Published in final edited form as:

Cult Health Sex. 2017 February ; 19(2): 165–178. doi:10.1080/13691058.2016.1213422.

Gang masculinity and high risk sexual behaviors

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Abstract

Context—High risk sexual behaviors (HRSB) are one of many problem behaviors, including relationship violence and substance use, which often cluster together among adolescents in high risk settings. Adolescent gang members often show the highest rates of HRSB, substance use and relationship violence.

Methods—This paper uses 58 in-depth interviews with male and female gang members from 6 different gangs. We explore the role of gangs as powerful socializing peer groups that set gender, sexual and relationship roles and expectations for their male and female members.

Results—HRSB among gangs included sex with multiple partners and group sex. Gang norms included the belief that male members were sexually insatiable with multiple sexual partners and that female members should be sexually available to male members. Alcohol and drugs were seen to have a large influence on sexual desire and the inability to use condoms. Much sexual behavior with gangs, such as group sex, was viewed with ambivalence and seen as somewhat coercive. Finally, the gendered sexual expectations (boys as sexually insatiable and girls as sexually available) made forming long-term romantic relationships difficult for gang members.

Discussion—The influence of gang norms on HRSB must be addressed in interventions with gang members.

Keywords

Gangs; Substance Use; Sexual Risk; Dating Violence; Romantic Relationships

INTRODUCTION

High risk sexual behaviors (HRSB) are one of many problem behaviors that often cluster together among adolescents in high risk settings, particularly adolescent gang members (Clark et al. 2016) (Botvin and Griffin 2014). Among the adolescent risk behaviors that often accompany HRSB are antisocial behavior and conduct problems, delinquency, academic difficulties, alcohol, tobacco and other drug use (Reider, Robertson, and Sims 2014, Capaldi 2014). HRSB among adolescents include early initiation of sex, unplanned pregnancies, HIV and other STIs, and relationship violence (Reed et al. 2008, Silverman et

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al. 2006, Rothman et al. 2008, Sales et al. 2012, Teitelman et al. 2011, Miller et al. 2011, Minnis et al. 2013). Adolescents and young adults are disproportionately affected by HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Approximately 3 million adolescents are infected each year with Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2001). Adolescents aged 15 to 24 years represent approximately 25% of sexually active persons in the United States but accounted for over 60% of new gonorrhea and chlamydia infections in 2013 and 26% of HIV infections were among youth aged 13 to 24 (Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2013).

Among adolescents who exhibit multiple problem behaviors, adolescent gang members are at elevated risk in terms of number of problem behaviors exhibited and their seriousness. For example, in a study of 270 detained adolescents, adolescents who reported having been in a gang were 5.7 times more likely to have had sex, 3.2 times more likely to have gotten a girl pregnant, and almost 4 times more likely to have had sex while high on alcohol or drugs than adolescents who were not members of a gang (Voisin et al. 2008). Adolescent gang members are at highest risk for abusing drugs and alcohol when compared with other inner-city adolescents who are not gang members (Thornberry et al. 1993, Battin-Pearson et al. 1998, Walker-Barnes and Mason 2004, Esbensen and Huizinga 1993, Esbensen et al. 2002). Research has also shown that gang membership is associated with adolescent dating violence (Borowsky, Hogan, and Ireland 1997). Finally, recent reports have revealed high rates of sexual assault, coercion and exploitation within gangs (Brookings 2013, Wise 2013, Berelowitz et al. 2013, Beckett et al. 2013, Coy et al. 2013). Girls within gangs are often treated as commodities and are expected to have sex with members of their gangs, or to ensnare rival gang members (Wise 2013, Beckett et al. 2013). This research has shown that many unwanted sexual encounters, including sex with someone incapacitated by alcohol, are not generally labeled as rape by gang members who view rape as only involving explicit force between strangers (Coy et al. 2013, Akre et al. 2013).

One reason that problem behaviors cluster together in adolescent subgroups such as gangs is that these behaviors are often mutually reinforcing (Elliott, Huizinga, and Menard 1989). Drugs or alcohol can impair cognitions or make it difficult for adolescents to use condoms or contraception during sex (Houck et al. 2006, Flom et al. 2001, Malow et al. 2006). Risky sexual behaviors can also lead to fear and regret and alcohol and drugs may be used to cope with these feelings (Kuo et al. 2014). Alcohol and other drugs can create “expectancies” such as the expectation that those who consume substances are more sexually aroused, less able to control their sexual urges, or unable to use condoms or other protection (MacAndrew and Edgerton 1969). Alcohol and drugs use also often precede dating and are used after violence as a coping mechanism (Kuo et al. 2014).

However, the mutually reinforcing properties of multiple risk behaviors do not explain why gang members exhibit more risk behaviors than other groups. Dishion and colleagues hypothesize that economic hardship, academic difficulties and attenuated family relationships in early childhood lead to peer rejection at school, which lead adolescents to seek approval from alternative peer groups, most often deviant peer groups (Dishion, Ha, and Veronneau 2012). Many researchers have argued that multiple marginalizations such as experiences of racism, poor quality schools and limited economic opportunities lead to a

rejection of conventional institutions and norms (Vigil 2002). Gangs are a powerful peer group with numerous social mechanisms in place to maintain and increase group cohesion in the face of external threats (Klein and Maxson 2006). Intervention research has shown that attempts to work with gangs as a unit generally increases the social cohesion of gangs which increases their problem behaviors (Klein and Maxson 2006).

Because of the importance of the gang as a peer group, it is important to understand HRSB and in the context of gang norms regarding gender (Miller 2001). Connell (Connell 1987, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) has argued that societies contain multiple masculinities and that groups that are blocked from attaining the hegemonic masculinity in a society embrace alternative masculine norms and ideals. In the United States, hegemonic masculinity includes achieving high status through education and high paying jobs. For those who are blocked from achieving these goals, like gang members, masculine norms include a willingness to show violence and sexual prowess (Whitehead 1997). Norms that prescribe gang practices such as the expectation for girls to have sex with gang members “on demand” may affect other aspects of gang members’ dating and sexual relationships. However, it is equally important to attend to gang members’ feelings about their sexual behaviors and dating relationships. While gang norms may exert influences on these behaviors, gang members’ feelings about these may reveal ambivalence about the norms and behaviors. These feelings often include ambivalence and regret revealing recognition that sexual practices within gangs are sometimes coercive. These reveal limits to the power of peer norms that provides room for intervention. In addition, conflicting feelings about sex and gender norms may have psychological consequences for gang members.

In this paper, we will explore male and female members’ sexual experiences beginning with their sexual debut, the sexual expectations for boys and girls within the gang, the sexual exploitation/coercion norms among gang members, and the presence/quality of long-term sexual relationships among gang members. We use multiple masculinities as a theoretical framework, arguing that gangs reinforce these norms as a powerful peer group. We will also explore the role of alcohol and drugs in each of these experiences and the presence of ambivalence and sexual regret. Finally, we will explore the intervention implications of our findings.

METHODS

Sampling and data collection

Between June 2012 and July 2013, we conducted 58 semi-structured interviews with members of six adolescent African American and Latino gangs in a mid-sized Midwestern city. Gangs were purposively selected to represent differences in size and ethnic composition in order to explore whether size or ethnicity had an effect on participation in drug selling and substance use and girls roles and status within gangs, as seen in some studies (MacKenzie, Hunt, and Joe-Laidler 2005, Esbensen, Deschenes, and Winfree 1999). However, no differences based on ethnicity or size of gang were found. One primarily African American gang and one primarily Latino gang were larger, mixed-gender gangs, while the other gangs were smaller, racially diverse mixed-gender gangs. Inclusion criteria were active membership in one of the six identified gangs, being 14 to 19 years old, and the ability to

provide informed consent. Ability to speak English was not an inclusion criterion, although it was the language preferred by all participants.

The first gang members were recruited by key informants, or adults in the neighborhood with ties to a specific gang. Potential participants were given information about the study by key informants and a phone number to contact project staff who carefully screened participants for eligibility and to ensure that no coercion had taken place. Research assistants were an African American woman and Latino man, both of whom had years of experience providing social services to active gang members and were trained in qualitative interviewing. Upon completion of the interview, participants received two referral cards to recruit additional gang members into the study. Participants received a \$30 cash incentive for participating and an additional \$10 incentive for referring additional eligible participants. Participants were 44.8% female (n=26), 63.8% African American (n=37), 22.4% Latino (n=13) and 13.8% (n=8) identified as mixed race, primarily Latino and African American. Mean age was 18 years old. Participants had been in the gang for an average of 5 years (range one month to 8 years), and had joined on average at the age of 13 (range 10 to 17 years old). All participants completed written informed consent prior to screening given the sensitivity of the screening questions. The consent form was read verbatim and participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions. We received a waiver of parental consent for minors under the age of 18 given that some parents may be unaware of their children's gang involvement. Informed consent and project protocols were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the Medical College of Wisconsin.

Interviews were conducted in English, digitally recorded, and lasted approximately one hour. Interviews took place in community-based settings that were comfortable and accessible to participants, including community organizations and churches. The two research assistants conducted all interviews, and interviews with female members were conducted by the female research assistant given the sensitivity of the interview questions. The semi-structured interviews were based on an interview guide created collaboratively with the Principal Investigator, co-investigators, and research assistants, which outlined topics to be covered during the interview, allowing flexibility to probe, ask follow up questions, and explore certain areas in more depth. Interview questions covered sexual experiences, including sexual debut, experiences of sex within the gang, group sex and relationships, and current drug and alcohol use. (See appendix for interview guide.)

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded and analyzed by three members of the research team in MAXQDA. We coded all transcripts by gender, ethnicity, and gang, to explore differences among gangs or across gender and ethnicity of gang members. We examined transcripts to identify primary coding categories and themes. An initial codebook was created to capture broad content areas and key analytical concepts evident across interviews, including sexual experiences, gender norms, male and female roles within the gang, and drug and alcohol use. The codebook was created collaboratively with input from the PI, the research team, and the research assistants who conducted the interviews, and included code definitions and guidance on what themes and topics should be included in a

given code. Codes were refined using an iterative process throughout the analysis. As additional interviews were conducted and new themes emerged, changes to the codebook and refinement of codes occurred after discussion with the research team. All transcripts were coded by at least two coders, and discrepancies were resolved by consensus. We analyzed the transcripts for emergent themes and patterns using a constant comparative method, characterized by repeated coding, analysis, and interpretation (Boeje 2010). We explored the differences and similarities within and between male and female gang members across the larger themes. Specifically, we analyzed data for similarities and differences in sexual and relationship experiences, the role of substance use in these experiences, and how they were interpreted by male and female gang members. The final phase of analysis consisted of summarizing major themes related to the sexual experiences among male and female gang members, looking for salient themes, as well as outliers and contradictions to protect against overgeneralizations. Emblematic quotes were selected to represent ideas, thoughts, or experiences consistent across interviews, or to highlight differing or contradictory experiences, thoughts, or attitudes.

RESULTS

First Sexual Experiences

Both boy and girl gang members reported having sex for the first time at a very young age, usually before 16 years old and sometimes as young as 11. This was also the age range in which participants reported joining gangs. Participants reported joining gangs out of economic necessity as gangs provided them with opportunities to earn money by selling drugs (Authors pub in press). Most participants also reported considerable difficulty in school including failing grades, suspensions and expulsions, frequent truancy and ultimately, school drop out. As success through school seemed more remote for participants, gang membership became more attractive (Authors pub. In press).

Both boys and girls described feeling peer pressure to have sex at an early age. As most participants spent some time with gang members before officially joining, gang members were typically the peer group that most influenced boys and girls decisions to have sex. For some girls, this pressure led to feelings of regret and that they had sex too early, or with a partner who did not really care about them as much as they had thought.

While some boys described having their first sexual experience with a girlfriend or other girls they knew, some boys (5) described that their first sexual experiences occurred within the gang. None of the girls reported having had their first sexual experiences within the gang. For five of the boys, their first sexual experience occurred shortly after their initiations into the gang with an older female member who was told to have sex with the boy in celebration.

Male Participant: I think I was, you know, 13. And it was a party, you know. I had just basically officially, you know, kinda was initiated in a couple weeks before. It was an older girl. Had to be 16, 17 or whatever. What can I say? You know, I was, uh, drinking, you know, smoking some weed, and, uh, just had some fun.

Interviewer: How did it make you feel?

Male Participant: I felt like a man. Like I got my manhood that day...

Interviewer: Okay. Do you know if she kinda was told to do it with you?

Male Participant: Yeah. Yeah. You know, I was getting cracked at for real 'cause, you know, my guys—like I said, these are guys I grew up with, so, you know, they pretty much knew that I was still a virgin, whatever, so, you know, it was planned. It was like my coming out party or something. (Latino, 18 years old)

Other qualitative research about adolescent boys' first sexual experiences have highlighted the role that older male peers play in facilitating these encounters by providing the opportunity, space and mentoring (Ott et al. 2012). Not dissimilar to non-gang members' accounts, alcohol and drugs, and the party atmosphere, also facilitated the first sexual experience and set up the expectation that this was a one-time experience for "fun." The quote above also demonstrates the strong link between norms of gang masculinity and sex with women. The boy "got his manhood" when he lost his virginity, a few days after he was initiated.

Sexual Expectations

While relatively uncommon, the sexual debut of young male gang members in the gang can be seen as a way of socializing members to expectations of masculine sexual prowess and virility, and of female gang members' sexual availability. These sexual expectations are ways of expressing the alternative masculinity favored by gang members. Further experiences within the gang reinforced these values and male gang members almost universally endorsed the norm that boys were supposed to have multiple, concurrent sex partners. As one participant explained, "I got plenty sex partners. You know, that's the—that's part of the code, so." (Latino/African American, 16 years old) However, such expectations create ambivalence as girls and boys reported having sex when they really didn't want to, but because gang norms dictate that both boys and girls should want or at least submit to sex at any time, many boys and girls were not quite willing to call such experiences coerced or forced sex. For example, a boy who refuses the sexual advances of a girl may be seen as less masculine and his reputation might suffer. Thus, the participant below reported having sex with a girl when he really didn't want to.

Male Participant: There were a few times like I just be sitting there watching TV with them. Next thing I know, they start taking their clothes off. I ain't got no choice. I am a boy. (Latino/African American, 18 years old)

Stating that he "had no choice" because he is "a boy" is a direct expression masculine gender norms in which boys are always expected to want sex.

Male gang members further expected female gang members to be sexually available to them. Girls in turn, were often not given a choice of whether to have sex or not. Boys' ability to demand sex from girls was based on hierarchy. In general, boys with higher rank within the gang were more able to demand sex from girls than other boys.

Male Participant: Man, whenever you feel like having sex, they gotta do it. They can't say no. It's always gotta be yes, especially if they're our gang chicks, you know what I mean. (Latino, 19 years old).

Similar to girls being offered to male members in celebration of initiation, girls were also expected to have sex with male gang members in order to “cheer them up” as described below.

Male Participant: [Girls are] basically—some of them are just kind of, you know, eye candy. Take one for the team. Basically it’s like, you know, someone is going through a really bad day. You know, their brother just got locked up or something and they had a really long day. You know, just kind of take them into the other room, make them feel happy again for a little bit. Take his mind off of it, stuff like that. (Latino, 17 years old)

Male gang members reported turning to sex “on demand” to express their masculinity in response to situations that threatened their masculinity such as the mass criminalization and incarceration of African American and Latino boys and men (Rios 2011). Incarceration blocks economic and educational opportunities for gang members, further limiting their potential to achieve hegemonic masculinity.

Girls also reported being told by leaders to have sex with certain gang members, although they frequently reported not wanting to engage in sex on those occasions. As one girl gang member stated, “I felt like my pride was stepped on.” Another girl reported that she had sex with someone when she didn’t want to.

Female Participant: ... I was drunk, you know, and I saw my friend doing—my friend having sex with her guy and I was just sitting there and a guy came to me and he wanted to but I didn’t really want to and I just let him, you know? I didn’t really want it to happen but I just let it happen.... I felt kinda bad... I told people but it wasn’t like I was like raped but it was like I let it go on when I shouldn’t have let it go on. (Latina/African American, 19 years old)

Some research has suggested that many adolescents feel ambivalence after unwanted sexual experiences. This constitutes a “gray area” in which the adolescent recognizes that sex was not wanted, but attributes its occurrence to alcohol use, miscommunication, or girls’ desire not to disappoint boys’ expectations (Akre et al. 2013). While all these factors played a role into the girl above not labeling the experience as a rape, gang norms around being sexually available within the gang, a powerful peer group, may also have led to her not labeling the experience as rape as it was normative within the gang. The limits of gang norms in shaping members’ feelings is still apparent, however, in her and other girls’ reporting of regret.

Substance Use and Sex

Norms and expectations about the effects of alcohol and other drugs also play a large role in HRSB among adolescent gang members. All participants reported that sex was common during parties where alcohol and other drugs were used. Alcohol, in particular, was seen as lowering inhibitions to have sex and as increasing sexual desire.

Male Participant: Like when I’m drunk it’s like make your hormones, but to me like—and by the females being around all the time, you know. You know, it’s easy. You can do it any time, so you do it. You all—you all wind up doing it... Sometimes you regret who you fell asleep with and sex with at the end of the day.

Some participants reported that condoms were inconsistently used when participants had been drinking. In addition, while alcohol and sex often occur in the context of parties and, thus, are engaged in to have fun, many participants were ambivalent about the practice and often expressed regret after such sexual encounters.

Alcohol is also often involved in these “gray areas” of coercive versus consensual sex making consent more difficult. In addition, the use of alcohol can help numb feelings of regret after the event, as the female gang member who reported having sex with two male gang members while she was drunk described.

Female Participant: After I just—I felt bad but I just kept drinking so I just been hiding it. (Latina/African American, 19 years old)

While the girl said that this sexual experience with more than one male partner did not have anything to do with the gang, it did occur with members of her gang. Thus, gang expectations that girls be sexually available may have played a role. She continued to use alcohol to help her to cope with coercive sex.

Group sex

Within gangs, group sex is normative. Group sex is also consistent with the general sexual expectations and gang ideals of masculinity described above, that boys have insatiable sexual appetites and that girls should generally be sexually available to them. Almost all gang members reported either having seen or participated in group sex. For example, when asked whether she had seen group sex, this 19 year old girl responded:

Female Participant: Yeah, um, one of our guys’ house, you know. There’d be a room like it’d be like—I don’t know, you walk in and everyone’s having sex, you know? It’s like one of the main things is sex. And I was—I kind of was taken back like, oh my God! Like [laughs], I was young still. I didn’t—and that was the first time I saw something like that. But you get used to it, you know? As normal. (Latina/African American, 19 years old)

Many gang members also reported initial reactions of shock. However, participants, like the girl above, saw that other gang members were not shocked but rather acted like it was normal behavior, and so she eventually “got used to it.”

Girl gang members participated in group sex not just as sexual objects but also in facilitating the encounters with other girls or recording them as in the case below.

Female Participant: Yeah, I, I’ve seen it [group sex]. Actually I recorded once. Um, it’s my friend... he had this girl, and her sister, and her cousin, and it was like eight guys, and it was like they was all just doing it up and stuff, like he was like, hey, record this for me. So I’m like, okay. So I’m recording them and stuff. . . I feel like them girls didn’t wanna go through with it, ‘cause they, at first they didn’t know it was eight guys in the room ‘cause it was dark. The lights were out and my camera had night vision. So like they’ll get a couple strokes in, they he’ll try to do a different position, then a dude, a different dude’ll come in, and then do it. So it’s like, that’s how they was doing and it was crazy ‘cause it was like them girls never

knew that eight niggas just been up in their punanny like that. And it was just crazy but, you know. (African American, 17 years old)

Again, the girl suggests some amount of ambivalence about the event she recorded recognizing that the girls involved had not really consented to having group sex. However, she seemed to distance herself from what happened to the girls and later even became the girlfriend of the main perpetrator of the incident.

In another instance described by a girl who had witnessed nonconsensual group sex, the girl's victimization was justified by her overuse of alcohol.

Female Participant: We was leaving a club one day and my sister was driving. She had her friends, we all kicking it, everybody drunk. Her god brother want to, ah, screw one, somebody that was in our gang or whatever. And so they did it, though, they, they got her in the back of the truck, everybody, allegedly said 'cause she was drunk. He did it. Then somebody else got back there and did it. We make it to the house, we still drinking and smoking and they just walk back and forth in and out the room like, and she's still in there. Like plenty of dudes pulling up their pants, they just coming out there, you know what they did. (African American, 18 years old)

While the girl quoted above and her friends were all drinking and smoking marijuana, they still rationalized the gang rape of the girl due to her overuse. This may be a result of mixed messages around substance use which is seen as having the advantages, on the one hand, of acting as a social lubricant to meet potential partners and excusing sexual behaviors they may later regret, it was also seen as increasing vulnerability to sexual assault (Livingston et al. 2013).

Relationship ambivalence

While many male and female participants described having main sexual partners, for both sexes, these relationships were often marked by feelings of ambivalence, with participants describing both feelings of love and caring with mistrust and resentment. As mentioned above, in part, this is due to mistrust based on the sexual expectations within gangs, i.e. that boys will have multiple sexual partners and that girls will be sexually available to boys. For some boys, this resulted in a lack of desire to have a steady girlfriend, preferring instead to have only casual partners. As one 17 year old African American boy said, "They can't be trusted... They'd be cheating all day, you know." The cheating may stem from some of the sexual expectations that girls be sexually available to different male gang members.

Male gang members who expressed a desire to have a girlfriend often talked about needing to know the person for a long period of time in order to establish trust.

Interviewer: Do you have a steady girlfriend?

Male Participant: I wouldn't call it that, but it's just like trust is a big thing. It's just, I don't know. You know, the younger females, is a big thing with trust. It's like they don't make them like the stories you hear about females and males being together for a long time. So, it's a trust thing. It's—I don't—I wouldn't call it a relationship.

Interviewer: So, what are your plans for this person though? Like you and her?

Male Participant: When you live in the—in a gang life, it's more like it's all trying to get ahead. So, you see her more as helping you on what you trying to do 'cause most of the time with a dude, you be in the streets so you hoping she can be like a back bone, you know, the positive things going, working, and you know, somebody to lean on really.

Interviewer: So, are you planning on trying to make this young lady your girlfriend?

Male Participant: Eventually, if she can prove her loyalty (African American, 18 years old)

Interestingly, the boy above has been clearly influenced by idealized relationships in “stories” where “males and females” are together for a long time. He implies that this type of relationship is based on trust that takes a long time to develop. This trust, however, is also based on girls’ willingness and ability to help him in his gang activities. The lack of trust does not exclude a sexual relationship with this person in the meantime, nor did it prevent him from having outside partners.

While other qualitative studies have reported that many male gang members choose “good girls,” i.e. girls who were not gang members or did not attend gang parties (Joe and Chesney-Lind 1995), this was generally not the case among our male participants. Only one boy reported having a girlfriend outside the gang who knew nothing about his gang involvement. More often boys reported wanting a girlfriend who was a gang member and could help support them to get ahead in the street economy. For girls, however, boys’ continued involvement in gang activity was often seen as an impediment to having a long-term steady relationship. The girl below, for example, had been in a relationship with a male gang member for three years and had children with him, but did not feel that they had a long-term future together.

Interviewer: What are your plans with this person?

Female Participant: Honestly, I don't know because right now he's more stuck in the 'hood than I am. I kind of have this state of mind that I'm kind of wanting better for myself, so I really don't know where this relationship is going to be. And I feel like him ending up incarcerated might be a sign that maybe it might be easier to pursue my dreams. (Latina, 19 years old)

This participant had children and so was looking to establish a more conventional life for herself and her children, including going to school and obtaining legal employment.

It is clear that some boys and girls desired monogamy within their dating or co-parenting relationships. However, the expectation within gangs that girls and boys will have sex with each other makes this difficult. In some cases, physical conflicts resulted from suspicions or actual instances of infidelity. These physical altercations were started as often by girls as by boys.

Interviewer: Do you guys have couples, you know, in your gang? Like boyfriend-girlfriend couples?

Male Participant: Nah. They share. Like I said, it's a family. I may lay up with her tonight, but tomorrow she'll be my sister in the morning...There might be a few that date here and there but.

Interviewer: Is there any, you know, for those few, is there like ever any physical altercations because of anything?

Male Participant: There's always physical altercations when you're dealing with, you know, things in the clique and people she slept with and now you in love with her. So there's always gonna be something there. (Latino, 19 years old).

In fact, the expectation that gang members publicly have sex with multiple partners within the gang may serve as a mechanism to minimize external threats to loyalty to the gang that could come from a long-term committed relationship. Sex with multiple partners may also discourage romantic relationships within gangs in which the male to female ratio is quite unbalanced. In this context, committed relationships could result in sexual rivalries. In spite of relationship conflict, however, most participants reported wanting in the future to establish long-term, committed relationships with romantic partners, to raise children together, and to obtain legal employment (Authors, in review). This was usually a future hoped for after they left active involvement in the gangs.

DISCUSSION

Gangs are powerful peer groups that shape the roles, norms and expectations surrounding sex and relationships (Klein and Maxson 2006). Gangs socialize members into the expectation that boys will have multiple sexual partners, insatiable sexual desires and show aggression, and that girls will be sexually available to male gang members on demand, an alternative masculinity that stems from exclusion from achieving success in education and work (Connell 1987, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). As a result, male and female gang members often reported having had sex with multiple members of their own gang. Group sex was also common. Sexual expectations caused male and female gang members to have sex even when they did not really desire it, leading to considerable ambivalence and regret. Alcohol and drug expectations also played a large role in the sexual risk behaviors and coercive sexual practices of gang members. Participants reported that alcohol got them in the mood for sex and made it difficult for them to use condoms. Being drunk or high made consent ambiguous as both male and female members reported sexual experiences under the influence that they later regretted. Girls who were extremely intoxicated were seen as partly to blame for coercive sexual experiences and some reported continuing alcohol or drug use after some of these experiences as a way of numbing themselves from the unwanted sexual experiences.

Normative sexual behaviors and gender roles within gangs also had repercussions for other aspects of gang members' lives including their ability to form romantic relationships. Girls often felt that continued gang activity was antithetical to establishing a stable home life for them and their children. Boys, on the other hand, were often looking for girls who could

help support them in their gang activities. In some ways, the sexual norms and expectations that make forming romantic relationships difficult may serve as a defense against the external threat that such relationships may pose to gang cohesion. Committed long-term relationships and children may supersede the gang for members' loyalty and attention. While a considerable research has explored sexual practices such as group sex and multiple partners as a way of constructing and reinforcing a particular gang masculinity that forms part of gang members' identities (Hunt and Joe-Laidler 2001, Hunt, Joe-Laidler, and MacKenzie 2000, Hunt, Joe-Laidler, and Evans 2002), little research has examined the way that these norms and behaviors may also promote gang cohesion.

These results have important implications for interventions with this high risk group of adolescents. Interventions to address condom use, particularly in high risk situations such as parties where alcohol and drugs are being used and sexual activity is prevalent, are needed. However, these kinds of harm reduction interventions would not address some of the other harms associated with sexual and gender norms within gangs such as the numbing and dissociation expressed by many girls after unwanted sexual experiences or the mistrust and conflict within romantic relationships. Interventions to address unwanted and coercive sex, sexual risk behaviors and intimate partner violence within gangs need to address the long-term consequences of victimization. Sexual and dating violence interventions should be targeted to inner-city adolescents already involved in gangs as well as children younger than 11 years old, given our results that suggest that many initiate sexual activity and gang membership between the ages of 11 and 16. Early intervention may help break masculine norms that depict boys as sexually insatiable and girls as sexual objects, and that support coercive sex.

Interventions to address the structural conditions of poverty, unemployment, community violence and limited educational opportunities could help address the sexual violence and risk common among adolescent gang members. Connell argues that there are multiple masculinities in a given society, but that some male members may embrace alternative masculinities as opportunities to fulfill hegemonic masculine norms are blocked (Connell 1987, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). In U.S. society, hegemonic masculinity (i.e. white male masculinity) ascribes status to men based on high-status, well-paying jobs that are obtained by achieving a college education. Among urban ethnic minority men and boys, the ability to obtain a high-status job through education is blocked. Thus, masculinity is displayed through demonstrating a willingness to fight, sell drugs and have multiple sexual partners. Girls sometimes reported depending on sexual partners for economic support. Addressing opportunities might help alleviate sexual risk behaviors and coercive sex among this population. Structural interventions, such as improving inner-city schools and increasing economic opportunities, may be the best hope of interrupting the cycle of risky sex, substance use, and violence for adolescent gang members and their children.

This study has some limitations that should be noted. As this is a qualitative study with a relatively small number of members from only six gangs in one Midwestern city, results may not be generalizable to members of other gangs living in other parts of the country. In addition, interviews were conducted on time as opposed to longitudinally, limiting our

ability to make causal inferences. Nonetheless, our sample is larger and more diverse than many qualitative studies of gang members, and includes both male and female perspectives.

Acknowledgments

This research was funded in part by a grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (R01DA0207299) and the National Institute of Mental Health (P30MH57226).

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