male counterparts, but testing the boundaries of normative femininity. In doing so, they took steps to control 'risks' to protect their reputations and honour. As we have tried to underscore in recounting our work, male and female gang members, like many young people, ultimately are concerned with negotiating gender, one key difference with gang members, however, is that this negotiation is coupled to their marginalized status.

While our research cannot be strictly defined as within a longitudinal paradigm, it has, over the course of two decades, through a series of qualitative studies, examined and tracked changes in gang members' alcohol and drug use and sales in one urban ethnically mixed locale. Moreover, through these series of studies, our focus has gone beyond the immediate concerns of life on the street to significant passages into young adulthood as with parenthood, and perhaps points to a broader rethinking of methodologies for longitudinal work. For gang research both in the US and abroad, the longitudinal approach need not be of a purely corrective or prescriptive nature, but a fluid one, which makes room for multiple and alternative understandings of drug use and deviance.

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