

Study on intermittency in gang membership underscores value of preventing youth from rejoining gangs

May 21 2021



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Research has shown that joining a gang is associated with increased criminal behavior. A new study examined whether the intermittent

nature of gang membership affects offending. Researchers sought to determine whether the association with increased offending was a consistent attribute or, since people enter and exit and re-enter gangs, whether the intermittent nature of membership affected members' likelihood of offending. The study found that first-time membership was associated with increases in criminal behavior from when gang members were not in gangs, and that joining for a second time significantly raised the likelihood of offending, including more violent behavior.

The study, by researchers at the University of Texas at San Antonio and the University of Maryland, appears in *Criminology*, a publication of the American Society of Criminology.

The results suggest that gang membership, whether as a new or a repeat experience, is a salient life event and that intermittency can disrupt individuals' offending profiles, according to coauthors Megan Bears Augustyn, associate professor of criminology and criminal justice at the University of Texas at San Antonio, and Jean McGloin, professor of criminology and criminal justice at the University of Maryland.

Augustyn and McGloin say that based on their documentation of changes in offending behavior that parallel changes in individuals' self-identification as gang members, interventions should take into account the intermittency of gang membership.

Although past researcher has acknowledged the intermittency of gang membership, studies have not investigated whether different stages of gang membership are associated with different offending patterns. In this study, researchers used data from the Rochester Youth Development Study, which examined the development of antisocial behavior among 1,000 youth who were representative of the seventh- and eighth-grade public school population of Rochester, NY, in 1988. The 177 youth included in this study self-reported gang membership; of these, 53 said

they had joined a gang for the second time.

The youth were predominantly Black (67 percent), as well as Hispanic (17 percent) and White (16 percent). Most of the youth (73 percent) were male, only 36 percent lived with both biological parents at the start of the study, and most were economically disadvantaged. The average age of participants at the beginning of the study was 13.9 years old. Youth were interviewed up to nine times over about four and a half years.

Joining a gang for the first time was associated with increases in general offending behavior, as well as violence, property crime, and drug sales, when compared to pre-gang time periods. Joining a gang for the second time was also associated with significant increases in general offending, violence, and drug sales (though not [property crime](#)), when compared to time out of the gang after first-time membership.

The study also found that joining a gang for the second time had an indirect path to offending via delinquent peers, but not deviant values or drug use. Deviant values were measured as youth's level of agreement with 10 offenses (e.g., stealing something worth \$100 or more). This path was not observed in first-time gang membership. This led the researchers to conclude that there are significant changes in individuals' offending [behavior](#) both when they first join a gang and when they later join a gang.

The authors note that the [gang members](#) they studied came from one urban jurisdiction and joined gangs during adolescence, raising questions about generalizability to other areas and other ages. In addition, the study lacked information from all nine interviews on a number of factors that could explain individuals' reasons for joining gangs. Finally, the study was unable to deconstruct joining a gang for the second time by whether an individual went back to the same gang or joined a different one.

The authors say their research underscores the importance of not only supporting youth's decision to leave a gang in the first place, but also preventing [youth](#) from rejoining a [gang](#) while navigating the disengagement process since this has significant implications for [criminal behavior](#) and the associated snares.

More information: *Criminology*, [DOI: 10.1111/1745-9125.12274](https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12274)

Provided by American Society of Criminology

Citation: Study on intermittency in gang membership underscores value of preventing youth from rejoining gangs (2021, May 21) retrieved 28 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-05-intermittency-gang-membership-underscores-youth.html>

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