Gender Norms and Age-Disparate Sexual Relationships as Predictors of Intimate Partner Violence, Sexual Violence, and Risky Sex among Adolescent Gang Members

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Abstract Unequal gender norms and age-disparate sexual relationships can lead to power imbalances and are also associated with intimate partner violence (IPV), sexual coercion and violence, and sexual risk behaviors. The present study examined these variables from both victim and perpetrator perspectives among adolescent gang members. Age-disparate sexual relationships were defined as sex partners 5 or more years older among female participants and 5 or more years younger among male participants. Participants were recruited from a mid-sized Midwestern city and completed a 60–90-min audio computer-assisted self-interview in a community-based setting. Participants in this study included 107 female gang members (68 % African-American, 19 % Latina; mean age, 17.6) and 169 male gang members (62 % African-American, 28 % Latino; mean age, 17.7). As hypothesized, endorsing unequal gender norms toward women was significantly related to IPV victimization among female participants and perpetration among male participants, and engagement in group sex in the past month among both female and male participants ($ps < 0.05$). Additionally, unequal gender norms were significantly related to male participants' perpetrating rape ($p < 0.05$). As hypothesized, female gang members who had been in age-disparate sexual relationships were significantly more likely to have

experienced more IPV and report being raped and males gang members who had age-disparate sexual relationships were significantly more likely to perpetrate IPV in the past year and perpetrate rape ($ps < 0.05$). Age-disparate sexual relationships were also significantly related to being gang raped among female gang members and participating in a gang rape among male gang members, and engaging in group sex among both female and male gang members ($ps < 0.05$). Female participants who had been in age-disparate sexual relationships were more likely to have been pregnant ($ps < 0.05$). It is essential for researchers and public health practitioners to create programs for female adolescents to reduce or avoid risky situations, such as inability to negotiate condom use with older sex partners. Additionally, programs must be developed for both female and male gang members to help them understand and identify unequal gender norms, and interpersonal and sexual coercion/violence. Early intervention will also be necessary as these adolescent gang members are already engaged in extremely high-risk, coercive, and violent behaviors.

Keywords Adolescent gang members · Age of sex partners · Intimate partner violence · Sexual violence · Sexual coercion · Risky sexual behavior

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Introduction

Gender norms are expectations regarding what is considered appropriate behaviors for each gender [1].

Unequal gender norms, or the belief that women are not equal to men or do not have equal roles in a relationship (e.g., unequal power dynamics), are present in many different cultures and can have a multitude of negative health consequences [1, 2], including intimate partner violence (IPV) [3]. Unequal gender norms and IPV are associated with unintended pregnancy, forced or coerced sex, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs)/HIV due to difficulties in negotiating condom use [2–6]. Research has shown unequal gender norms to be associated with sexual violence and rape [3, 7–9]. Adolescence is a critical moment in which gender norms are learned and internalized from family [10] and peer influences [11]. Adolescents, particularly inner-city adolescents, are vulnerable to IPV, unwanted pregnancies, and HIV/STI infections [12–15]. Therefore, it is essential to understand the role of gender norms on IPV, sexual violence, and sexual risk in order to develop more effective prevention strategies.

Unequal gender norms can play a big role in relationships and are common in gangs. Among male-dominated gangs, female gang members are often considered inferior and are expected to play a subservient role [16] and provide sex [17]. One study found that Mexican American female gang members accepted traditional gender roles that women should be passive and submissive [18]. Male gang members often view female gang members as sex objects rather than equals [19]. This type of gang hierarchy can lead to justifying and accepting the perpetration of IPV against female gang members [16].

Gang members are at an increased risk of both experiencing and perpetrating IPV and sexual coercion [20]. While male gang members are at high risk for victimization from neighborhood violence, female gang members are at high risk for victimization from gang members and boyfriends [16, 17, 21]. Gang membership among young women was significantly associated with having ever been raped and experiencing IPV [22]. Among male gang members, sexual aggression and coercion is very common [23, 24], even though many of them do not report perpetrating rape [23]. This may be partly due to gang members not identifying unwanted sex as rape, including when a young woman is intoxicated [25]. Additionally, male gang members are more likely to behave aggressively in sexual situations [23, 24], increasing a female gang member's likelihood of getting raped. Qualitative research suggests that male

gang members often engage in “gang rape,” the rape of one young woman by a group of young men [26]. Latinas involved in gangs frequently reported gang rape, rape (including by male partners), IPV, and pregnancies [27]. Gang members also engage in group sex, which is distinct from gang rape because it occupies a gray area between consensual and coercive sex. Group sex occurs when multiple male gang members have sex with one female gang member, which is sometimes considered consensual [28, 29]. Group sex can occur as part of the initiation of young women into the gang or at parties [30].

Another manifestation of unequal power in relationships are age differences between sex partners during adolescence [31, 32]. Age differences as little as 2 or more years older between sex partners was found to be associated with risky sexual behavior among female adolescents [31]. Additionally, sex between a minor and a person 5 or more years older is considered a form of childhood sexual abuse [33, 34]. Female adolescents with older sex partners are at increased risk for IPV including sexual violence [32], are less likely to use condoms [31, 32, 35], and are more likely to have been pregnant [36]. One study found that this lack of condom use among female adolescents was significantly related to fear of negative reactions from their older partners [31]. Because female gang members are already at high risk for experiencing IPV [16, 21, 37], female gang members with older male sex partners may be at an even higher risk for IPV. Due to the power imbalances created by age-disparate relationships and the sexual violence and coercion frequently faced by female gang members, it is possible that large age differences between sex partners may be associated with experiencing and perpetrating sexual violence and coercion. We will refer to sexual relationships with partners 5 or more years older (for female gang members) or younger (for male gang members) as age-disparate sexual relationships.

Gang membership is associated with risky sexual behavior, including not using condoms [38]. Gang members are at exceptionally high risk for STIs/HIV [5, 39] and are more likely than non-gang members to have gotten a young woman pregnant [39]. Although gang membership is not predictive of pregnancy among female gang members, having male partners who are gang members is significantly associated with increased pregnancies among young

women [5, 27]. Female adolescents who have older sex partners are also at increased risk for STIs/HIV and have difficulty negotiating condom use [31], among other negative health outcomes [32].

The current study aims to examine the relationship between gender norms and IPV, sexual violence and coercion, and risky sex among adolescent gang members. Previous research has examined these relationships among many populations; however, no studies to our knowledge have examined these associations among adolescent gang members. Previous research suggests that both male and female gang members harbor unequal gender norms toward women [16–19, 37]. Thus, the current study will examine complementary hypotheses of victimization of female gang members and perpetration by male gang members:

1. Female gang members who endorse unequal gender norms toward women will be significantly more likely to have experienced IPV, rape, gang rape, engaged in group sex, engaged in unprotected sex, and to have ever been pregnant.
2. Male gang members who endorse unequal gender norms toward women will be significantly more likely to have perpetrated IPV, rape, gang rape, engaged in group sex, engaged in unprotected sex, and to have gotten a young woman pregnant.

Additionally, previous research has not investigated age-disparate sexual relationships and IPV, sexual violence and coercion, and risky sex among adolescent gang members. Given the power dynamics in gangs, it is important to investigate these relationships further among a young, high-risk population as it can shed light on areas for future prevention research. The present hypotheses will also examine these relationships as complementary:

3. Female gang members in age-disparate sexual relationships (i.e., sexual partners 5 or more years older) will be significantly more likely to have experienced IPV, rape, gang rape, engaged in group sex, engaged in unprotected sex, and to have ever been pregnant.
4. Male gang members in age-disparate sexual relationships (i.e., sexual partners 5 or more years younger) will be significantly more likely to have perpetrated IPV, rape, gang rape, engaged in group sex,

engaged in unprotected sex, and to have gotten a young woman pregnant.

Many studies involving gangs are qualitative; the present study adds to the limited quantitative literature on adolescent gang members, gender norms, age differences among sexual partners, IPV, sexual violence and coercion, and risky sex. It is imperative to investigate these relationships among adolescents, particularly adolescent gang members, so that programs can be developed to reduce early victimization and perpetration [40].

Methods

Recruitment

Participants were recruited from a mid-sized Midwestern city by finding a point of contact, i.e., someone who had ties to gang members. Initial participants were approached by research assistants throughout the community (e.g., festivals, community events) and through partnerships with schools and community organizations that worked with adolescents. Information about potential participants was then given to two research assistants. A brief phone screening was conducted, followed by an in-person screening. Eligibility criteria included participants being 14 to 19 years old, a member of a Milwaukee gang, and able to provide informed consent. We received a waiver of parent consent for participants under 18 years old. Once participants were deemed eligible and they expressed interest in participating, they signed the informed consent. Participating gang members were paid \$10 for recruiting additional participants.

Participants

A total of 461 gang members (191 females and 270 males), representing 71 different street gangs, were recruited into the study. The mean number of members recruited from each gang was 6.3 ($SD = 10.3$, range = 1–62). Our study of female gang members who have been in age-disparate sexual relationships focused on 107 women who reported sexual activity in the previous 30 days. For the hypotheses investigating male gang

members who had been in age-disparate sexual relationships, we focused on 169 male participants who reported sexual activity during the previous month.

Procedures

Participants completed a 60–90-minute audio computer-assisted self-interview in a community-based setting. They were given 10-min breaks four times throughout the survey to aid in concentration. Participants were compensated \$30 for their participation. Following each interview, participants were given the opportunity to receive free, on-site HIV and STI screening conducted by a local AIDS service organization. The University's Institutional Review Board approved all procedures.

Measures

Predictor: Unequal Gender Norms

An adapted 19-item scale measured *Unequal Gender Norms* toward women [1]. Participants specified their level of agreement (1 = “Strongly agree” through 5 = “Strongly disagree”) with statements such as: “Women shouldn’t ask their partners to use a condom,” or “If a woman cheats on a man, it’s okay for him to hit her.” Reliability testing showed strong inter-item consistency in this sample (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.85$). A mean score was computed for all participants who answered at least 15 of the 19 items ($M = 2.6$, $SD = 0.61$). The average gender norms score for female gang members was 2.4 ($SD = 0.58$) and for male gang members was 2.7 ($SD = 0.061$).

Predictors: Age-Disparate Sexual Relationships

In a series of questions about their sexual partners in the past 30 days, participants were asked about the ages of their sexual partners relative to themselves (5 or more years older, 2–4 years older, the same age (defined as less than 2 years older or younger), 2–4 years younger, and 5 or more years younger) [41]. We coded indicators of age-disparate sexual relationships as those where participants had one or more partners 5 or more years older, and those with a partner 5 or more years younger than themselves.

IPV

Participants who indicated having a main sexual partner in the past year responded to 12 adapted questions on IPV [42]. The first six items asked how often (0 = “Never” to 6 = “More than 20 times”) during the past year that the participant experienced specific acts of abuse from a partner. Responses to these six questions were recoded to frequency weights of 0 to 20 and then summed to compute an index of *Number of IPV Acts Experienced* in the past year. A second series of six items referenced how often the respondent perpetrated acts of violence toward a partner. These six items were similarly weighted and summed to create a measure for *Number of IPV Acts Perpetrated* in the past year.

Sexual Violence/Coercion Outcomes

Participants reported whether they had ever been victims or perpetrators of sexual violence. Specific questions asked whether they had been forced by an individual to have sex, had ever been the victim of a gang rape, or had sex with more than one person at a time. They were then asked whether they had ever forced someone else to have sex, or had ever participated in a gang rape.

Risky Sex

Participants were also asked about having any condomless vaginal or anal intercourse in the past 30 days. Female participants were also asked if they had ever been pregnant; male respondents were asked if they had ever gotten a young woman pregnant.

Data Analyses

Female gang members were analyzed separately to test hypotheses on sexual victimization; male gang members were analyzed separately to test the hypotheses on perpetrating sexual coercion/violence. In order to assess the statistical significance of associations between sexual violence/coercion outcomes and gender norms or age-difference predictors, we performed Generalized Linear Mixed Regression Models for binary logistic or Poisson (IPV) distributions, where the participant’s recruitment referee (research assistant or participant) was included as a random factor. All analyses were performed using IBM/SPSS Statistics, Version 21 (2012).

Results

Sociodemographic Background

Descriptive analysis of the 107 sexually active female gang members indicated that 68 % ($n=73$) were African-Americans and 19 % ($n=20$) were Latinas (see Table 1). The mean age of these participants was 17.6 ($SD=1.4$, range=14–19) years and they had been gang members for an average of 4 ($SD=2.6$, range=0.5–14) years. Forty-one percent ($n=44$) of female gang members reported that they were currently attending school and 23 % ($n=25$) indicated that they had graduated high school. More than 26 % ($n=28$) of female participants reported having one or more children. One of the sexually active female participants reported being HIV-seropositive at her last test, and three more reported being diagnosed with an STI in the past 6 months.

Of sexually active male gang members, 62 % ($n=104$) were African-Americans and 28 % ($n=48$) identified as Latino (see Table 1). The mean age of these male participants was 17.7 ($SD=1.4$, range=14–19) years and they had been gang members for an

average of 6.2 ($SD=4.4$, range=0–19) years where 19 years of gang membership refers to being “born into the gang” and 0 years refers to being a gang member for less than 1 month. Almost 47 % ($n=79$) of male gang members reported that they were currently attending school, and 20 % ($n=33$) had graduated. Almost 30 % ($n=50$) of the male sub-sample reported having one or more children. None reported an HIV-seropositive result at their last test; however, three did report an STI diagnosis in the past 6 months.

Almost 18 % of the young women had been in age-disparate sexual relationships. On average, young women experienced over 12 IPV acts in the past year, almost 20 % had been forced to have sex, 14 % had been gang raped, over 17 % engaged in group sex in the past month, almost half (44 %) had ever been pregnant, and over 80 % had unprotected sex in the past month (see Table 4). Almost 15 % of the young men had been in age-disparate sexual relationships. On average, young men perpetrated over five acts of IPV in the past year, almost 6 % forced someone to have sex with them, over 4 % participated in a gang rape, almost 15 % engaged in group sex, over 40 % had ever gotten a young woman pregnant, and over 75 % had condomless sex in the past month (see Table 5).

Table 1 Sociodemographic background of 107 female and 169 male gang members who were sexually active in the past 30 days

	Females	Males
Race/ethnicity—% (n)		
African-American	68.2 % (73)	61.5 % (104)
Latina/(-o)	18.7 % (20)	28.4 % (48)
White	0.9 % (1)	0.0 % (0)
Mixed/other	9.3 % (10)	5.3 % (9)
Refused	2.8 % (3)	4.7 % (8)
Age (in years)— M (SD)	17.6 (1.44)	17.7 (1.41)
Years in gang— M (SD)	4.0 (2.62)	6.2 (4.40)
Education status—% (n)		
Currently attending school	41.1 % (44)	46.7 % (79)
Graduated	23.4 % (25)	19.5 % (33)
Expelled	5.6 % (6)	8.3 % (14)
Dropped out	25.2 % (27)	21.9 % (37)
Refused	4.7 % (5)	3.6 % (6)
Has children—% (n)	26.2 % (28)	29.6 % (50)
Diagnosed positive for HIV—% (n)	0.9 % (1)	0.0 % (0)
Diagnosed positive for STI, past 6 months—% (n)	2.8 % (3)	1.8 % (3)

Unequal Gender Norms as a Predictor of IPV, Sexual Violence/Coercion, and Risky Sex

The regression analysis revealed that the unequal gender norms index was a significant predictor of two outcomes for female gang members: number of IPV acts experienced and having group sex (see Table 2). An increase

Table 2 IPV, sexual violence/coercion, and risky sex experiences of female gang members by unequal gender norms toward women

	OR	95 % CI	p
Number of IPV acts experienced in the past year ^a	1.49	1.29, 1.72	<0.001
Ever forced to have sex	0.90	0.37, 2.17	0.809
Ever been victim of gang rape	1.77	0.67, 4.69	0.249
Had group sex, past month	3.28	1.18, 9.14	0.023
Ever been pregnant	0.96	0.48, 1.90	0.900
Had condomless intercourse, past month	0.75	0.32, 1.79	0.514

^a The analysis was conducted for 66 females who were sexually active and in an intimate relationship during the past year, and who responded on the Unequal Gender Norms scale

Table 3 IPV, sexual violence/coercion, and risky sex experiences by male gang members by unequal gender norms toward women

	OR	95 % CI	<i>p</i>
Number of IPV acts perpetrated in the past year ^a	3.91	3.10, 4.91	<0.001
Ever forced someone to have sex	3.49	1.16, 10.54	0.027
Ever participated in a gang rape	2.44	0.75, 7.95	0.137
Had group sex, past month	3.13	1.37, 7.15	0.007
Ever gotten someone pregnant	1.21	0.71, 2.05	0.479
Had condomless intercourse, past month	1.45	0.78, 2.70	0.241

^aThe analysis was conducted for 89 sexually active male gang members who had a main partner during the past year and who responded to the Unequal Gender Norms scale

of one unit on the gender norms scale was associated with a female gang member experiencing, on average, 1.49 (95 % CI=1.29, 1.72) more acts of IPV per year. Similarly, a unit change in gender norms increased a female gang member's odds of having group sex more than three times (OR=3.28, 95 % CI=1.18, 9.14). Unequal gender norms were not significantly associated with forced sex, gang rape, pregnancy, or condomless intercourse.

The unequal gender norms scale predicted three outcomes for male gang members: number of IPV acts perpetrated, forcing someone to have sex, and participating in group sex (see Table 3). Each unit increase in unequal gender norms held was related to, on average, almost four additional acts of violence toward an intimate partner per year (OR=3.91, 95 % CI=3.10, 4.91). Male gang members who manifested more chauvinistic

gender norms were significantly more likely to have forced someone to have sex (OR=3.49, 95 % CI=1.16, 10.54) and were more likely to engage in group sex in the past month (OR=3.13, 95 % CI=1.37, 7.15). The gender norms index was not significantly associated with participating in a gang rape, getting someone pregnant, or having unprotected intercourse.

Age-Disparate Relationship as a Predictor of IPV, Sexual Violence/Coercion, and Risky Sex

The results of the analyses are presented in Table 4. Data showed that female gang members who had been in age-disparate sexual relationships experienced, on average, almost four times as many acts of IPV in the past year as female participants whose partners were slightly older, the same age, or younger (35.1 versus 9.3, $p<0.001$). Female gang members who had been in age-disparate sexual relationships were also more than three times as likely to have been the victims of gang rape (31.6 versus 10.2 %, $p=0.028$) and almost 3.5 times more likely to have had group sex in the past month (42.1 versus 12.5 %, $p=0.009$) than female adolescents with partners who were the same age as or younger. More than 68 % of female gang members who had been in age-disparate sexual relationships reported a previous pregnancy compared to female adolescents with sex partners less than 5 years older (38.6 %), and this difference was also statistically significant ($p=0.024$).

Results are presented in Table 5. The data showed that males who were in age-disparate sexual relationships reported that they had engaged in, on average,

Table 4 IPV, sexual violence/coercion, and risky sex experiences of female gang members who had sexual partners 5 or more years older than themselves in the past 30 days

	Total (<i>N</i> =107)	Had sex partner 5 or more years older than you in past month		
		No (<i>N</i> =88)	Yes (<i>N</i> =19)	<i>p</i>
Number of IPV acts experienced in the past year— <i>M</i> (Median) ^a	12.2 (4)	9.3 (3.5)	35.1 (34.8)	<0.001
Ever forced to have sex—% (<i>n</i>)	19.6 (21)	17.0 (15)	31.6 (6)	0.213
Ever been victim of gang rape—% (<i>n</i>)	14.0 (15)	10.2 (9)	31.6 (6)	0.028
Had group sex, past month—% (<i>n</i>)	17.8 (19)	12.5 (11)	42.1 (8)	0.009
Ever been pregnant—% (<i>n</i>)	43.9 (47)	38.6 (34)	68.4 (13)	0.024
Had condomless intercourse, past month—% (<i>n</i>)	80.4 (86)	79.5 (70)	84.2 (16)	0.595

^aThis index was scored only for women who had a main partner in the past 12 months as well as sexual activity in the past 30 days. Thus, the analysis was conducted for a total of 70 women, including 8 with a partner 5-plus years older and 62 whose partners were younger

Table 5 IPV, sexual violence/coercion, and risky sex experiences by male gang members who had sexual partners 5 or more years younger than themselves in the past 30 days

	Total (<i>N</i> = 169)	Had sex partner 5 or more years younger than you in past month		<i>p</i>
		No (<i>N</i> = 144)	Yes (<i>N</i> = 25)	
Number of IPV acts perpetrated in the past year— <i>M</i> (Median) ^a	5.1 (0)	3.6 (0)	15.0 (2.5)	<0.001
Ever forced someone to have sex when they didn't want to—% (<i>n</i>)	5.9 (10)	3.5 (5)	20.0 (5)	0.019
Ever participated in a gang rape—% (<i>n</i>)	4.1 (7)	1.4 (2)	20.0 (5)	0.007
Had group sex, past month—% (<i>n</i>)	14.8 (25)	9.7 (14)	44.0 (11)	<0.001
Ever gotten someone pregnant—% (<i>n</i>)	40.8 (69)	40.3 (58)	44.0 (11)	0.769
Had condomless intercourse, past month—% (<i>n</i>)	75.7 (128)	75.7 (109)	76.0 (19)	0.898

^a This index was scored only for men who had a main partner in the past 12 months and sexual activity in the past 30 days. Thus, the analysis was conducted for a total of 92 men, including 12 with a partner 5-plus years younger and 80 whose partners were older

more than four times as many IPV acts toward their female partners in the past year as male gang members with partners of similar age or older than themselves (15.0 versus 3.6, $p < 0.001$). Male gang members who had been in age-disparate sexual relationships were more than 5 times as likely to have ever forced someone to have sex (20 versus 3.5 %, $p = 0.019$) and more than 14 times as likely to have participated in a gang rape (20 versus 1.4 %, $p = 0.007$). Additionally, male gang members who had been in age-disparate sexual relationships were significantly more likely to have participated in group sex in the past month than male participants whose partners were of similar age or older than themselves (44 versus 9.7 %, $p < 0.001$).

Discussion

The present study is unique because it is one of the first to examine the effects of unequal gender norms and age-disparate sexual relationships among adolescent gang members on IPV, sexual coercion and violence, and sexual risk. Additionally, it examined complementary hypotheses from a victim and perpetrator perspective.

Hypotheses 1 and 2 were complementary, such that unequal gender norms among both female and male gang members were significantly related to IPV (victimization for females, perpetration for males) and engaging in group sex, thus supporting the current literature [4, 29, 40, 43, 44]. While causal relationships cannot be determined from this study, these results do support the notion that unequal gender norms may be a

root cause of IPV among adolescent gang members. Additionally, if both female and male gang members believe that women are unequal to men and are meant in part to satisfy men sexually, then it is logical that gang members would be amenable to engaging in group sex. Although group sex is defined as “un-coerced” sex with multiple sexual partners [29, 30], it is possible that females engaging in group sex feel as if they must. This emphasizes the need to intervene early among gang members to address these unequal gender norms. Unequal gender norms predicted rape perpetration among male gang members, but not rape victimization among female gang members. This discrepancy may be due to the underreporting of rape and the gray area between consensual and non-consensual sex [45, 46]. For example, a sexual experience that is later regretted due to substance use during sex, feeling pressured, or feeling coerced is often not reported or identified as rape by the victims [46]. Other times young women may engage in sex to “keep their man happy” even if they do not want to have sex [25, 46].

Hypotheses 3 and 4 were also complementary, such that age-disparate sexual relationships among female and male gang members were significantly associated with IPV (victimization for females, perpetration for males), gang rape (victimization for females, perpetration for males), and engaging in group sex. Results also supported that female gang members who had been in age-disparate sexual relationships were more likely to have ever been pregnant. Additionally, males who had been in age-disparate sexual relationships were more likely to have ever perpetrated rape. These results support the current literature that age-disparate sexual

relationships are often associated with IPV, sexual violence, and risky sex [23, 32, 36].

Age-disparate sexual relationships did not predict condomless sex in the past month for either female or male gang members. This may be due to participants frequently reporting participating in condomless sex (over 80 % of females and over 75 % of males), thus creating a ceiling effect. Age-disparate sexual relationships predicted rape for male perpetrators but not for female victims. These differences could be partly explained by gender norms and expectations about sex. Rape is often unreported among young women [45] so differences may not be detectable. However, male gang members who had been in age-disparate sexual relationships are already engaging in statutory rape by having much younger sex partners (i.e., minors), thus they may be more likely to engage in other forms of sexual coercion and violence such as rape. Age-disparate sexual relationships predicted pregnancy among female gang members, but not among male gang members. It is possible that this discrepancy is because male gang members are more likely to have gotten a young woman pregnant [39] regardless of the age of their sex partners. More research is needed in this area.

Limitations

Gang members were sampled from a mid-sized Midwestern city; thus, results are not generalizable to gang members from other cities or outside the Midwest. Additionally, the survey was cross-sectional; as such, results cannot be interpreted as causal. While we focused on female gang members as victims and male gang members as perpetrators, this is not always the case. However, due to small numbers of female perpetrators and male victims, analyses could not be extended into these scenarios. Larger sample sizes are needed to identify similar relationships between variables in these different victim-perpetrator scenarios. Additionally, the IPV measure was specifically for participants in relationships in the past year, thus our sample size was greatly reduced.

Future Research

There is limited research involving gender norms, age-disparate sexual relationships, IPV, sexual coercion, group sex, and risk sex among adolescent gang members. While the present study contributes to this gap in

the literature, more research is needed. Future research should consider examining gender norms and age-disparate sexual relationships with lifetime violence, violence experienced before and after entering the gang, and differences between female-only and mixed-gender gangs. It is essential for researchers and public health practitioners to create programs for adolescent females to reduce or avoid risky situations, such as the inability to negotiate condom use with older partners [31, 40]. The present results support the importance of intervening among adolescent gang members as early as possible to help female adolescents avoid “consensual” relationships with much older young men, and young men to avoid sexual relationships with much younger female adolescents. Additionally, programs must be developed for female and male gang members to help them understand and identify unequal gender norms, and interpersonal and sexual violence. Early intervention will be necessary as these adolescent gang members are already engaged in extremely high-risk, coercive, and violent behaviors.

Conclusions

The present study is one of the first studies to examine unequal gender norms and age-disparate sexual relationships as predictors of IPV, sexual violence and coercion, and risky sex from both the perspective of female victims and male perpetrators. Hypotheses for female and male gang members were complementary, identifying the extreme importance of creating and implementing programs and interventions for both female and male gang members at very young ages.

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