

Study links gang membership and depression

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Credit: Michigan State University

Kids who decide to join gangs are more likely to be depressed and suicidal - and these mental health problems only worsen after joining, finds a new study co-authored by a Michigan State University criminologist.

Gang membership is associated with greater levels of depression, as well as a 67 percent increase in suicidal thoughts and a 104 percent increase

in suicide attempts.

"Youth who join a gang are much more likely to have [mental health](#) issues, and then being in the gang actually makes it worse," said Chris Melde, MSU associate professor of criminal justice. "It doesn't act as an antidepressant. And some people may be seeking that out - a sense of well-being or purpose."

With an estimated 850,000 members in the United States, [gangs](#) remain a "stubbornly persistent" problem, according to the Justice Department. Many youth - particularly poor and minority youth - join gangs to escape hardship for the promise of money, protection, status or a sense of belonging they're not getting at home, school or elsewhere.

But Melde has studied youth gangs for years and found no discernible benefits. For example, the rate of substance abuse and violent victimization only increase after kids join gangs.

In the latest study, Melde and Adam Watkins from Bowling Green State University studied national survey data of more than 11,000 middle- and high-school students. Youth who joined gangs had significantly higher levels of depression and [suicidal thoughts](#) than those who didn't join gangs. Further, membership in gangs made these underlying problems much worse.

"If you think of [gang membership](#) as a coping mechanism - trying to cope with the hand you've been dealt in life - it doesn't work," Melde said. "Kids join gangs for reasons, but when we try to find the benefits - whether it's for protection, a sense of worth, whatever - we're finding it actually makes an already significant problem in their lives even worse."

The study was published online today in the journal *Criminal Justice and Behavior*.

Provided by Michigan State University

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