

Today's offenders are tomorrow's victims in gangs

May 7 2014

Gang members are twice as likely to become both a victim and an offender of a crime than non-gang members, as single acts of violence often lead to retribution between gangs as a whole, according to a new study.

"In other words, [gang members](#) are not distinctly offenders or victims; instead, gang membership is a common source of both forms of violence," said David Pyrooz, an assistant professor at Sam Houston State University, College of Criminal Justice and principal author of the study. "Today's criminal offender is tomorrow's victim, and today's victim is quite likely to be tomorrow's criminal offender."

The study, co-authored by Richard K. Moule Jr. and Scott H. Decker of Arizona State University, found that [gang membership](#) is a large risk factor for becoming both a victim and an offender. Gangs widen the pool for its members to be involved in both sides of crime through a shared history of collective identity; unconventional ways to earn status in a gang; involvement in criminal activity and norms of retaliation; and shared liability for being affiliated with a gang.

"Violence begets violence," said Pyrooz. "The motto, 'we are all in this together,' extends to offending and victimization."

The study was based on interviews with 621 youth and [young adults](#) from five cities, including Cleveland, OH; Fresno, CA; Los Angeles, CA; Phoenix, AZ; and St. Louis, MO. It was funded in part by Google

Ideas, a think/do tank that explores the role that technology can play in tackling human challenges, such as violent extremism, illicit networks and fragile states.

While criminology research has found a common overlap between victims and offenders involved with crime, gang members do not fit traditional theories. One generally accepted theory focuses on the characteristics of the individual, including such biological or psychological factors as impulsivity, intelligence or risk-seeking, which continually put people in bad situations, leading to crimes or victimization. The second theory emphasizes a "contagion" between offending and victimization—that is, engaging in criminal behavior puts someone at risk for victimization, while victimization puts someone at risk for committing a crime.

In contrast, it is the group process that puts gang members at the cross hairs of offending and victimization. At any given time, 2 percent of youth and young adults in the U.S. are in gangs. In major cities, homicide rates for gang members are 100 times higher than that of the general public.

"It is not that gangs aren't comprised of impulsive youth who live high-risk lifestyles, but that gangs are equipped with a collection of group processes and 'manpower' that better facilitate trading places as victim and offender," Pyrooz said.

To address this issue, Pyrooz and his colleagues suggest several strategies that focus on both victims and offenders. For example, in Ceasefire Chicago, the program uses former gang members as "violence interrupters" to identify and intervene in gang-related conflicts to prevent retaliatory shootings. Law enforcement strategies that target all members of the gang, instead of an individual's behavior, also have proven effective. Interventions should not just target the triggerman and

his accomplices, but also the victim and his accomplices.

More information: The full study, entitled "The Contribution of Gang Membership to the Victim-Offender Overlap," can be found in the *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* at jrc.sagepub.com/content/51/3/315.full.pdf+html

Provided by Sam Houston State University

Citation: Today's offenders are tomorrow's victims in gangs (2014, May 7) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-05-today-tomorrow-victims-gangs.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
