

Personal history with street gangs sparks U. of I. graduate student's research

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Gabriel ("Joey") Merrin, a doctoral student in child development, is the lead author of a recent study that explored the risk and protective factors associated with young people who are recruited by, but resist joining, street gangs. Co-authors of the study were educational psychology professor Dorothy Espelage and alumnus Jun Sung Hong, currently a professor at Wayne State University and at Sungkyunkwan University in Seoul, South Korea. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

The allure of street gangs is something Gabriel "Joey" Merrin knows firsthand, having grown up in low-income neighborhoods in inner-city Chicago that are notorious for gang violence, crime and poverty.

For youths living in these hardscrabble surroundings, "It's not a question of if, it's a question of when you'll be faced with an offer or pressure to join a [gang](#)," said Merrin, who affiliated with a neighborhood gang for part of his youth.

"I grew up very scared," Merrin said. "I was surrounded by crime, drugs and violence at a very young age. I was around older kids a lot, and I looked up to them. My mother was a single parent who was always gone, so I spent a lot of time in the streets.

Many of my friends had been shot, killed or arrested. I was searching for protection and a way out."

Currently a doctoral candidate in child development at the University of Illinois, where his research focus is delinquency and youth gangs, Merrin also is the lead author of a recently published study that examined the individual, peer, family, school and neighborhood factors associated with young people who resist the magnetic pull of street gangs.

While numerous studies have explored the [risk factors](#) associated with gang involvement, Merrin said he believes his study to be just the second to explore the risk and protective factors associated with youths who were targeted for recruitment but resisted joining street gangs.

"Researchers don't really talk about the individuals who have resisted membership as a way to better understand the youth gang phenomena, and that's one of the things I'm really proud of about the paper," Merrin said. "We know that some of these individuals who face similar risks as their peers choose not to join gangs, and I want to better understand

these individuals and identify some key protective elements."

Of the more than 15,700 participants in Merrin's study, 973 youths (5.6 percent) reported they had been asked or pressured to join a gang but declined. Another 625 youths, or 3.6 percent of the participants, reported being current or former gang members.

Many of the youths who resisted recruitment were exposed to the same risk factors as their peers who became gang members, including alcohol or drug use, dysfunctional families, and residing in chaotic, dangerous neighborhoods.

However, compared with peers who became [gang members](#), youths who resisted pressure to join were 1 1/2 times more likely to perceive fair treatment by their teachers and other school personnel, and to report having at least one adult in their lives they could depend on for help with their problems, Merrin found.

Published in the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, the paper underscores the importance of positive educational experiences and supportive relationships with teachers and other adults as buffers against the influences that lure youth into gang affiliation - findings that mirror Merrin's early life.

Nicknamed "Smart Guy" by his friends, Merrin's intellect, along with his aptitude for sports, may have saved him from the bleak consequences that awaited many of the young men around him. Recognizing Merrin's potential, his football coach and some guidance counselors at his school encouraged Merrin to concentrate on sports and academics. They also urged him to envision a future that included going to college, a brass ring that Merrin, and many kids in impoverished neighborhoods like his, perceived as being beyond their grasps.

"They encouraged me to stay in school, and I trusted them, so I threw myself into school, not knowing where it would take me," Merrin said. "When I left high school, I was running in search of a better life with more certainty and opportunities."

Since then, Merrin has earned a bachelor's degree in sociology and a master's degree in human resource development, both from the U. of I. Although Merrin initially sought a doctorate in HRD, the program didn't seem like the right fit: His early experiences piqued an interest in researching issues related to delinquency and gang involvement instead.

Merrin transferred into the educational psychology department and began working with Dorothy Espelage on her research into bullying and youth violence at schools in central Illinois and Wisconsin. Merrin also has led interventions with gang-involved youths at the schools and mediated conflicts between [youth](#) at the Champaign County Juvenile Detention Center.

"I have a perspective that's a little bit different from some people, and I can relate to some of the students and speak to them in their own language," Merrin said. "I try to have a dialogue with them, listen to them, learn their truths without judgment, and offer some suggestions that worked for me when I was facing similar situations."

"It helps when someone that looks like them with similar lived experiences is standing there and saying, 'Look, regardless of your current situation, there's still light at the end of the tunnel. You can still engage in education, get out of the gang, and have a productive, high-quality life,'" Merrin said.

Espelage and Illinois social work alumnus Jun Sung Hong, currently a faculty member at Wayne State University and at Sungkyunkwan University in Seoul, South Korea, were co-authors on the study.

More information: "Are the Risk and Protective Factors Similar for Gang-Involved, Pressured-to-Join, and Non-Gang-Involved Youth? A Social-Ecological Analysis" *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 2016.

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