

CHAPTER 5

Micro-Level Theories

Gang Involvement as a Developmental Pathway

◆ Introduction

The theories reviewed in Chapter 4 help explain the existence of gangs. In this chapter, the focus is on individuals and how they become involved in gangs. Like other adolescent problem behaviors, gang involvement develops gradually over time, and life-course development theories (Elder, 1985, 1997) best illuminate this process. Two technical terms that are used in this chapter require some explanation. First, a *developmental pathway* refers to patterned sequences of behaviors, such as patterns of delinquency from less serious problem behaviors to more serious offenses, or from minor delinquency to gang involvement, and in turn to serious property and violent crimes. Second, *trajectories* refer to larger classes or groups of individuals who differ in a behavioral trait or crime pattern over time, such as early onset versus late onset of delinquency. Both developmental pathways that include gang membership and gang members as a trajectory group are the focus of our attention in this chapter.

◆ Developmental Theories

Developmental theories have achieved widespread acceptance because these explain onset, escalation, course maintenance, de-escalation, and desistance in individuals' delinquent and criminal careers (Howell et al., 2014). Overall, the percentage of youth involved in delinquency increases from late childhood (ages 7–12) to middle adolescence (ages 13–16) where it peaks, and the down-slope of the age-crime curve represents the decrease in criminal activities from late adolescence (ages 17–19) into early adulthood (ages 20–25) (Loeber, Farrington, Howell, & Hoeve, 2012). Taken together, these four groups correspond with the bell shape of the age-crime curve or trajectory (Farrington, Loeber, & Jolliffe,

2008). However, high-risk/high-rate (e.g., the most prolific) offenders dominate among juveniles and young adults (Macleod, Groves, & Farrington, 2012). So it is with gang members: They too join in late childhood, become increasingly active in middle adolescence, and generally desist from gang activity in late adolescence. But there is unevenness in this general pattern; some youth join gangs at a very early age, and others, a bit later. Some youth remain involved for a short period of time; others, longer. We begin with consideration of broader developmental pathways to serious and violent behavior because gang involvement is embedded within delinquency careers.

To fully grasp the nature of gang members' careers, it is useful to first consider how gang involvement grows out of a juvenile delinquency pathway. Almost invariably, youths who join a gang had previously been involved in delinquent behavior. From this perspective, gang joining is a stepping stone in a longer pathway of delinquency involvement that spans the period from childhood to adolescence and into adulthood. In Focus 5.1 provides an example of the timing of gang membership relative to other problem behaviors in the oldest sample of Pittsburgh youth.

IN FOCUS 5.1 PITTSBURGH YOUTH STUDY: AGE OF ONSET OF PROBLEM AND CRIMINAL BEHAVIORS

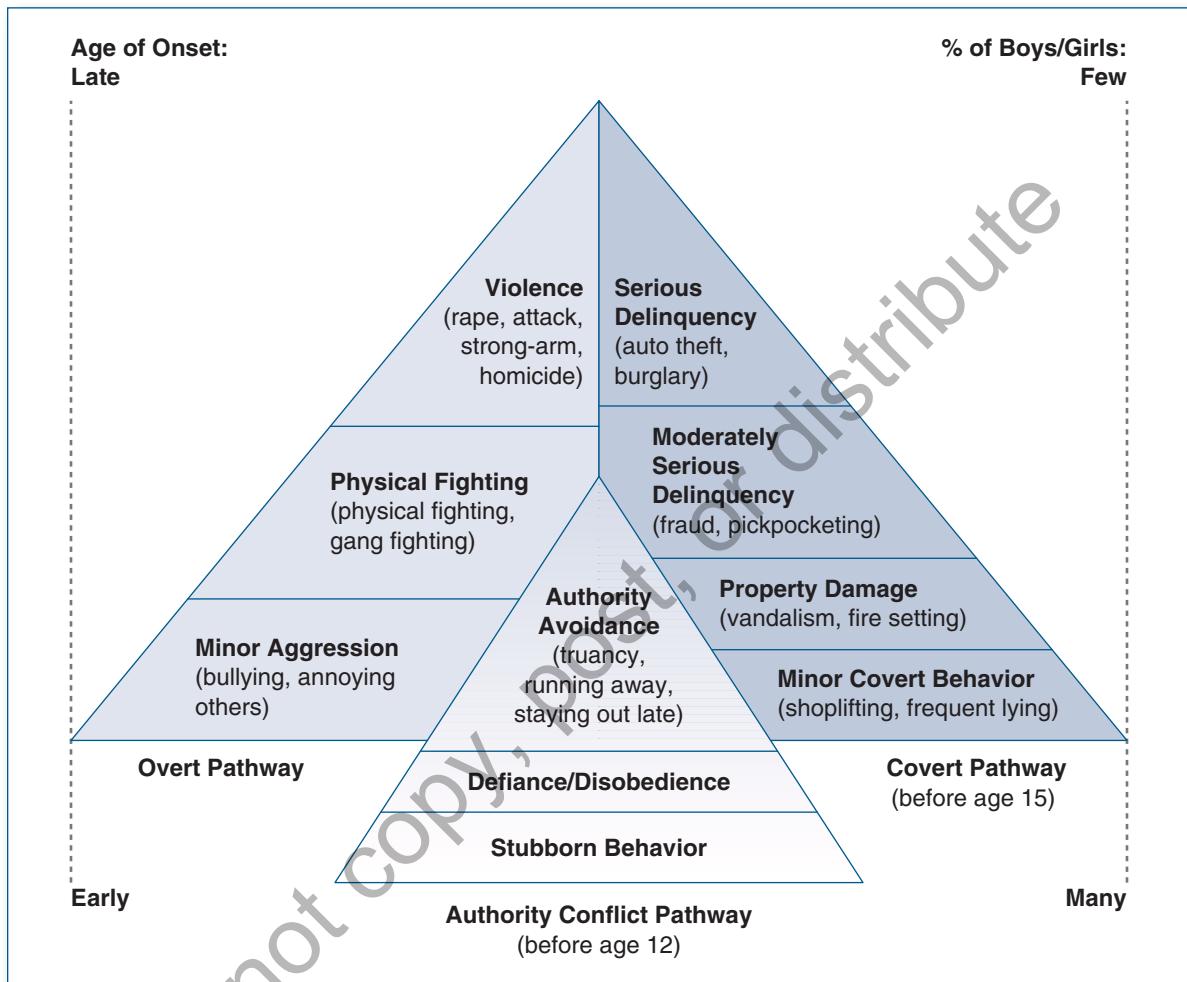
Behavior (mean age in parentheses)

- alcohol use (12.0)
- serious theft (13.1)
- tobacco use (13.2)
- serious violence (14.6)
- gang membership (15.4)
- hard drug use (15.6)
- marijuana use (15.7)
- drug dealing (16.2)
- gun carrying (17.3)

Source: Loeber, Farrington, Stouthamer-Loeber, White, & Wei, 2008, p. 150 (oldest cohort).

Developmental Delinquency Pathways

Loeber and colleagues (1997, 1999) discovered three main but overlapping pathways in the development of delinquency from childhood to adolescence (Figure 5.1). These are the authority conflict pathway, the covert pathway, and the overt pathway. The authority conflict pathway consists of pre-delinquent offenses, the covert pathway consists of concealing and serious property offenses, and

Figure 5.1 Developmental Pathways to Serious and Violent Behavior

Source: Loeber, Wei, Stouthamer-Loeber, Huizinga, & Thornberry, 1999, p. 247.

the overt pathway consists of violent offenses. Loeber's pathways model has four important dimensions. First, the model shows an orderly progression over time from less serious to more serious offenses and delinquent behaviors—in actual behaviors that were charted by the research team. Second, the progressively narrowing width of the triangles in this figure illustrates the decreasing proportion of youth (from *many* to *few*) involved in particular problem behaviors and delinquent offenses. Third, the model shows the general age of onset (from *early* to *late*). Fourth, the pathways are hierarchical in that those who have advanced to the most serious behavior in each of the pathways usually have displayed persistent problem behaviors characteristic of the earlier stages in each pathway.

Problem behavior typically begins in the authority conflict pathway with stubborn behavior, followed by defiance or disobedience, then truancy, running away, or staying out late. Persistent offenders then typically move into either the overt pathway or the covert pathway. The first stage of the covert pathway is minor concealed behavior (shoplifting, frequent lying); this is followed by property damage (vandalism, fire setting) and then moderately serious (fraud, pickpocketing) and serious delinquency (auto theft, burglary). The first stage of the overt pathway is minor aggression (bullying, annoying others); physical fighting follows (often including gang fighting) and then more serious violence (rape, physical attacks, and strong-arm robbery). Thus, gang involvement (gang fighting) is an intermediate step in the overt pathway.

With age, Loeber, Burke, and Pardini (2009) reported a large proportion of Pittsburgh Youth Study boys progressed on two or three pathways, indicative of an increasing variety of behaviors over time. In particular, boys who were escalating in the overt pathway were more likely to progress in the covert pathway. This model also accounted for the self-reported high-rate offenders and court-reported delinquents. Kelley, Loeber, Keenan, and DeLamatre (1997) and Loeber and colleagues' (1999) validated the model on delinquents in Denver and Rochester samples, while Tolan and Gorman-Smith (1998) confirmed it in a Chicago study and in a nationally representative sample of adolescents (the National Youth Survey). The pathways model has also been largely replicated for girls (Gorman-Smith & Loeber, 2005; Loeber, Slot, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 2007), and this developmental model clearly illustrates how gang involvement is intertwined with other delinquent behavior, most prominently indicated by frequent gang fighting.

Developmental Theories

Several other developmental theories of delinquency have received empirical support (see Table 5.1). While few of these address co-offending, each of them holds potential for application to an individual's involvement in gangs. This is a challenging enterprise because numerous risk factors of relevance have been revealed in longitudinal studies, in multiple developmental domains, and with potentially varying influence across age levels.

Life-course–persistent and adolescence-limited offenders

Moffitt (1993) identified two main groups of offenders in the childhood and adolescent period: life-course–persistent offenders and adolescence-limited offenders. Life-course–persistent offenders begin offending in childhood, and adolescence-limited offenders begin their offending later. According to Moffitt, four characteristics distinguish life-course–persistent offenders: (1) early onset of offending, (2) active offending during adolescence, (3) escalation of offense seriousness, and (4) persistence in crime in adulthood. However, in the Rochester Youth Development Study, eight groups with diverging patterns of juvenile offending were observed, prompting Thornberry (2005) to conclude that “offending can start earlier or later, but onset is not distinctly divided into neat patterns of *early starters* and *late starters*” (p. 160). Our preference is to use the term *stable* when referring to multi-year gang members, and to use *serious, violent, and chronic* when referring to offenders who persist and advance to the highest levels in Loeber's serious property and violence pathways.

Life-course developmental theory

The key construct in Sampson and Laub's (1993, 2005) developmental theory is age-graded informal social control, particularly the strength of bonding to family, peers, schools, and later adult social

Table 5.1 Leading Life-Course Developmental Theories

Theory	Primary Scholar(s)
Age-graded informal social control	Sampson & Laub, 1993, 2005
Coercion/early onset model	Patterson et al., 1991
Developmental pathways/theory	Loeber, 1996; Loeber et al., 2007
Life-course–persistent and adolescence-limited offenders	Moffitt, 1993
Integrated cognitive antisocial potential (ICAP) theory	Farrington, 2003, 2005, 2006
Integrative multilayered control	LeBlanc, 1993
Interactional	Thornberry, 1987, 2005; Thornberry & Krohn, 2001; Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003; Thornberry, Lizotte, et al., 2003
Multiple marginalization	Vigil, 2002, 2006, 2008
Social development model	Catalano & Hawkins, 1996
Strain/differential opportunity	Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Agnew, 2005
A unified theory of gang involvement	Wood & Alleyne, 2010

institutions (marriage and jobs). This theory received some research support by viewing gang membership as a turning point in the life course (Melde & Esbensen, 2011), finding that gang membership tends to impact attitudes, emotions, and behavior in a negative manner consistent with Sampson and Laub's (2005) turning point framework. The authors suggest that gang interventions can be most effective if they provide youth with means of building social capital, such as improved relationships with prosocial peer networks, school officials, and their families.

“To me it was my life, my one and only way . . . They were like my brothers and sisters. I mean, at that time, that's the only thing I had. It was them and my grandparents.” —Anonymous male member of the Hoya Maravilla gang (in J. Moore, 1991, pp. 76–77)

Interactional theory

Thornberry and Krohn's encompassing interactional theory (Thornberry, 2005; Thornberry & Krohn, 2001, 2005; Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003) accounts for patterns of *onset*, *course length and shape*, and *desistance*. A key premise is that risk factors for gang membership are found in several interacting domains, including individual, family, peer, school, and neighborhood, and that different domains are more influential at different developmental stages in childhood and adolescence. In the initial test of this theory, school bonding and association with antisocial peers had significant effects on the odds of gang membership later in adolescence (Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003). The interactional feature of this

theory is important. For example, delinquency involvement may worsen family life, which may weaken parental controls and in turn increase the likelihood of gang joining.

Multiple marginality theory

Vigil's (2002, 2006, 2008) theoretical explanation for Mexican American gang membership is that the social, cultural, ecological, and economical "marginalization" of youth that these and other immigrant people face in the United States create conditions that undermine traditional social control institutions, particularly family and school—as seen in Chapter 1. Vigil suggested that these extreme forces—macrohistorical (racism and repression) and macrostructural (immigration and ghetto/barrio living)—combine to strain and undermine social control and bonds with the family and school and also diminish respect for law enforcement. Having been left out of mainstream society because of language, education, cultural, structural, and economic barriers, this situation

relegates these urban youths to the margins of society in practically every sense. This positioning leaves them with few options or resources to better their lives. Often, they seek a place where they are not marginalized—and find it in the streets. (2002, p. 7)

Because the complexity of Vigil's theory presents unusual measurement challenges, particularly the macrohistorical and macrostructural factors, researchers have only partially tested it to date. Nevertheless, Freng and Esbensen (2007) and Krohn, Schmidt, and colleagues (2011) generally found support for Vigil's theory for explaining current gang membership. More extensive validation of Vigil's theory should be forthcoming as the measurement issues are resolved. Without doubt, Telles and Ortiz's (2008) and Waters (1999) multi-intergenerational studies demonstrated that gang involvement is most pronounced among Mexican American youth in the second generation of migrants. Studies also show, because of the successful assimilation of early European migrant groups into American society, that gangs had virtually disappeared by the third generation (Telles & Ortiz, 2008; Waters, 1999). Assimilation of Mexican American and Black peoples into American society has not progressed so smoothly.

"It was the most important thing in my life at that time. There was nothing that came even close to it except maybe my own personal family. But even then...my gang life was my one love." —Anonymous male member of the Hoya Maravilla gang (in J. Moore, 1991, p. 77)

Social development model

The social development model (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996) specifies hypotheses regarding the relationships among risk and protective factors in the etiology of both prosocial and antisocial behaviors. This model has been adapted to gang involvement (Gilman, Hill, Hawkins, Howell, & Kosterman, 2014). Briefly, "the theory hypothesizes two parallel, but distinct developmental pathways, one reflecting prosocial opportunities, involvement, rewards, bonding, and beliefs and the other reflecting antisocial opportunities, involvement, rewards, bonding, and beliefs" (p. 207). Gilman, Hill, Hawkins, and colleagues (2014) demonstrated the relevance of this developmental theory to adolescent gang membership in finding that neighborhood and peer antisocial environments and gang exposure (living with a gang member) strongly predicted gang joining. Unexpectedly, this research also showed that the effects

of risk and protective factors did not vary with age, through age 19. The study authors suggest that this finding may be owing to the multiple studies showing that gang members are distinctively different from ordinary delinquents in that they possess more risk factors and generally experience them in multiple developmental domains during childhood and early adolescence, thereby generating enduring effects (Esbensen et al., 2010; Hill et al., 1999; Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003). Similarly, R. A. Gordon and colleagues (2014) found that developmental, familial, and contextual risk factors generalize across combinations of criminal activity, that is, the pairing of extreme violence with drug selling or combining drug selling and serious theft.

◆ Location of Gang Membership in Developmental Pathways

This section highlights research on the importance of the gang membership stage in the formation of youngsters' criminal pathways. The first studies to examine delinquency offending patterns among gang members along a developmental pathway before, during, and after boys are active gang members were conducted in Rochester, New York (Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 1993), Denver, Colorado (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993), Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (R. A. Gordon et al., 2004, 2014), and Seattle, Washington (Hill, Chung, Guo, & Hawkins, 2002; Krohn & Thornberry). This pattern has also been found in Canada (Gatti et al., 2005; Haveland & Nagin, 2005; Haveland, Nagin, Rosenbaum, & Tremblay, 2008) and Norway (Bendixen, Endresen, & Olweus, 2006).

In sum, evidence is plentiful in a number of longitudinal studies that youth gangs facilitate or promote increased involvement in delinquency, violence, drug use, and carrying a weapon (Krohn & Thornberry, 2008). In comparison with non-members, both short-term and stable gang members (multi-year participation) have significantly higher rates of self-reported crime in the Rochester gang study. Huizinga (2010) finds that multi-year gang members (two or more years) in Denver represented only 8% of the youth yet they committed 71% of all serious crimes. Thornberry (1998) notes the finding that gang involvement increases youths' criminality as "one of the most robust and consistent observations in criminological research" (p. 147).

R. A. Gordon and colleagues' (2014) recent analysis of Pittsburgh Youth Study data has filled an important gap in this line of research: the extent to which gang membership is associated with *simultaneous* engagement in *multiple* criminal behaviors. This research extended prior longitudinal studies by showing that gang-involved youth were especially likely to combine multiple types of crimes, particularly in two combinations (serious violence and drug selling; and serious violence, drug selling, and serious theft), and these multiple patterns of criminal activity were most elevated during periods of active gang participation. In fact, the increase was enormous, four to five times higher during waves of active gang membership than during waves before or after gang membership up to age 28.

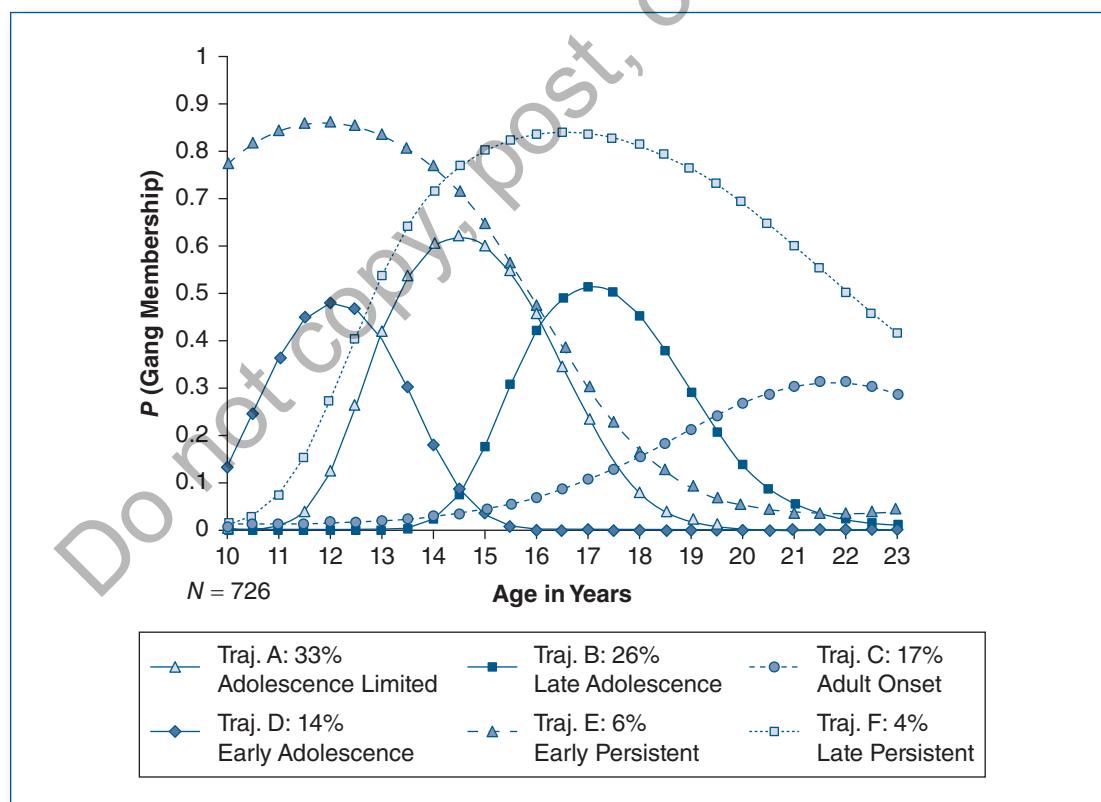
Gang membership also affects the life trajectory of youth. In a national sample, youth who joined gangs were 30% less likely to graduate from high school and 58% less likely to earn a four-year degree than their matched peers (Pyrooz, 2014a). Arnett (2000) drew attention to this period of "emerging adulthood"—approximately 18–25 years of age when people have emerged out of adolescence but have not established themselves as young adults. Even in short periods of engagement, gang membership disrupts this process of becoming well-adjusted adults. Krohn, Ward, and colleagues (2011) found that gang membership was related to precocious transitions into adulthood that then predicted disrupted

family relationships, economic instability, and criminal behaviors at the age of 30 years. Gilman, Hill, and Hawkins (2014) found that the effects of gang membership extended well into adulthood (age 33). Compared to their nongang peers, for those who reported joining a gang in adolescence, gang membership predicted lower rates of high school graduation, poor general health, depression, drug abuse or dependence, self-reported crime, official felony conviction, and incarceration in adulthood.

Figure 5.2 classifies individuals according to their gang membership over time (i.e., trajectory groups), from ages 10 to 23 in respondents to the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY), a nationally representative sample of 8,984 persons. Pyrooz (2014b) identifies four main trajectory groups: adolescence limited (33%), late adolescence (26%), adult onset (17%), and early adolescence only (14%). The two remaining groups are not of sufficient size for practical significance: early persistent (6%, 43 individuals nationwide) and late persistent (4%, only 29 persons).

One might call these trajectory groups *age-gang membership curves*, analogous to the *age-crime curve* described earlier. The modal age of gang membership in this sample is 15. The first two trajectory groups, composing the majority (59%) of gang members in the age-member curves, show patterns of

Figure 5.2 Distinct Trajectories of Gang Membership in the Life Course



Source: Pyrooz, 2014b, p. 360

gang membership consistently reported in several longitudinal studies, in Denver, Montreal, Pittsburgh, Rochester, Seattle, and in the multi-city GREAT samples: a sharp increase in gang joining in late childhood or early adolescence, a peak in membership around ages 14–17, and a sharp decline thereafter, forming the classic bell curve. What is unique in this analysis is the sizeable group of (largely) adult onset members, making up 17% of the sample. Discounting that about one-third of this group had joined by age 17, this still is a substantively important group from a developmental standpoint. Past gang studies have not searched for persons who join gangs in adulthood. Thus, Pyrooz's research fills a gap with respect to the shape of age-gang member trajectories. However, broad surveys of young adults such as the NLSY may not be representative of members of gangs that are responsible for most of the violence associated with these because those gang members are not distributed evenly across the United States. Rather, those participants are concentrated in several respects, particularly in urban areas, and further, within specific neighborhoods and communities of large cities. To illustrate the discrepancy that can occur, looking at race/ethnicity, in Pyrooz's analysis of the NLSY data, the predominant racial/ethnic group is White persons. However, serious gang violence across the United States overwhelmingly involves members of color, both as victims and as perpetrators (Howell, 1999; Maxson, 1999).

◆ A Developmental Model of Gang Involvement

A central question is this: Why are some youth at high risk of joining a gang? There are two equally important perspectives on this matter. As Reckless, Dinitz, and Murray (1956) noted in the juvenile delinquency field, two sets of forces are at work. The first set is called *pulls*, or gang attractions, and an opposite set of forces is called *pushes*, or risk factors that may propel youth toward gangs. The latter set is the main focus of this chapter.

Perceived Benefits of Joining a Gang: Gang Attractions

Early gang research suggested that gang joining is a somewhat natural process. Thrasher (1927/2000) initially viewed the typical gang member as a rather well-adjusted American boy seeking an outlet for normal adolescent drives for adventure and expression. More recent gang studies have refuted this romanticized view of what gangs offer young candidates. A male gang leader expressed succinctly the main attractions of the gang in response to a question posed to him in the course of an interview. Hardman (1969) asked him what additional questions might be included in the interviews of other gang members to obtain a better understanding of the reasons why youths join gangs. He replied (quoted verbatim here):

Ask them about feelin's of not bein' wanted at home; ask them about feelin' left out; ask them about the gang makin' up for some of these things they didn't get at home, y'know; ask them about the gang makin' them feel important, wanted, needed. Ask them about the feelin' of security that it gives you, always knowin' you got the guys backin' you up. Ask them about the feelin' of importance that they get from bein' in the gang. (p. 179)

Vigil (2002) helps further illustrate the attraction of gang membership as follows:

What established gangs in the neighborhood have to offer is nurture, protection, friendship, emotional support, and other ministrations for unattended, un-chaperoned resident youths. In

other words, street socialization fills the voids left by inadequate parenting and schooling, especially inadequate familial care and supervision. This street-based process molds the youth to conform to the ways of the street. (p. 10)

In an 11-city study, Esbensen and colleagues (1999) compiled the following reasons youth reported for joining a gang, in the order of descending importance:

- For protection
- For fun
- For respect
- For money
- Because a friend was in the gang

Of these reasons, most studies relay that youth commonly join gangs for the safety they believe the gang provides, particularly in urban areas. Gangs are often at the center of appealing social action, including hanging out, music, drugs, and opportunities to socialize with members of the opposite sex. In other words, the gang may be appealing because it meets a youth's social needs. Decker and Van Winkle (1996) found youth also reported, albeit far less frequently, more instrumental reasons for joining a gang such as drug selling or making money. J. Moore's (1978) and Vigil's (1988) early ethnographic studies noted the strong influence of friends and family members who already are part of the gang, especially for Mexican American youth. More recent student surveys also show the importance of family ties for all racial/ethnic groups (Gilman, Hill, Hawkins, et al., 2014; D. Peterson, Taylor, & Esbensen, 2004). In many cases, youth view the gang as a surrogate family.

"We are not just Bloods, this is my blood. They are my family."—Ronny (in Leap, 2012, p. 71)

IN FOCUS 5.2

SAN DIEGO MEXICAN AMERICAN GANGS

The San Diego Mexican American gangs Sanders (1994) studied had a strong social orientation, focused on action events, status, and "kicking back." Action consisted of risk-taking activities. Status ensued from belonging to a gang that was feared or respected by other gangs in the community. Kicking back meant hanging out with other members, partying, drinking, and taking drugs. Although heavy drug users, they rarely were involved in trafficking (pp. 137–138).

These gangs were organized around cliques and barrios. A given barrio might have one or more gangs, although typically only one. Each gang consisted of age-grade cliques, each of which had one or more informal leaders. Sanders (1994) characterized these gangs as having more of the *influential* leader model of organization than the *horizontal* structure commonly found among Chicano gangs in Los Angeles. Strong solidarity grounded in the barrio identity held each gang and clique within it together. The continued existence of barrios gave stability to even inactive gangs.

Unlike the Black gangs described by Jankowski (1991) and Keiser (1969), the San Diego Black gangs (Crips and Bloods) that Sanders (1994) studied were not highly organized, but very large and divided into allied branches. Each of the branch territories was made up of sets. Their lack of organization was related in part to the fact that their territories were large, according to Sanders, because of their money-making enterprises. Each gang was made up of hardcore, affiliate, and fringe members. Because of the age cohorts, leadership structure, and limited number of hardcore members, these gangs were constantly in flux.

Sanders (1994) suggests that gangs ebb and flow from inactive neighborhood street groups to active fighting gangs with the incorporation of each new cohort of members. "As a new age cohort of boys comes into the gang, the level of activity rises. After a time, they either make their names, become more aware of the risks they are taking, or become cowed by the police or other gangs. When this occurs, the gang's activity subsides" (p. 61).

Source: Based on Sanders, 1994.

Romantic interests are another factor. Many female adolescents are attracted to gang life through their boyfriends. One study placed the research spotlight on San Antonio, Texas, girls who never joined the gang (Petersen & Valdez, 2004, 2005; Av. Valdez, 2007). They began hanging out with gang boys in childhood, just before age 12, and at the time of the study, 40% reported having a boyfriend in a gang, and 80% said they had a good friend in a male gang. Gang associations led to the girls' involvement in delinquent and criminal activities, including holding drugs (55%), selling drugs (31%), and holding weapons (27%).

Relationship of Risk Factors to Gang Involvement

Recent youth gang research has produced four seminal findings with respect to the impact of risk factors on the likelihood of gang membership. First, Howell and Egley (2005b) emphasize that risk factors for gang membership span all five of the risk factor domains (family, peer group, school, individual characteristics, and community conditions). Generally speaking, research-supported risk factors for gang joining apply alike for minorities versus non-minorities and for girls and boys. However, females evidence certain unique risk factors that are discussed in Chapter 6.

Second, risk factors have a cumulative impact; that is, the greater the number of risk factors the youth experience, the greater the likelihood of gang involvement. In a Seattle study, children under the age of 12 who evidenced as many as 7 of 19 measured risk factors were 13 times more likely to join a gang than children with none or only one risk factor (Hill et al., 1999). Esbensen and colleagues (2010) found a similar exponential relationship in a multiple-city survey beyond the accumulation of six of the particular risk factors measured in that study. As youth accumulated more of these risk factors, they were more likely to become involved with gangs as opposed to violence (52% of gang members experienced 11 or more risk factors, compared with 36% of violent offenders).

Third, the presence of risk factors in multiple developmental domains and the interaction of these appears to further enhance the likelihood of gang membership. Rochester researchers, Thornberry, Krohn,

and colleagues (2003), examined seven risk factor domains, including (1) area characteristics, (2) family sociodemographic characteristics, (3) parent–child relations, (4) school, (5) peers, (6) individual characteristics, and (7) early delinquency. A majority (61%) of the boys and 40% of the girls who had elevated scores in all seven risk factor domains were gang members. This study finds that the *interaction* of risk factors across domains produces the greatest risk of gang membership.

Fourth, general delinquency, violence, and gang involvement appear to share a common set of risk factors (Esbensen et al., 2010).

◆ A Delinquency and Gang Theory

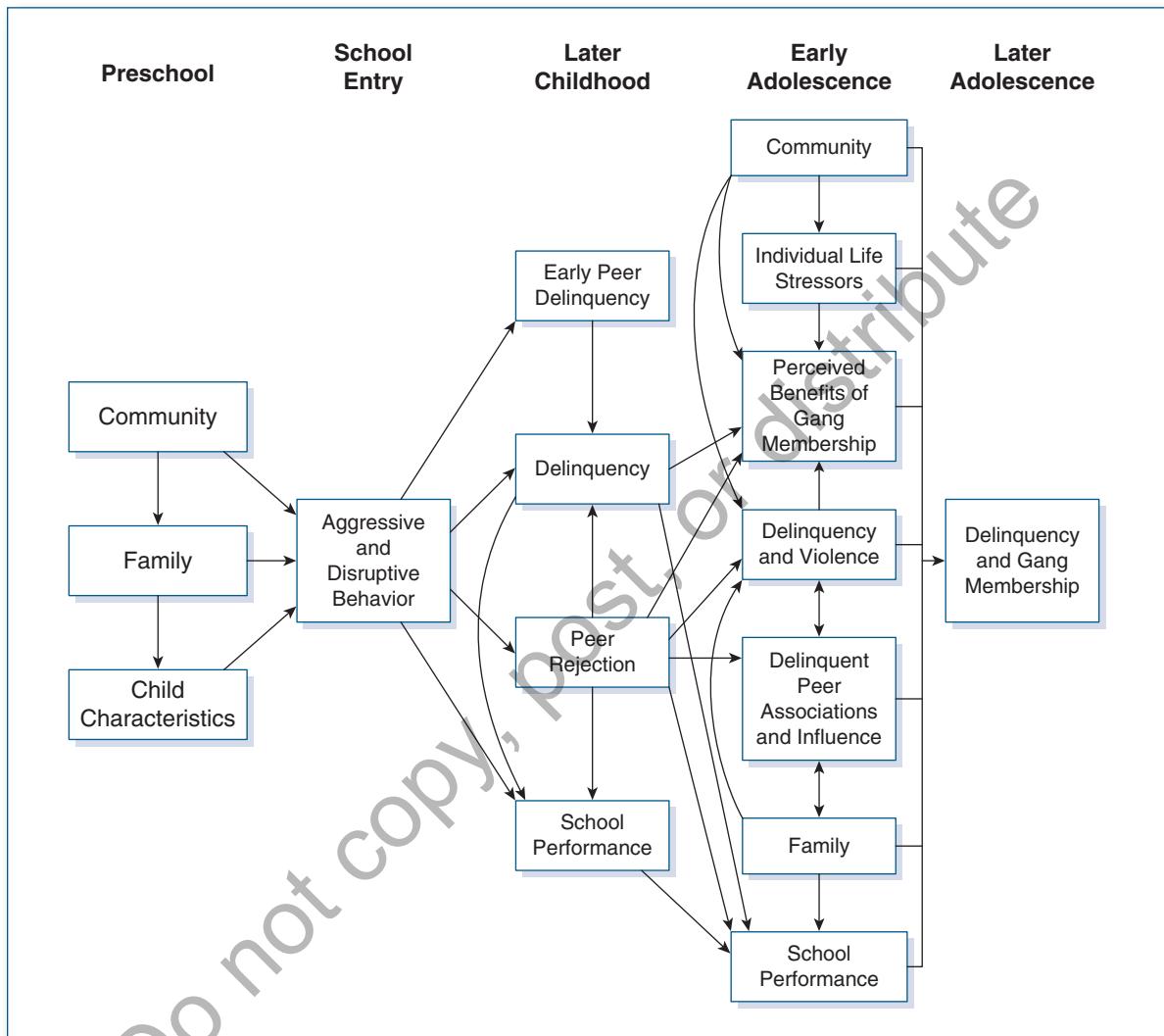
Howell & Egley (2005b) extended the age span of Thornberry and colleagues' (Thornberry, 2005; Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003) gang membership theory downward, so that the developmental model presented here (see Figure 5.3) encompasses antecedents of gang membership from birth through adolescence. This extension may prove beneficial because, as Loeber and colleagues (2009) note, about equal numbers of risk factors associated with early disruptive and delinquent behaviors begin very early, at or close to birth, and in the elementary school years, with fewer first appearing during the middle and high school years. "Thus, the most salient risk window of children's exposure to risk factors is prior to adolescence" (p. 301).

Thornberry and colleagues' theoretical model specifies four distinct developmental stages in the pathway to delinquency and gang involvement—preschool, school entry, childhood, and adolescence—and these are displayed in Figure 5.3. This discussion and Figure 5.3 also include attractions of the gang, or perceived benefits of joining, although this has not been conceptualized in research as a risk factor; it could be included, because gang attractions clearly elevate youths' risk for joining. The discussion that follows focuses on risk factor research that supports Thornberry and colleagues' theoretical model as it applies to delinquency and gang membership.

◆ A Review of Risk and Protective Factors for Gang Involvement

Studies do not agree on the most important risk factors for gang membership because of different criteria employed in researching these. Three credible lists of such risk factors have been generated. First, Howell and Egley's (2005b) review is detailed in the discussion in the next section. Second, Klein and Maxson's (2006) compilation was drawn predominantly from cross-sectional studies (14 of the 20 studies they reviewed are in this category). The cross-sectional studies measure both risk factors and outcomes at the same time, hence the causal ordering cannot be determined with certainty; what appears to be a predictor could well be an outcome of gang involvement. Third, Huizinga and Lovegrove (2009) compiled a short list of research-supported risk factors from an analysis of a number of longitudinal studies. This list was limited to factors that proved especially strong in at least two longitudinal study sites. This method is sound, but the drawback is that only 11 of more than 50 scientifically established risk factors in longitudinal studies met Huizinga and Lovegrove's stringent criteria. Research clearly shows that youth who have numerous risk factors in multiple domains are most likely to join gangs. In addition, research has established that the prevalence of risk factors varies among study sites (which explains, in large part, the dissimilar lists from one longitudinal study to another). Reliance on a very

Figure 5.3 Delinquency and Gang Theory



narrow list such as that generated by Huizinga and Lovegrove's stringent criteria could have the unintended consequence of overlooking important factors that have not been well researched. For example, high rates of school suspensions and truancy and other punitive school policies that have become more widespread in the past decade or more are potent risk factors in North Carolina cities (Graves et al., 2010; Weisel & Howell, 2007) and in France (Debarbieux & Baya, 2008), but these factors are not yet on any lists of research-based gang risk factors because of their newness and the practical orientation of the school-related research.¹ Therefore, for strategic-planning purposes, each community should examine a broad array of research-supported risk factors, and practical ones as well, to identify those that apply

to a given community. Because the risk research has been conducted with a variety of racial and ethnic samples, there is every expectation that the research-supported risk factors apply across predominant racial/ethnic groups. Risk factors for girls are discussed at length in Chapter 6. Briefly, even though important gender differences have been discovered in recent years, there is considerable evidence of gender similarity in risk-factor predictors.

Table 5.2 contains risk factors for juvenile delinquency and gang involvement—almost all of which emanate from longitudinal quantitative studies. The risk factors for delinquency were identified in two national Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) study groups, one on child delinquents (Loeber & Farrington, 2001), another on serious and violent juvenile offenders (Loeber & Farrington, 1998), and those published lists are updated here. The purpose for integrating them is to promote a holistic approach to delinquency and gang involvement. Note that the risk factors shown in Table 5.2 are organized by age level and that risk factors for gang involvement (almost all of which also predict general delinquency) are noted with an asterisk. Indeed, delinquency almost invariably precedes gang joining. Therefore, the theoretical model proposed here integrates developmental processes for delinquency involvement with gang membership. This developmental process is more likely to occur in disorganized communities where families, schools, and religious institutions are structurally weak, ineffective, and possibly alienating.

The Preschool Stage

In this first developmental stage, child characteristics and community and family deficits produce aggressive and disruptive behavior disorders by the time of school entry (Kalb & Loeber, 2003) and, in turn, according to Loeber and Farrington (2001), delinquency and school performance problems in later childhood. At birth—or beginning in the prenatal period for some infants—the family of procreation is the central influence on infants and children. During the preschool years, and especially in the elementary school period and onward, the array of risk factors expands, as some children are exposed to negative peer influences outside the home. Vaughn and colleagues (2009) describe a “severely impaired subgroup” (9.3%) of children identified in their analysis of data collected on a nationally represented cohort of more than 17,000 children drawn from approximately 1,000 kindergartner programs and collected by the National Center for Education Statistics.

Loeber and Farrington (2001) identify important family variables in the preschool stage that include low parental education (social capital) and a host of family problems, including what Pogarsky, Lizotte, and Thornberry (2003) found as a broken home, parental criminality, poor family or child management, abuse and neglect, serious marital discord, and young motherhood. Keenan (2001) along with Loeber and Farrington (2001) contend that pivotal child characteristics during the preschool period include a difficult temperament and impulsivity, typically described as aggressive, inattentive, and sensation-seeking behaviors.

The School Entry Stage

Kalb and Loeber (2003) identify products of dysfunctional families as early childhood aggression and disruptive behaviors, including stubbornness, defiance and disobedience, and truancy after school entry. This is particularly true in disadvantaged communities. Harsh parenting, according to Hipwell and colleagues (2007, 2008), is a key factor at this stage for girls, leading to conduct problems. Aggressive and disruptive behaviors are likely to be followed by rejection by prosocial peers, thus opening the door to

Table 5.2 Risk Factors for Delinquency, Violence, and Gang Involvement

Risk Factors Measured at Approximately Ages 0–2
<p>Individual</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct disorders (authority conflict/rebellious/stubborn/disruptive/antisocial)* • Difficult temperament • Hyperactive (impulsive, attention problems)* <p>Family</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family poverty/low family socioeconomic status* • Family violence (child maltreatment, partner violence, conflict) • Having a teenage mother • Maternal drug, alcohol, and tobacco use during pregnancy • Parental criminality • Parental psychiatric disorder • Parental substance abuse • Poor parent–child relations or communication • Pregnancy and delivery complications
Risk Factors Measured at Approximately Ages 3–5
<p>Individual</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct disorders (authority conflict/rebellious/stubborn/disruptive/antisocial)* • Lack of guilt and empathy* • Low intelligence quotient • Physical violence/aggression* <p>Family</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family violence (child maltreatment, partner violence, conflict) • Parental psychiatric disorder • Parental use of physical punishment/harsh and/or erratic discipline practices
Risk Factors Measured at Approximately Ages 6–11
<p>Individual</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Antisocial/delinquent beliefs* • Lack of guilt and empathy* • Early and persistent noncompliant behavior • Early onset of aggression/violence* • Few social ties (involved in social activities, popularity) • General delinquency involvement* • High alcohol/drug use* • Hyperactive (impulsive, attention problems)* • Low intelligence quotient • Low perceived likelihood of being caught • Medical/physical condition

(Continued)

Table 5.2 (Continued)

- Mental health problems*
 - Physical violence/aggression*
 - Poor refusal skills*
 - Victimization and exposure to violence
- Family
- Abusive parents
 - Antisocial parents
 - Broken home/changes in caretaker*
 - Family poverty/low family socioeconomic status*
 - Family violence (child maltreatment, partner violence, conflict)
 - High parental stress/maternal depression
 - Parent proviolent attitudes*
 - Parental use of physical punishment/harsh and/or erratic discipline practices
 - Poor parental supervision (control, monitoring, and child management)*
 - Poor parent-child relations or communication
 - Sibling antisocial behavior*
 - Lived with a gang member*
- School
- Bullying
 - Chronic absenteeism
 - Frequent school transitions
 - Frequent truancy/absences/suspensions, expelled from school, dropping out of school*
 - Identified as learning disabled*
 - Low academic aspirations*
 - Low achievement in school*
 - Low school attachment/bonding/motivation/commitment to school*
 - Old for grade/repeated a grade
 - Poor student-teacher relations
 - Poorly defined rules and expectations for appropriate conduct
 - Poorly organized and functioning schools/inadequate school climate/negative labeling by teachers*
- Community
- Availability of firearms*
 - Economic deprivation/poverty/residence in a disadvantaged neighborhood*
 - Exposure to firearm violence
 - Neighborhood antisocial environment*
 - Feeling unsafe in the neighborhood*
 - Low neighborhood attachment*
 - Neighborhood youth in trouble*

Peer
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Association with antisocial/aggressive/delinquent peers; high peer delinquency* • Peer antisocial environment* • Association with antisocial peers in the past year* • Peer alcohol/drug use • Peer rejection*
Risk Factors Measured at Approximately Ages 12–19
Individual
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Antisocial/delinquent beliefs* • Lack of guilt and empathy* • Early dating/sexual activity/fatherhood* • Few social ties (involved in social activities, popularity) • General delinquency involvement* • High alcohol/drug use* • High drug dealing • Illegal gun ownership/carrying • Life stressors* • Makes excuses for delinquent behavior (neutralization)* • Mental health problems* • Physical violence/aggression* • Violent victimization*
Family
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Antisocial parents • Broken home/changes in caretaker* • Delinquent/gang-involved siblings* • Living with a gang member* • Family history of problem behavior/criminal involvement • Family poverty/low family socioeconomic status* • Family violence (child maltreatment, partner violence, conflict) • Having a teenage mother • High parental stress/maternal depression • Lack of orderly and structured activities within the family • Living in a small house • Low attachment to child/adolescent* • Low parent education* • Parental use of physical punishment/harsh and/or erratic discipline practices • Poor parental supervision (control, monitoring, and child management)* • Poor parent-child relations or communication • Lived with a gang member*

(Continued)

Table 5.2 (Continued)

School
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bullying • Frequent school transitions • Low academic aspirations* • Low math achievement test scores (males)* • Low parent college expectations for child* • Low school attachment/bonding/motivation/commitment to school* • Poor school attitude/performance, academic failure* • Poorly organized and functioning schools/unsupportive and unsafe school climate/negative labeling by teachers*
Community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Availability and use of drugs in the neighborhood* • Availability of firearms* • Community disorganization* • Economic deprivation/poverty/residence in a disadvantaged neighborhood* • Exposure to violence and racial prejudice • Neighborhood antisocial environment* • Feeling unsafe in the neighborhood* • High-crime neighborhood* • Low neighborhood attachment* • Neighborhood physical disorder • Neighborhood youth in trouble* • Antisocial neighborhood*
Peer
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Association with antisocial/aggressive/delinquent peers, high peer delinquency* • Association with antisocial peers in the past year* • Association with gang-involved peers/relatives*

* Risk factors for gang membership

Sources: National Gang Center, OJJDP Strategic Planning Tool (2014 update).

antisocial or deviant peer influences, which predict delinquent activity in later childhood and early adolescence. The link between physical aggression in childhood and violence in adolescence is particularly strong (Brame, Nagin, & Tremblay, 2001; Broidy et al., 2003).

It is important to note that most disruptive children do not become child delinquents, nor do most child delinquents engage in delinquency in adolescence. Loeber and Farrington (2001) report one-fourth to one-third of the disruptive children at school entry are at risk of becoming child delinquents, and about a third of all child delinquents later become serious, violent, and chronic offenders. However, as Thornberry and Krohn (2001) explain, “the earlier the onset, the greater the continuity” (p. 297). Compared with late-onset delinquents, Wasserman and Seracini (2001) suggest child delinquents tend to come from dysfunctional families with one or more of the following characteristics: family disruption

(especially a succession of different caregivers), parental antisocial behavior, parental substance abuse, mother's depression, and child abuse and neglect.

Loeber, Farrington, Stouthamer-Loeber, and colleagues (2003) indicated families with a harsh child punishment profile are overrepresented in such disadvantaged neighborhoods, and serious delinquency tends to occur more quickly in youngsters residing in these communities. Taken together, concentrated disadvantage at the community level, family problems, and certain child characteristics lead to early childhood problems (aggression and disruptive behavior), and each of these four conditions, in turn, increases the likelihood of delinquency in childhood and gang membership in adolescence.

The Later Childhood Stage

In the third developmental stage, later childhood, other risk factors (explanatory variables) that prepare children for gang membership begin to come into play. Children who are involved in delinquency, violence, and drug use at an early age are at higher risk for gang membership than other youngsters (Craig et al., 2002). Hipwell and colleagues (2005) contend that girls are more prone to earlier alcohol use than boys, and greater physical aggression was associated with early alcohol use. More than one-third of the child delinquents in Krohn, Thornberry, Rivera, and Le Blanc's (2001) Montreal and Rochester samples became involved in crimes of a more serious and violent nature during adolescence, *including* gang fights. Thornberry and Krohn (2001) conclude, "In brief, very early onset offending is brought about by the *combination and interaction* of structural, individual, and parental influences" (p. 295).

Coie and Dodge (1998) link peer rejection in childhood to a tendency for greater susceptibility from the influence of deviant peers, including more aggressive youths. Aggressive and antisocial youths begin to affiliate with one another in childhood and Cairns and Cairns (1994) suggest this pattern of aggressive friendships may continue through adolescence. A Montreal study led by Craig (2002) suggests displays of aggression in delinquent acts at age 10 or perhaps younger may be a key factor leading to gang involvement. Peers rated gang members as significantly more aggressive than nongang members at ages 10 to 14. Warr (2002) identifies the negative consequence of delinquent peer associates as one of the most enduring findings in empirical delinquency studies. Lacourse and colleagues (2006) find associations with delinquent peers increase delinquency and the likelihood and frequency of physical aggression and violence, which in turn increases the likelihood of gang membership in early adolescence.

School-related variables that lead to gang involvement, according to studies led by Craig (2002) and Hill (1999), include low achievement in elementary school, low school attachment, and having been identified as learning disabled. Factors that weaken the student-school bond (commitment to school) in the later childhood stage contribute to delinquency and gang membership. Poor school performance (poor grades and test scores) in childhood is likely to result from prosocial peer rejection, child delinquency, and family problems.

The Early Adolescence Stage

The remainder of this developmental model incorporates only risk factors that predict gang involvement. Children who are on a trajectory of worsening antisocial behavior are more likely to join gangs during adolescence, and they tend to have more problems than nongang members (Esbensen et al., 2010; Howell & Egley, 2005b). Esbensen and Huizinga (1993) suggest gang entry might be thought of as

the next developmental step in escalating delinquent behavior—a product of risk factors that accumulate from birth through childhood and onward.

Community or Neighborhood Risk Factors. “Communities too have careers in delinquency” (Short, 1996, p. 224). As discussed in Chapter 1, the key conditions that gave rise to early gangs in U.S. history are urban slums, social disorganization, and concentrated disadvantage. As children grow older and venture outward from their families, they are more and more influenced by community conditions. The key factors include residence in a disadvantaged neighborhood, lots of neighborhood youth in trouble, and a ready availability and use of firearms and drugs. Bingenheimer, Brennan, and Earls (2005) claim exposure to firearm violence approximately doubles the probability that an exposed adolescent will perpetrate serious violence over the next two years. Other undesirable community conditions include feeling unsafe in the neighborhood and low neighborhood attachment. All of these are conditions in which gangs and violence tend to thrive.

Family Risk Factors. Studies show that both family structure and poor quality of interactions and interrelationships among family members are important risk factors for gang membership. With respect to family structure, a broken home (absence of either or both biological parents) and multiple family transitions or caretaker changes are important predictors of gang membership.

Several family interactions and interrelationships predict gang membership. In Hill and fellow researchers' (1999) study, the most negative arrangement was one biological parent and other adults in the home. One of the most prominent risk factors is poor parental supervision (including control, monitoring, or management of family matters). These factors suggest the importance of well-structured family activities. Other family conditions compromise parental capacity to carry out their child development responsibilities, including low parent education, family poverty, low family socioeconomic status, pro-violent attitudes, and child maltreatment (abuse or neglect). Living with a gang member is a key risk factor for gang joining (Gilman, Hill, Hawkins, et al., 2014).

“I'd dress my kids in gang clothes—I thought they were so cute. I dropped out of school and there I was, a baby mama with two kids in [gang] clothes.” —Joanna (in Leap, 2012, pp. 59–60)

School Risk Factors. Most studies of risk factors for juvenile delinquency and gang membership have examined only one segment of the school–student relationship: satisfactory academic performance. The low achievement of children is one side of the coin; poor-quality (poorly functioning) and unsafe schools is the other side (G. Gottfredson, 2013; Lyons & Drew, 2006). Thornberry and Krohn's team (2003) concluded that poor school performance on math tests predicts gang membership for males, as well as low attachment to teachers. Hill and colleagues (1999), and also Le Blanc and Lanctot (1998), found future gang members perform poorly in elementary school, and they have a low degree of commitment to and involvement in school. A contemporary indicator of poor-quality schools is zero tolerance policies that produce high suspension, expulsion, and dropout rates. In addition to alienating students from schools and teachers, thus weakening the student–school bond, zero tolerance policies release many youths from adult supervision during the day and after school, which Vigil (2002) suggests potentially exposes them to deviant influences on the streets and a higher likelihood of gang involvement themselves. Modern-day studies of school experiences now include (a) measures of “school

climate” (G. Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, & Gottfredson, 2005), (b) identification of “difficult” schools (typically characterized by higher levels of student victimization, sanctions, and poor student-teacher relations) (Debarbieux & Baya, 2008), and (c) weak student “connectedness” to schools (Resnick, Ireland, & Borowsky, 2004). Debarbieux and Baya’s (2008) study of “difficult” schools found that the percentage of students who were gang members doubled in them.

“Gang participation is much greater in schools perceived by students to be unsafe” (G. Gottfredson, 2013, p. 91). In a survey of more than 10,000 junior high and high school students nationwide, Alvarez and Bachman (1997) uncovered the key school-related situations that make students fearful of assault both at school and while going to and from school: Recent victimization experiences, the presence of a violent subculture at the school (e.g., gang presence and attacks on teachers), and availability of drugs/alcohol were related to fear in both contexts. Vigil (1993) concurs that students who feel vulnerable at school may seek protection in the gang.

Peer Risk Factors. Based on their Montreal study, Lacourse and colleagues (2006) conclude that being part of a deviant peer group is associated with the onset, persistence, and aggravation of conduct problem symptoms during adolescence. Thornberry and Krohn’s team (2003) identified association with peers who engage in delinquency as one of the strongest risk factors for gang membership, particularly for boys. Moreover, both Craig and colleagues (2002) and Lahey and colleagues (1999) found association with aggressive peers—whether or not they are involved in delinquency—during adolescence as a strong predictor of gang joining. Lacourse, Nagin, Tremblay, Vitaro, and Claes’s (2003) Montreal study produced similar findings. Furthermore, rejection by prosocial peers (being unpopular) seems to be a key factor that pushes children into affiliations with delinquent groups and gangs (Haviland & Nagin, 2005; Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003).

Individual Risk Factors. A variety of individual risk factors increase risk of gang joining. Children who are child victims of abuse or neglect are more likely to join gangs (Fleisher, 1998; J. Miller, 2001; Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003). Mental health problems also increase risk for gang joining. Influential early theorizing about gang members held that violent gang members were so impaired mentally and socially that they should be classified as “sociopathic” (Yablonsky, 1967). Psychopathic symptoms can be misleading because the group dynamics of gangs often promotes psychopathic traits, particularly *locura* (acting extremely crazy) in Mexican American members (Vigil, 1988). To be sure, sociopathic traits include serious psychological disorders. Goldstein and Glick (1994, p. 20) summarize the common features of sociopaths:

- Aggressive, reckless, cruel to others, impulsive, manipulative, superficial, callous, irresponsible, cunning, and self assured
- Fails to learn by experience, is unable to form meaningful relationships, is chronically antisocial, and is unresponsive to punishment
- Is unable to experience guilt, is self-centered, and lacks a moral sense
- Is unreliable, untruthful, shameless, shows poor judgment, and is highly egocentric
- Is unable to show empathy or genuine concern for others, manipulates others
- Is loveless and guiltless

The most representative study of gang members to date contradicted Yablonsky's supposition of widespread sociopathic traits (Av. Valdez, Kaplan, & Codina, 2000). This representative San Antonio study drew a large sample of members of 26 gangs (160 male gang members between 14 and 25 years old), and was randomly drawn by catchment area, gang types, and gang membership status. Only a very small proportion (4%) of the sample of gang members was classified as "sociopaths" in individual screens using the Hare Psychopathy Checklist (Hare, Hart, & Harpur, 1991). Nevertheless, 4 out of 10 gang members were assessed as possibly having serious psychological problems with the potential for a sociopathic diagnosis.

"I admired [gang] people, growin' up, and some of them were . . . killers and gangsters, but they all had this persona about them, and I would think, Damn, I wanna be just like that when I grow up." —Ronny (in Leap, 2012, p. 98)

However, prevalence rates are much higher among older gang members, particularly for those who have been victimized. For example, in a recent psychological assessment of identified gang members among a sample of serious and violent offenders ages 14–17 in two cities' juvenile justice systems (Philadelphia and Phoenix), Dmitrieva and colleagues (2014) reported a greater prevalence of sociopathic traits in this study sample (comprising only serious and violent juvenile offenders) than revealed above in Valdez's representative community sample. In addition, a British study identified very high incidence of serious psychiatric problems among older gang members, ages 18 to 34 (Coid et al., 2013). One in four gang members suffered from psychosis, 60% had high anxiety, 85% were diagnosed with an antisocial personality disorder, and more than half were dependent on drugs or alcohol. In addition, traumatization and fear of further violence was exceptionally prevalent in these older gang members.

Protective Factors

Juvenile delinquency and gang involvement are common outcomes of the relative preponderance of risk factors over *promotive* factors. Stouthamer-Loeber, Loeber, Wei, Farrington, and Wikstrom (2002) describe promotive factors as not only serving to buffer individuals from negative effects of risk factors (the common conceptualization of protective factors), but also promoting conventional social behavior and desistance. In extremely high-risk conditions, people need more than a simple majority of protective factors to overcome multiple risk factors (Stouthamer-Loeber, Loeber, Stallings, & Lacourse, 2008). Moreover, Stouthamer-Loeber and fellow researchers (2002) note the condition of considerable exposure to risk domains paired with the relative absence of protective domains "dramatically increases the risk of later persistent serious offending" (p. 120).

Bushway, Krohn, Lizotte, Phillips, and Schmidt (2013) found several factors that could protect adolescents across a decade (from age 13 to age 23) who were engaged in violent acts (consisting of attacking someone with a weapon, other assault, gang fighting, throwing objects at a person or persons, robbery, and rape). Protective factors were identified for four violence prevalence trajectory groups and two gang fighting prevalence trajectory groups. Total cumulative protection across all domains proved to be most helpful for those at risk, especially in the family (parental support, parent partner status) and individual domains (educational aspirations, self-esteem, academic achievement, and group conventional behavior) for those at risk for involvement in violent acts. "Keeping adolescents focused on

school, feeling good about themselves, and involved with conventional peers all seem to be productive avenues for protecting our youth” (p. 22). Parents still mattered for violence incidence, even in mid to late adolescence, by age 23. According to Stouthamer-Loeber and associates (2008), the strongest protective factors for desistance from overall serious offenses are parents’ good supervision, the youth’s high-perceived likelihood of getting caught when delinquent, and low parental stress.

Protective factors for gang involvement and related violence must be validated in longitudinal studies. Just two such studies have been conducted to date. The first study found research support for protective factors in the major developmental domains from the 5th to 12th grades: prosocial family, school, neighborhood, peer environments, and individual characteristics (Gilman, Hill, Hawkins, et al., 2014). Positive family and school environments appeared to operate through other domains, mainly peer and neighborhood. In the family context, not living with a gang member was a key protective factor. Interestingly, these protective factors did not lose potency with age. However, early intervention may be particularly beneficial in preventing female gang onset because girls virtually ceased joining gangs by age 15, though boys continued to join gangs through age 19.

Research in the Rochester Youth Developmental study (Krohn et al., 2014) finds that, from mid-adolescence onward, six of the protective factors interacted with the chronic violence trajectory to reduce violence incidence (including gang fighting and gun carrying): (1) cumulative protection across domains, (2) cumulative protection in the family domain, (3) educational aspirations and (4) self-esteem in the individual domain, and (5) parental supervision and (6) parent partner status in the family domain. Thus of central importance is increasing the level of positive feelings youth have for themselves and their parents, and empowering parents to better supervise teenagers’ behavior and choice of friends.

◆ Apex of Gang Member Criminal Activity

Keeping in mind the age-gang membership curve, we next profile youths who maintain an active course of gang activity for an extended period of time, thus expanding the peak in the age-gang membership curve by delaying desistance. Most youths who join gangs have already been involved in delinquency and drug use. Once in the gang, they are quite likely to become more actively involved in delinquency, drug use, and violence (Thornberry, 1998; Krohn & Thornberry, 2008). Invariably, longitudinal gang studies show that members are far more actively involved in criminal activity during the period of active gang membership than either periods before or after (Krohn & Thornberry, 2008). But is this elevated criminal activity composed of serious property and violent crime as the Loeber pathways model suggests? Yes, in both community and juvenile justice system samples.

Among the Pittsburgh young men, two particular sets of criminal activities (i.e., drug selling and violence; drug selling, theft, and violence) were most elevated when youth were in gangs (R. A. Gordon et al., 2014). In sum, this research suggests that gang involvement can propel high-risk delinquents who have begun a career in crime to new heights. In parallel with this research, the Rochester study suggested that the gang culture of violence introduces members to even more dangerous enterprises. “Gang members carry guns to protect themselves and their turf from rival gangs, who, in turn, must arm” (Lizotte, Krohn, Howell, Tobin, & Howard, 2000, p. 830). Then, in late adolescence, involvement in serious drug trafficking, which may be independent of gang involvement, is a much stronger factor explaining hidden gun carrying—typically after gang involvement has ended. In two large statewide multiyear samples of adjudicated serious and violent juvenile offenders, gang members were about

three times more likely than other offenders to be chronic serious property and violent juvenile delinquents (Baglivio, Jackowski, Greenwald, & Howell, 2014; M. Howell & Lassiter, 2011).

◆ Long-Term Impact of Gangs on Participants

For the gang to have devastating consequences, it need not be a large formal gang. Even low levels of gang organization have important consequences for involvement in crime and victimization (Decker et al., 2008; Esbensen, Winfree, et al., 2001; T. Taylor, 2008). Various forms of violent victimization are associated with gang joining (T. Taylor, 2008; T. Taylor, Freng, Esbensen, & Peterson, 2008). What the available research shows most clearly is that a constellation of risky behaviors, gang fights included, elevates one's risk of violent victimization,² and as Melde (2009) notes, for both genders. These risky behaviors include participating in gang or group fights, carrying a weapon, committing serious assault, selling drugs, and associating with delinquent peers. In addition, studies led by Esbensen (2010) and D. Peterson (2004) conclude that violent victimization rates are higher for gang members than they are for their nongang counterparts.

Thornberry, Krohn, and colleagues (2003) found that gang involvement has a way of limiting youngsters' life chances, particularly if they remain active in the gang for several years. Over and above embedding its members in criminal activity, the gang acts as a powerful social network in constraining the behavior of members, limiting access to prosocial networks, and cutting members off from conventional pursuits. Thornberry and colleagues found that gang involvement tends to produce precocious, off-time, and unsuccessful transitions that bring disorder to the life course in a cascading series of difficulties, including school dropout, early pregnancy or early impregnation, teen motherhood, and unstable employment. Long-term gang membership also leads to negative life-course transitions in adulthood for males, engagement in street crime, and, in turn, being arrested as an adult (Krohn, Ward, et al., 2011), as well as abusing their own children as a long-term result of the "gang way of life" (Augustyn et al., 2014).

Gilman and colleagues (2014) extended this line of research, finding that the effects of gang membership cascaded into three broad areas of adult functioning (up to age 33): illegal behavior, educational and occupational attainment, and physical and mental health. Compared with those who had never joined a gang, yet were actively involved in delinquency, those who reported joining a gang in adolescence were (at age 27, 30, or 33 years) nearly three times as likely to report committing a crime in the preceding year, almost four times more likely to report receiving income from illegal sources, nearly three times more likely to meet the criteria for drug abuse or dependence in the preceding year, and more than two times more likely to have spent time incarcerated in the preceding year. By comparing gang members with other delinquents, this research underscores the additional negative consequences of gang involvement. In another long-term follow-up of offending careers of Pittsburgh youth (up to age 29), gang membership was among the strongest predictors of convictions for homicide (Loeber & Farrington, 2011).

Juvenile and criminal justice system careers of gang members begin at an early age. Recent research shows that the deeper the level of juvenile justice system penetration, the greater the likelihood of gang involvement (M. Howell & Lassiter, 2011). 7% of all juveniles against whom delinquent complaints are filed, 13% of juveniles adjudicated delinquent, 21% of juveniles admitted to short-term detention, and 38% of juveniles committed to secure residential facilities. In addition, Gilman and colleagues (2014) and Benda, Corwyn, and Toombs (2001) find that adolescent gang membership is a

strong predictor of entry into the correctional system for adults. A statewide Florida analysis also showed that serious, violent, and chronic juvenile offenders are almost four times more likely to indicate gang association than other offenders (Baglivio et al., 2014). The strongest research-supported risk factors for recidivism among gang members who had been adjudicated delinquent are frequency of violent assaults, degree of gang embeddedness, low self-control, and frequency of associations with fellow gang members (Howell et al., 2014, p. 155).

◆ Desistance From Gang Membership

The down slope of the age-gang member curve represents the desistance process (Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule, 2014). Findings from longitudinal studies in Denver, Pittsburgh, Rochester, Seattle, and a multisite GREAT sample indicate that active gang membership periods are relatively brief. However, there is considerable variability:

- The majority of gang members remained involved with gangs for one year or less (48% to 69%).
- Declining percentages reported two (17% to 48%), three (6% to 27%), and four or more (3% to 5%) years of gang membership among sites (Pyrooz et al., 2013, p. 244).

It is noteworthy that up to one in four (27%) gang members in the five studies remain active for at least three years. More embedded members remain active for a longer period of time. In particular, *gang embeddedness* refers to duration youth in gangs, as indicated by frequent routine contacts, participation in important gang activities, and perceived higher social status from gang participation (Pyrooz et al., 2013). The explanation for the gradual down-slope is that desistance does not occur abruptly. In one study, gang embeddedness was associated with slowing the rate of desistance from gang membership over the full five-year study period. Gang members with low levels of embeddedness leave the gang quickly, crossing a 50% threshold in six months after the baseline interview, whereas high levels of embeddedness delay similar reductions for about two years (Pyrooz et al., 2013). In the largest study of gang desisters, a total of 1,185 youth who left their gang (Carson et al., 2013), young members typically became disillusioned with gang life and then decided to simply drift away from gangs in adolescence, typically “without fanfare or consequences” (p. 529). There are exceptions, to be sure, several of which Carson and colleagues document. Where gangs are fully institutionalized in communities, members cannot easily leave their gangs. “Even after relinquishing their gang member status, [youths] may still associate with members of the gang; these are their neighbors, friends, and family members, after all” (Peterson, 2012, p. 82). In the words of an older gangster,

“You never leave the neighborhood—you just stop participatin’. I guess I’m like an alumni. I graduated. But I still check in with my old homies. We visit.” —Kenny (in Leap, 2012, p. 148)

◆ Concluding Observations

The goal of this chapter was to show how youth become involved in gangs. Developmental models help to map the offense-based pathway to gang involvement. The developmental framework, in a simplified manner, depicts key stepping-stones in the gang member pathway. Future theoretical work needs to

incorporate these research-supported risk factors. Gang involvement is a key stage in the formation of youngsters' criminal pathway, and gang membership also has a way of limiting youngsters' life chances, that extends far beyond the period of active gang participation. Over and above embedding its members in criminal activity, in Rochester, New York, the gang acts as a powerful social network in constraining the behavior of members, limiting access to prosocial networks, and cutting members off from conventional pursuits. These effects of the gang tend to produce precocious, off-time, and unsuccessful transitions that bring disorder to the life course in a cascading series of difficulties, including school dropout, early pregnancy or early impregnation, teen motherhood, and unstable employment. In addition, the gang "way of life" leads to poor general health, depression, drug abuse, child maltreatment, continued criminality, arrests, and incarceration in adulthood.

Several tentative conclusions can be drawn about studies to date on risk factors for gang membership. First, a caveat is in order. Only a relatively small number of longitudinal studies have investigated these, and as Krohn and Thornberry (2008) note, still fewer of them have used a common set of risk factors. Consequently, there are few replicated results. In addition, it must be emphasized that, as in the case of many other problem behaviors,

gang membership does not seem to be a product of a few central risk factors; none exerts a massive impact on the likelihood of being a gang member. But, the accumulation of risk is strongly related to the chances of becoming a gang member. Gang members have multiple deficits in multiple developmental domains, each of which contributes in a small but statistically significant way to the chances of becoming a gang member. (p. 138)

Over the long term, fulfilling the developmental needs of children is a goal of great importance for reducing gang involvement. These developmental needs span the individual, family, school, peer, and neighborhood domains. The likelihood of joining a gang is far greater when multiple risk factors are present, and even more so when risk is present across all five of the developmental domains (Hill et al., 1999; Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003). In the most detailed risk study to date, examining the relative influence of risk factors from childhood to adulthood in a representative Seattle sample (Gilman, Hill, Hawkins, et al., 2014), the strongest predictors of joining a gang are living with a gang member, antisocial neighborhood, and antisocial peer environments. School factors apply more strongly earlier in the developmental process, in early childhood, particularly low academic achievement, school marginalization, and suspension from school.

Future gang members share several of the same risk factors seen in future serious and violent adolescent offenders, including association with delinquent peers, drug and alcohol use, school problems, and family problems. Thus, a continuum of responses consisting of age-appropriate services is needed to develop risk factors and service needs as they emerge with age. Gang involvement should routinely be assessed at each stage of juvenile justice and criminal justice system processing. Recommended procedures are detailed in Chapter 10.

DISCUSSION TOPICS

1. What are the key propositions of developmental or life-course theories?
2. How does Loeber's pathways model explain continued progression from less serious to more serious delinquent offenses?

3. Which theories best account for youths who advance to the top of Loeber's pathways model, that is, become serious (property), violent, and chronic offenders?
4. What factors best explain the bell-shaped age-gang membership curves?
5. Why does gang membership have long-reaching negative effects across the life course?
6. What are some of the common misperceptions about gang involvement, persistence, and desistance that are debunked, based on your reading of this chapter?

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Gang Attractions

- Decker, S. H., & Curry, G. D. (2000). Addressing key features of gang membership: Measuring the involvement of young members. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 28, 473–482.
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NOTES

1. Reports of research of this sort are classified as grey literature because they were not published in traditional professional journals or books.
2. Including receiving injuries from an assault or robbery (e.g., being attacked by someone with a weapon or by someone trying to seriously hurt or kill them). Injuries were considered serious if they involved a cut or bleeding, being knocked unconscious, or hospitalization.