ASU criminologists find higher teenage delinquency rate in China

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Criminologist Scott Decker discusses one of the first gang research projects in the United States. Credit: Jamillah Anderson

(Phys.org) -- A new study found Chinese teenagers and young adults are involved in higher rates of delinquency and violence than reported in previous research. The findings, published in the latest online edition of the *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, also show that gang involvement in China is at levels not unlike those in the United States and other Western countries.

Criminologists David Pyrooz and Scott Decker studied youth and young adults in Changzhi, a city of more than 3 million people in Northern China, to learn more about teenage delinquency and crime. They also wanted to find out if the same methods they used to study gang involvement in the United States and Europe would also work in a

country where crime data is hard to come by.

“We’re trying to add to a nascent body of literature in China,” said Pyrooz, who earned his doctorate in Criminology and Criminal Justice from Arizona State University in May and now teaches in the College of Criminal Justice at Sam Houston State University in Texas. “There’s just not much that we know about delinquency in China.”

“It’s really important to understand crime and gang behavior in China,” said Decker, who is the director of the ASU School of Criminology and Criminal Justice. “It’s worth paying attention to before it reaches more difficult levels to deal with.”

Decker and Pyrooz chose Changzhi for its diverse population. The industrial city has a sizeable minority population as well as transplants from rural areas. They selected six schools for the study: two high schools, two vocational schools, a school for vocational and college students, and a college. The mix of schools resulted in study participants being slightly older than American high school students.

A total of 2,163 students completed questionnaires which asked about their own involvement in delinquency, violence and gangs. Decker and Pyrooz had previously found the self-reported delinquency method produced valid results in the United States, Europe, and other Western nations, but not necessarily in China.

“There is the presumption in self reported research in China that among middle class and smart students there’s underreporting of delinquent involvement because it reflects negatively on the country of China and the culture of China,” said Decker. “That underreporting is not found in the members of our sample who were ethnic minorities or working class. They report involvement in all kinds of delinquency.

More than half of respondents reported they had engaged in at least one non-violent delinquent act in the past year. One in five said they had committed a violent act. Less than 10-percent said they had committed multiple acts of violence in the past year

“The higher rate of delinquency was something that some might consider surprising or a little bit unexpected,” Pyrooz said. “And we found a prevalence of gang membership that was pretty consistent with the United States.”

The criminologists found 11-percent of study participants said they had been involved in a gang, a rate consistent with gang membership rates in the United States and Europe. The study found those with a history of gang membership reported four times as many violent acts and three times as many delinquent acts compared to non-gang respondents.

“They do a lot of things you would expect gang members to do in the United States and other regions of the world--engaging in crime, violence, vandalism, hanging out, using substances such as alcohol or drugs,” said Pyrooz. “We observed a pretty high rate of substance abuse, at least with marijuana and alcohol with this sample in China.”

The same risk factors that lead to delinquency and gang involvement in Western counties also play a role in China. Those include low self-control, household strains, parental monitoring, parent and school attachment, and association with peers that engage in delinquency or violence.

Pyrooz and Decker suggest another factor plays a role – the internet. In an earlier project, published by the Council on Foreign Relations, the researchers found that gang members in the United States reinforced their gang membership though technology by recording videos of fights on their cell phones and posting them on the internet.

"We think that the internet fuels the transmission of a lot of these behaviors – the cultural images, the behavior, the ideology about being in a gang," Decker said. "And certainly, this study documents fairly high levels of delinquent involvement among Chinese youth."

The study also sought to find out if those levels of delinquent involvement declined when someone left a gang. Past research has shown that when some quits a gang in the States and throughout Europe the levels of crime decline in frequency and seriousness.

"What's really unique from our finding, though, is that the effect of gang membership on crime persists beyond gang membership," noted Decker. "So the U.S. and Europe when you leave the gang you pretty much get a falling off in crime. In China, leaving the gang doesn't produce those same declines in crime."

Decker and Pyrooz suspect that's because gang membership in China carries a greater stigma and simply renouncing membership isn't enough.

"It might be a little bit more difficult for these guys to repair those friendship connections and to regain the social capital that they lost while they were in a gang. Those are the resources and friendship networks that would work against criminal activity," observed Pyrooz.

The growth of gangs in China hasn't drawn the kind of attention gangs in Western countries have received. But it could only be a matter of time says Pyrooz.

"So these are things to take into consideration and if this does become a larger issue what this research will do is provide a foundation for future gang responses and programming," Pyrooz said.

The criminologists suggest further study of gang violence is needed in

China, including the role of delinquent peers. Pyrooz and Decker say research should be expanded to bigger cities with larger sample sizes.

Provided by Arizona State University

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