

Study: Street gangs, crime serve as deviant leisure activities for youths

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University of Illinois faculty members, from left, Kim Shinew, Liza Berdychevsky and Monika Stodolska are co-writing a series of papers that examine gang membership and criminal activity from the perspective of leisure science. The studies are based on interviews with former members of street gangs operating in Chicago and central Illinois. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Although at-risk youths may have a variety of reasons for joining street gangs, a new study suggests that gang membership and criminal acts often serve as deviant leisure activities, fulfilling young people's needs for excitement, a sense of belonging and social support.

Based on interviews with 30 former street gang members in Illinois, the study is one of the first to explore gang involvement as leisure activity. The paper was co-written by Liza Berdychevsky, Monika Stodolska and Kim Shinew, all professors of recreation, sport and tourism at the University of Illinois.

"Studies like this are particularly important right now, given the incidence of gun violence in cities such as Chicago and the renewed attention to gang crime nationwide," Berdychevsky said. "Developing an in-depth understanding of what drives delinquent and criminal activities - and ways that sports and other [leisure activities](#) can be used for prosocial purposes - can help create more effective prevention, intervention and rehabilitation programs for at-risk youths and young offenders."

The researchers interviewed former members of the Latin Kings/Latin Queens, Satan's Disciples, the Vice Lords and other street gangs operating in Chicago and downstate Illinois. Some participants had left gang life as recently as the prior year, while others had desisted for decades, sometimes after serving lengthy prison sentences.

While active with a gang, each of the participants had been a perpetrator, victim and/or witness to violent crimes - including murders, rapes, beatings, shootings and stabbings. Some had trafficked drugs, stolen cars or committed arson or vandalism.

For some of the participants, the gang lifestyle was an intergenerational legacy -grandparents, parents and other family members taught criminal

behaviors and values to the generations that followed. Delinquent and deviant activities were accepted or even expected in their families and neighborhoods, they told the researchers.

"One of the most heartbreaking things was these young people's fatalism and defeatist outlook on life - they thought there was no future for them other than dying young or going to prison," Berdychevsky said.

Many of the participants had dropped out of school or attended only sporadically. With no responsibilities and few recreational opportunities in their neighborhoods, the youths felt a pervasive need for stimulation, and they satiated their boredom with parties that were rife with sex, drugs and alcohol; violent clashes with rival groups; and crimes such as stealing and crashing cars into vehicles driven by rivals.

Gang members' reasons for engaging in crime and other gang activities were similar to those that motivate other [young people](#) to engage in sports or other positive recreational activities, the researchers found.

"They even spoke about their violent acts using leisure and sports terminology, such as describing how they 'hunted' their victims," said Stodolska, the lead author of the paper. "One man said he felt as if he were on a football team and the bystanders, fellow [gang members](#) or people in his community who encouraged these behaviors were cheering him on from the stands.

"What was really striking about the people we interviewed was how much many of them enjoyed the violence. Some participants likened it to a drug addiction, which increased their attachment to that lifestyle."

Many of the interviewees described experiencing a "rush" - a surge of adrenaline, or a sensation similar to sexual arousal, according to one woman - during gunfights and other violent incidents. While many of

them attributed much of their criminal activity to drugs or alcohol, others told the researchers they preferred to be sober while committing violent crimes for the sheer pleasure of seeing people suffer.

The use of leisure activities in gang prevention, intervention and rehabilitation of offenders is underrecognized currently by cities and organizations seeking to develop solutions for gang-related crime and delinquency, Berdychevsky said.

"People in the parks and recreation field need to be involved in developing these strategies, as they're one among a number of stakeholder groups that can help combat gang involvement," Stodolska said.

Since leaving gang life and/or prison, many of the interviewees currently are involved in [gang](#) prevention organizations such as Cure Violence/Ceasefire and the Chicago Dream Center.

"One of the things that struck me was how smart, charming, articulate and talented many of the interviewees are," Shinew said. "And they have leadership skills. On several occasions, I thought, 'Wow. If you had just made a few different decisions in your life, your future might have been so different.'"

The study, which was funded by a Campus Research Board grant, has been accepted by the journal *Leisure Sciences*. Stodolska, Berdychevsky and Shinew have presented their findings at five symposia thus far, including the Academy of Leisure Sciences Research Institute in Indianapolis in February; and at the Illinois Parks and Recreation Association Conference, held in Chicago in January.

More information: "Gangs and deviant leisure" [DOI: 10.1080/01490400.2017.1329040](https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2017.1329040)

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