

Despite increased danger, youth gang members still feel safer (w/Video)

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Chris Melde is an assistant professor of criminal justice at Michigan State University. Credit: Michigan State University

Children who join gangs feel safer despite a greater risk of being assaulted or killed, according to federally funded research led by a Michigan State University criminologist.

The findings by MSU's Chris Melde, which appear in the current edition of the journal [Criminology](#), may help explain why youth continue to join street gangs despite the well-established danger.

"It's a paradox," said Melde, assistant professor of criminal justice.

"Gang members essentially are not allowed to show [fear](#) and this can have a profound impact on adolescents. Their quest for acceptance, along with their immersion into this culture steeped in violence, may ultimately numb their reaction to violence, including their fear of victimization."

While many researchers look at the downside of gang membership, Melde's research explores the potential benefits - or at least the perceived benefits. The current research is part of a larger project led by professor Finn-Aage Esbensen at the University of Missouri-St. Louis and funded by the National Institute of Justice, a department of the U.S. Department of Justice.

The project is believed to be the first long-term analysis of its kind. Melde and his colleagues studied 1,450 public school students in the sixth through ninth grades during a two-year period. The students came from 15 schools in four states: Arizona, New Mexico, Massachusetts and South Carolina.

The students who joined gangs said they had higher levels of victimization, but also reported a relatively large decrease in fear at the same time. Victimization ranged from the fear of home invasion to being attacked.

The study also highlights a possible intervention point. Because fear, which affects decision-making, generally peaks immediately following a violent action - and before the gang can organize a response - Melde said that might be the best time to try convincing gang members to quit.

"Intervening in their lives right then may impact their decision whether they stay in a [gang](#) or not," he said.

Source: Michigan State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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