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## Childhood adversity and the continued exposure to trauma and violence among adolescent gang members

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### Abstract

This study examines experiences of childhood adversity, trauma, and violence among adolescent gang members prior to and during adolescent gang involvement to better understand the effects of violence and trauma on gang members. We conducted 58 qualitative semi-structured interviews with members of six adolescent gangs. Data was analyzed using thematic content analysis and the constant comparative method in MAXQDA. Findings revealed that frequent and ongoing exposure to neighborhood violence and personal and familial trauma led many youth to normalize experiences of violence. Furthermore, although they believed gangs would offer protection and social support, gang membership led to additional exposure to violence and trauma and bleak future expectations. Interventions for adolescent gang members should address the complex childhoods and cumulative traumatic experiences of these adolescents.

### Keywords

Adolescents; adolescent gangs; trauma; violence; childhood adversity

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Recent official estimates suggest that there are nearly 30,000 gangs and over 750,000 gang members across the United States (Egley & Howell, April 2012), although these estimates are thought to be fairly conservative (King, Voisin, & DiClemente, 2013; Pyrooz, 2014). Risk of gang entry is elevated during early adolescence, and youth tend to cycle in and out of gangs throughout their lives (Pyrooz, 2014). Multiple risk factors for joining gangs have been identified: financial hardship (Eitle, Gunkel, & Van Gundy, 2004), coming from single-headed households or households living below the poverty line (Pyrooz & Sweeten, 2015), exposure to violence (Li et al., 2002), and perceptions of school as unsafe (Lenzi et al., 2014). Specific to males, family conflict or dysfunction contributes to increased vulnerability to gang membership (Eitle et al., 2004). However, the presence and consequences of childhood adversity and traumatic experiences prior to and following gang membership have seldom been considered among gang members. Similarly, understanding the effects of polyvictimization, the exposure to multiple forms of victimization (D.

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Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005), may be useful in further understanding gang membership and the continued exposure to trauma of gang-involved youth. This qualitative study provides context for young gang members' experiences of violence, adversity, and trauma and how such experiences may contribute to and reinforce gang membership.

Prior research suggests that childhood trauma and adversity increase the risk for future victimization as well as future perpetration of violence (Gill & Page, 2006). Violent victimization and delinquency are often intertwined and mutually reinforcing (Loeber, Kalb, & Huizinga, 2001) and there is an established empirical relationship between youth victimization and perpetration of violence (Baron, 2003; Hartinger-Saunders et al., 2011; Loeber et al., 2001). This relationship is especially relevant to gang members given the high levels of violence to which they are exposed. Youth with histories of victimization and extensive trauma are at increased risk for delinquency, often by way of the depression and substance use that frequently result from victimization (Cuevas, Finkelhor, Turner, & Ormrod, 2007; Ford, Elhai, Connor, & Frueh, 2010). In fact, the associations between trauma and delinquency are reciprocal, wherein trauma increases risk for delinquency and gang involvement, and involvement in antisocial behavior increases risk for further traumatization and exposure to violence (Begle et al., 2011).

Gang members have higher rates of victimization than non-gang youth and although some youth report joining a gang for protection, gang membership does *not* appear to be linked to lower rates of victimization (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Peterson, Taylor, & Esbensen, 2004). Instead, violence exposure is associated with negative mental health consequences among youth gang members (Coid et al., 2013; Harper, Davidson, & Hosek, 2008) including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; (Kelly, Anderson, Hall, Peden, & Cerel, 2012). The health and social consequences of trauma and violence increase for youth who experience polyvictimization, or cumulative trauma and ongoing exposure to violence or stressful life events (D. Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2009). For example, exposure to a greater number of risk factors in childhood increases poor health outcomes (e.g depressive symptoms, substance use; (Dong et al., 2004; Dube, Anda, Felitti, Edwards, & Williamson, 2002; McLaughlin et al., 2010) and risk of joining a gang in adolescence (Hill, Howell, Hawkins, & Battin-Pearson, 1999). Additionally, polyvictimized youth, as compared to other traumatized youth, are at increased risk of negative psychological sequelae including PTSD, depression, and substance use disorders (Cuevas et al., 2007; Cuevas, Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2009; D. Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007; Ford et al., 2010). Furthermore, given the extent of exposure reported by polyvictimized youth, mainstream conceptualizations of traumatic events and violent exposure may be normalized, although the negative effects still persist. For these youth, trauma must be considered in light of the normalization of (i.e., desensitization of or habituation to) traumatic or adverse events and cumulative exposure to violence and adversity (Malcoun, Williams, & Nouri, 2015).

The frequency with which polyvictimized youth are exposed to violence or trauma can contribute to a normalization or heightened tolerance of violence or aggressive behavior (Huesmann, 1998; Salzinger, Feldman, Stockhammer, & Hood, 2002). Youth exposed to chronic violence, rather than being overwhelmed by it, may adapt and become psychologically desensitized to violence. This response protects them from immediate

psychological and emotional distress, yet increases their propensity to violence (Dubrow & Garbarino, 1989; Garbarino, Kostelny, & Dubrow, 1991; Garbarino, 1995; Mrug, Madan, & Windle, 2016; Ng-Mak, Salzinger, Feldman, & Stueve, 2002). Youth who report fear of harm or violence may attempt to alleviate their anxiety by identifying with and joining delinquent or gang-involved peers (Schwab-Stone et al., 1995). Notably, research with female gang members by Jody Miller (1998, 2001) indicates that for girls, gang-related victimization may be more acceptable in lieu of neighborhood or community victimization faced by non-gang members. Additionally, the combination of community violence and trauma in the home or family can lead some youth to seek out gangs, which offer a sense of affiliation and security, as well as the potential for financial gain (Garbarino, 2001). Yet, although gang membership offers the prospect of social connections and physical protection for youth who have experienced trauma or victimization, youth gangs often perpetuate cycles of violence (Lenzi et al., 2014).

Taken together, this paper examines experiences of violence, trauma, and adversity experienced by adolescent gang members before and after joining the gang to deepen our understanding of the effects and context of trauma for adolescent gang members. Despite the significant public health impacts associated with gangs and gang-related behavior, research regarding childhood adversity and its specific contribution to gang membership is scarce. As such, youth gang members represent an understudied subgroup of high-risk individuals reporting polyvictimization which both precedes the joining of a gang and continues to escalate and alter in form following gang membership (Kerig, Wainryb, Twali, & Chaplo, 2013). This qualitative study will provide insight into youth gang members' cumulative experiences of trauma and adversity to inform interventions for at-risk and gang-involved youth.

## Methods

### Participants

Fifty-eight semi-structured interviews with active male ( $n = 32$ ; 55%) and female ( $n = 26$ ; 45%) members of six adolescent African American and Latino gangs were conducted between June 2012 and July 2013 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Eligibility criteria included active gang membership in one of six identified gangs, being 14 to 19 years old, and having the ability to provide informed consent. Gang membership was self-reported, a reliable measure of identifying gang members (Decker, Pyrooz, Sweeten, & Moule Jr, 2014). On average, participants were 18 ( $sd=1.37$ ) years old, and were primarily African American (64%), followed by Latino (22%), or Latino and Black/African American (14%).

### Procedures

Study materials and procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the [Blinded Institution]. Though all participants completed written informed consent (assent for youth under the age of 18), a waiver of parental consent was obtained for minors under the age of 18 to protect those whose parents may be unaware of gang involvement or unavailable to consent for their child. Through in-depth discussions and consultation with area community gang experts, the IRB concluded that the difficulty some youth would face

obtaining parental consent would unnecessarily exclude a significant number of youth gang members. A combination of the following recruitment strategies were used in the present study: 1) outreach and direct targeted sampling of gang members were conducted by two research assistants with extensive experience working with community youth, including gang members, and 2) referral of contacts from current study participants. Upon completion of telephone screening and the in-person interview, participants were asked to refer any fellow gang members to the study. Participants received two referral cards to aid in recruitment of other gang members and received a \$10 cash incentive for each additional referral. All participants received a \$30 cash incentive for their own study participation. Sampling occurred until we achieved saturation of themes in the interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and achieved diversity in race and gender.

All interviews were conducted in English by two research assistants (an African American woman and a Latino male) trained in qualitative interviewing methods; due to the sensitive nature of the interview guide, the female research assistant interviewed all of the female gang members. Interviews lasted between 1- 1½ hours, and were conducted in community-based settings (e.g., community organizations and churches). Interviews covered a range of topics including history of gang involvement (including when and why they joined the gang, how they were initiated, and their current gang activities), family history and living environment, drug and sexual risk behaviors, experiences with violence, and future aspirations. Though all participants were asked the same series of questions, the semi-structured guide allowed for flexibility to probe, ask follow up questions, and explore certain areas in more depth (Bernard, 2011).

## Data Analysis

Interviews were conducted in English, transcribed verbatim, and coded and analyzed using MAXQDA qualitative software. Initially, all transcripts were coded by gender, ethnicity, and gang affiliation to explore differences across gangs, gender, and ethnicity of participants. Transcripts were then analyzed using thematic content analysis to identify primary themes used to develop a codebook to capture broad content areas and key analytic constructs across interviews. Codes were refined throughout analysis to include emergent themes and allow for changes in the coding tree and refinement of codes and code definitions. The code book was refined and finalized to achieve consensus among the research team. Data were analyzed to explore childhood experiences of violence and victimization, family trauma, neighborhood distress, reasons for joining the gang, and violence and victimization as gang members. Thematic content analysis was used to explore patterns and themes across gangs. Analyses were conducted to examine differences among the themes by race/ethnicity and gender. Although few differences emerged, any significant comparisons are noted throughout. Pseudonyms are used to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

## Results

### I. Early normalization of violence and gangs through exposure to community violence

Prior to joining the gang, youth in this study reported significant and ongoing exposure to violence in their homes and neighborhoods. The majority of youth in this study grew up in

disadvantaged neighborhoods, plagued by poverty, drugs, violence, and failing schools. Even when youth reported strong and positive family ties and educational achievement, they also reported a perceived lack of safety in their own neighborhoods, early experiences of violent victimization, and frequent exposure to gangs and gun violence.

**Malik:** Before I started hanging around the guys and shit, and being part of the gang, people say stuff like ‘you not from around here,’ ‘don’t be around here,’ or ‘don’t be surprised if something happen to you.’ Or you know, people try to rob me and other stuff that would make me feel like I want to show them I am tired of being afraid and I wanted to be around. (19 year-old African American male)

Exposure to neighborhood-level violence and threats of victimization contributed to participants feeling unsafe in their own neighborhoods. Many youths’ neighborhoods had a strong gang presence and youth reported being victims of and witnessing violence regularly as children. Yet, despite the presence of gangs and the associated violence, gangs offered a perception of safety and support that many youth had difficulty receiving in other contexts of their lives. For example, some of the gang-involved youth acknowledged that they could either join the gang and deal with the violence that goes along with it as a group, or try to deal with the violence on their own. This thought process is reflected in the following statement by Destiny, a 17 year-old African American female, speaking about why she joined the gang:

**Destiny:** Well, I got jumped. I was getting jumped but I wasn’t even in the gang yet. But the people at the gang, by them knowing me, they helped. So I felt like I owe them something so I just joined the gang. They was trying to get me to join the gang for a minute [for some time] so I just joined it after I got jumped.

In addition to feeling gratitude and an obligation to the gang that helped her, she was also exposed to the benefits of the gang (e.g. protection) before she was even a member. Although community violence was not often explicitly cited as a reason participants joined gangs, the neighborhood environment and exposure to violence as a means to handle conflict seemed to have some influence on youths’ gang membership and perceptions of violence.

Early and ongoing exposure to gangs was common. Although some participants idolized older neighborhood and family gang members and anticipated their own membership, others entrenched in gang life via parents, cousins, and siblings, perceived their eventual membership as inevitable.

**Interviewer:** Tell me why you decided to join the gang.

**Maya:** I don’t think I really had a choice.

**Interviewer:** What you mean?

**Maya:** Like when, like your environment and being raised around people that’s what they do, it’s like, it’s in you. Even if that’s not what you wanna do, you go and do it ‘cause that’s what you know, and this is what people showing you around you. Like this is what you do, this is how you do this. And it wasn’t like I had a choice. So it just came in.

**Interviewer:** How old were you?

**Maya:** About like 10, 11. (18 year-old African American female)

While there were certainly youth whose parents and families were not affiliated with gangs, many youth, like Maya, had extensive family gang affiliations and normalized gang membership and the associated violence, drug use and selling. For them, gang membership hardly seemed like a choice they were able to make. For a few participants, this perceived lack of choice in joining the gang resulted in feelings of regret over being in the gang and an acknowledgement of the downsides of gang membership. In the following excerpt, for example, Chris explains how he was born into the gang, as his father and many other family members were part of the gang.

**Interviewer:** Did you have a choice if you wanted to join or not?

**Chris:** No.

**Interviewer:** If you would have a choice now, would you do it?

**Chris:** Nope.

**Interviewer:** Okay, could you tell me a little bit why?

**Chris:** Because I would rather have stayed in school and got my education. Things been so hard. I probably wouldn't have got shot or none of that. I probably be in college right now. (17 year-old Latino male)

Not only did Chris not have a choice in whether to join the gang, he recognized the opportunities he missed because of gang involvement, which can lead to anger and resentment.

The expected participation in gangs and youths' early exposure to neighborhood violence often resulted in the normalization of gangs, violence, and drug use, which participants spoke of rather casually.

**Jamal:** When it becomes normal to hear gunshots or normal to be sitting on the porch and see somebody sell somebody a bag of weed or a bag of dope or to see a fight jump out. But it's like normal, like you so used to it it's not a big deal compared to how somebody who not used to seeing that stuff will react if they was to come chill in the neighborhood with you. (18 year-old African American male)

Despite the normalization of violence, many youth also recognized the violence as problematic. Much like Chris acknowledged the consequences associated with gang membership, participants' narratives were filled with evidence and acknowledgement of the damaging effects and normalization of violence.

**Interviewer:** How big a problem is violence in your community?

**Mikayla:** It's a big problem. It's a really big problem. I have a sister and a brother that got shot at the same time.

**Interviewer:** What happened?

**Mikayla:** I really don't know the details of what happened... It was around Easter, so the family was out there drinking and smoking - doing what we usually do. And they just came over one night, and shot the block up. My brother got hit in his hand, and my sister got hit in her shoulder and her chest, it grazed past her chest. (19 year-old African American/Latina female)

The normalization of violence was not limited to neighborhood violence. For some youth, exposure to community violence was coupled with exposure to violence in the home.

**Gabby:** When I was with my dad. My gosh, yeah, I would see my dad hit my mom.

**Interviewer:** How'd that make you feel?

**Gabby:** I don't know. It was kinda like, even when in the gangs I would see some of the guys had hit their girlfriends. I never really got hit myself- maybe just one time. I just, when I was little I just thought it was normal I saw it so much, you know? I never really saw anybody stick up for the person – the woman who was getting beat, so. (19 year-old African American/Latina female)

Gabby articulates one of the consequences of early and ongoing exposure to interpersonal violence: the normalization and continuation of the cycle of violence. Importantly, she minimizes her own experience of violence noting that, "I never really got hit myself- maybe just one time." Furthermore, she accepts violence as a normal aspect of relationships, which she now sees reflected in her peers.

The personal effects of violence, including exposure to community and domestic violence, experiencing serious injury, or the death of friends and relatives, often resulted in anger, frustration, and the need for revenge.

**Interviewer:** Have you experienced a lot of that, either someone dying or a lot of people being hurt?

**Erik:** Yes, I've experienced both of them. Like me, I've had stitches in my head and I've been shot. To see one night my best friend, he got shot and he be, he never, he didn't make it.

**Interviewer:** And how did that make you feel?

**Erik:** It took another part of me. I was angry. Try to go back for revenge. (18 year-old African American male)

Anger, the thought of losing oneself, and the need for revenge were common reactions following direct or vicarious victimization. The loss of a best friend to gun violence is a significant traumatic event which, as Erik suggested, can have emotional and psychological consequences. Violence perpetrated against a close friend or family members is associated with greater depressive and anxiety symptoms and increased aggressive behavior (Brezina, Agnew, Cullen, & Wright, 2004). One of the ways Erik, and many other male gang members, dealt with those feelings was through revenge and the continuation of violence. The frequency with which youth were exposed to violence led many of them to understand violence to be a normative way to deal with their own anger and grief. Youth who report high levels of victimization are more likely than other youths to become associated with

aggressive and deviant peers. These youth are, in turn, more likely to view violence and physical retaliation as an acceptable and necessary response. Additionally, expressions of violence among boys provide an image of masculinity and status within the gang that is not provided by expressions of sadness or fear.(Brezina et al., 2004)

## II. Childhood adversity and trauma

Coupled with early and ongoing exposure to community violence and victimization, youth experienced significant polyvictimization and stressors in their personal lives due to familial financial hardship, parental substance use, domestic violence, and parental absence by way of incarceration, gang involvement, divorce, and death. Although there were a few youth who noted the positive involvement of their parents and described their parents' attempts to move them out of poor-performing and dangerous schools and keep them out of trouble, many youth in this study noted significant family distress and interpersonal violence and trauma.

**Interviewer:** I heard you mention your mom passed. Can you talk about that? Can you tell me what happened?

**Terrance:** She died from drinking, so.

**Interviewer:** I'm sorry to hear that. Can you tell me how that made you feel? At what age were you?

**Terrance:** I was so angry it happened, actually. When I was 14... It made me feel angry, you know. Angry.

**Interviewer:** So were you at the time living with your dad?

**Terrance:** No. My dad wasn't shit. He died from drinking too, right before my mom, so, nope. I didn't have no father figure or nothing like that. I got my niggas, you know. (19 year-old African American male)

The traumatic effects of parental substance use were evident throughout youths' narratives. Even when their parents were physically present, substance use contributed to family distress, domestic violence, and neglect of children's basic needs. As Tierra, an 18-year old African American female described her mom: "Well she's there but not there, so she don't really show us like no guidance of which way to go 'cause all she do is drink and smoke so I just go in my room sometimes or I go kicking down the block." Like Terrance, Tierra sought out peers in her neighborhood who offered social and emotional support and lacked parental guidance to counteract negative peer associations. Several youth in this study noted they were left on their own, physically or emotionally, and forced to support themselves and their siblings at a young age. In their parents' absence, youth reported spending more time with older siblings, cousins, or other youth in the neighborhood, which often precipitated gang membership. Lack of positive parental involvement and increased association with peers can contribute to youth feeling the need to join a gang for a more secure social support system. Several other youth similarly described a lack of parental supervision and the need to fend for themselves and siblings at a very young age.



Not surprisingly, the lack of parental guidance and family security also contributed to significant anger and frustration.

**DeShawn:** Yeah, my mom smoke.

**Interviewer:** That's why you all got taken from her?

**DeShawn:** Yeah, that's why, that's why I haven't seen her, that's why don't see my mom. Like that's why I don't stay with my mom. She's gone.

**Interviewer:** How that make you feel, though?

**DeShawn:** I mean, it might be fucked up, but it made me feel like I don't got no problem with selling drugs now 'cause somebody done sell them to my momma. So, why I can't sell them to somebody else momma? (15 year-old African American male)

Much like in reactions to violent victimization, a few youth expressed the desire for revenge in response to family trauma and their parents' substance use or absence. Although he was reluctant to discuss his childhood, noting it was "too personal," DeShawn explained that his mom lost custody of him and his three younger siblings and they currently live with their uncle in a drug house. He joined the gang when he was 11 and now, at just 15 years old, he spends the majority of his time selling drugs to make money to support himself, his daughter, and his siblings.

Like DeShawn, several youth noted they were trying to financially support themselves and their siblings, which was often discussed as routine expectations for youth. For example, Erik, an 18-year old African American male described the financial benefits of the gang for himself and siblings.

**Erik:** I went to school for like my first month of my senior year, but times got hard. I needed some money. I had to provide for my family... My mom ain't got no job. I got a little brother at home.

The financial benefits afforded primarily via drug selling in the gang, coupled with severe poverty and financial hardship, made gangs particularly appealing. As Peter, a 19-year old Latino male noted, "Some people got mamas that can't take care of themselves. It feels good to pay your mama's rent when you're only 16 years-old. The clique finds a way for you to do that." While a few youth had conventional jobs and many talked about the desire for mainstream financial opportunities, the majority of youth saw the gang as the most feasible and immediate way to provide for their families.

Both boys and girls also reported taking care of siblings in parents' absence. For example, as Gabby describes below, in the absence of her parents, she served as the mother figure to her younger siblings for many years.

**Gabby:** I'm kind of used of it. I've been basically alone without them since I was little. And because my dad was in jail I was living with my mom and she would just leave us at the house to - to fend for ourselves, I would cook dinner for three other kids so I don't know, I don't like mind. [laughs] ... I felt I was their mom. I took care of everything. Took them to school and um, there were even a time where we

were home alone and four men busted in our doors with guns. And my mom wasn't there to help us. She was out buying her drugs and messin' around with other guys. (19 year-old African American/Latina female)

Much like youth did when detailing exposure to violence, Gabby normalized her role in caring for her siblings and downplayed its significance. Yet, it is also clear that in the absence of her parents, as a child, she was occasionally put in dangerous situations and expected to protect herself and siblings.

In addition to parental absence and financial insecurity, youth experienced other traumatic and stressful events, including physical and sexual abuse. Five of the 26 girls and no boys in the study reported childhood sexual abuse, which is not surprising given that childhood sexual abuse is more common among girls than boys (D. Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2009). Peyton, an 18 year-old African American female described her experience.

**Interviewer:** Now have you ever had sex with someone when you really didn't want to?

**Peyton:** Eh, yes.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me about that a little bit?

**Peyton:** Actually, I didn't want to, it was taken from me.

**Interviewer:** What you mean?

**Peyton:** Molested. So, that's why I just do it [have sex] now for fun. It's pointless. It's already been taken away from me, my innocence.

**Interviewer:** How old were you when that happened?

**Peyton:** Eight.

**Interviewer:** Who was it?

**Peyton:** My cousin.

Peyton went on to note that she treats sex casually and now, has two children and, has had several casual sex partners, engages in condomless sex, and has had threesomes and other sexual encounters she regrets. Although she told her mother and uncle about the abuse, they did not call the police or take any actions against her cousin. As many participants did with difficult experiences, Peyton downplayed the significance of her experience noting, "I forgave him for it, I just don't talk to him so, I just brush it off." It is clear, however, that this experience shaped her perceptions of sex and experiences of sex as an adolescent. Her experience may be complicated by the lack of reaction from her mother or immediate consequence for her cousin, which can lead to insecurity and diminished trust and feelings of protection from her mom. Childhood sexual abuse is a uniquely traumatizing experience that may have long-term consequences for emotional and sexual development and risk including increased sexual risk behaviors (Brown et al., 2010; Senn & Carey, 2010), especially among girls.

As evident in these narratives, many youth experienced ongoing exposure to violence and faced significant polyvictimization in their communities and homes. These crises and stressors led many to seek refuge in the gang, perceived to offer family-like support, financial opportunities, and protection from neighborhood violence.

### III. Experiences of violence within the gang

Despite the perceived benefits, gang membership often introduced additional risk and exposure to violence and adverse situations and reinforced the normalization and perpetuation of violence. Participants reported within-gang fighting, intimate partner violence, fights with other gangs, and conflict with parents and caregivers over their gang membership.

**Interviewer:** What are some of the bad things about being in a gang?

**Mikayla:** Shootouts, um, worried about whether somebody's going to shoot up your house, where you lay your head at, the police coming and taking family members, the fights, the guns.

As such, trauma exposure can not only serve as a predisposing factor to joining a gang, but can also become a *consequence* of gang membership (Kerig et al., 2013). This victimization, much like maltreatment and victimization experienced prior to joining the gang, transpired in many different forms. For many participants, the increased violence associated with gang membership was evident beginning with their initiation. The most common way both male and female members reported being initiated into the gang was being 'jumped in' or beat by several members of their gang.

**Jasmin:** You gotta do a lot to get in a gang. You gotta prove yourself worthy, basically. That's what they want you to do. If you can't do that, then you're not worthy to be in the gang. You know, 'cause we gotta know if you ready to die. So they'll tell you like, you know, fight a few crew members just to see how you get down ... I had to fight four girls at the same time. And it was crazy 'cause it was my first time, you know. But, growing up, you know, I was forced to do a lot of things so being forced to fight four girls, you know. (17 year-old African American female)

As Jasmin noted about her initiation, it was essential that she demonstrate she was dedicated to the gang and willing to fight as a gang member. An expectation of gang membership is that members provide support for the others in times of distress. If a member does not step up to their duties in helping to protect other gang members (via fights, shootings, etc.), then he or she risks violent victimization from within their own gang.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me about fights or violence with other gangs?

**Maya:** [Laughter] We have plenty fights [Laughter] with other gangs. Like we went to a party and, and some other gang just came to the party and shot the whole party up. So we went back and shot at them. Or we done had been in a situation where it's just a big war, just a big old group fight, just everybody in the street just fighting, no they shooting it. It's just been plenty. We pretty much fought just about every gang that's in Milwaukee, like every side of town in Milwaukee.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me what are some of the causes of these fights?

**Maya:** My brother had got shot, ah, my sister got shot before. The same sister that shot, she got stabbed in her head, she fainted like, she had to get like 14 staples right in her head. Um, and I got cut on my face, ah, I had somebody hit me with a metal bat before and broke my arm outta place and all that. Like it been a lot of repercussions from it.

**Interviewer:** So when you guys are having these wars, as you call them, who's expected to get involved?

**Maya:** Everybody that's rolling with us.

**Interviewer:** So what if somebody don't want to?

**Maya:** You don't have no choice, or you gonna get right with them.

**Interviewer:** So if they said that they didn't want to, are they put out of the gang, or?

**Maya:** Yeah. And it's gonna be worsen than you came in. 'Cause first we gonna handle what we doing right here, and then we gonna meet back up with you because you didn't help. (18 year-old African American female)

Not only does Maya demonstrate the extent of violence gang members experience, she highlights the perceived lack of choice members have in participating in such violence. This atmosphere creates a no-win situation for the gang-involved youth; they must either endure violence via fights with other gangs, or they must endure the violence from within their own gang for not providing support. It also sustains a cycle of violence wherein violent retaliation is expected in response to violent victimization of gang members or their families.

In addition to simply not wanting to participate in certain violent activities, some participants noted feeling morally conflicted and guilty about their behavior and gang expectations. This was particularly evident when participants described crime and violence against innocent people.

**Interviewer:** What do you think about [the gang] now that you're in it?

**Marcus:** It ain't a good life to live.

**Interviewer:** What is about it you don't like?

**Marcus:** Like, what we do. We just be on the corner, waitin' on somebody to walk past, run up on him, hit him, jump him, take, go in they pocket, stomp 'em out, beat 'em half to death. All type of stuff. Like, what's the point? He didn't do nothin' to us. We just beatin' on an innocent person. We get like 20, 15 years, or life, just for beatin' on a person that didn't even do nothing to us. (19 year-old African American male)

Yet, despite feeling conflicted and as evidenced above, youth often felt as though they didn't have a choice in whether or not to participate in such activities. For some, their involvement in gang activity led to feelings of guilt and regret not over a particular incident or their own

behavior, but rather the general consequences of their gang involvement. For example, Darnell describes the death of his younger brother.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me why you only went to 11th grade?

**Darnell:** Well, I had family issues. My little brother had got killed. So, and it wasn't just based in that. It was just I had money issues, family, household problems.

**Interviewer:** I'm sorry to hear that. Can you tell me how you felt about that?

**Darnell:** Well, it kind of like hurt me real bad and, you know, my mom -you know, because my little brother tried to follow me around and I was into, like the running around with the gangs in the neighborhood and - and selling drugs and stuff. So, my brother was always following around me and he was like – accidentally shot by one of his friends. (19 year-old African American male)

Rather than responding to such a traumatic event by reducing his involvement with the gang, he noted that he now regularly carries a gun to protect his family because “I don't want nobody to do anything to [mom] because of the things I'm doing in the street ... because my mom and me fell out for a minute because she thought it was my fault that my brother passed.” Darnell's perception of safety for himself and his family was threatened by his brother's death and he expressed guilt over his own behavior, and perhaps his inability to protect his brother. This guilt was exacerbated by his mother's belief that he was responsible for the tragedy.

#### IV. Consequences of gang life

Chronic exposure to violence, stress, and adversity had significant effects on youth in this study. Most prominently, youth noted a perceived lack of safety, similar to the safety concerns expressed above by Darnell. The heightened exposure to violence associated with the gang often resulted in constant fear and stress about continued violence.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Can you tell me some of the bad things about being in the gang?

**Vanessa:** You can't really enjoy yourself. You got to always watch your back. You never know who you'll get into it with. It could not even be with you, but you never know who they [fellow gang members] into it with. So it is hard making new friends 'cause you're not sure like - so all that. You got to worry about your family 'cause people find out where you live. Then it's like - so it's a lot of worries. (18 year-old African American female)

Hypervigilance and the need to 'watch your back' was regularly reported. Youth noted that once they joined the gang, they always carried the 'gang member' label, which increased the risk of violence. Furthermore, as Vanessa explained, gang-related conflicts, whether they were involved individually or not, could lead to unexpected violence against them or their families, by virtue of their affiliation. This fear and hypervigilance made it difficult for youth to make friends outside of the gang and contributed to isolation and greater dependence on the gang for safety.

*Aida:* I mean you have to, always gotta constantly deal with protecting yourself and fighting, and, you know, getting harassed by police and stuff like that. And, um, you know, like sometimes like you wanted to be on the porch chilling, you know, you still have to be on because you're part that gang. You know, it's like, once you're in there, you're in there. You really don't have time to relax and say, 'okay, well, I'm goin' to the movies today, I'm not gonna be part of the gang today.' No, you always got that, you know, looking over your back and, you know, always something could happen to you. (19 year-old Latina female)

Participants recognized that their gang affiliation brought with it a reputation and consequences they could not evade. Furthermore, their histories of violence and victimization resulted in a survival through safety in numbers mentality and a reliance on the gang to provide that safety. This dependence and isolation of gang members was further explained by one participant who noted:

*Malik:* It's like you get lost in your own world because you build this mentality of 'fuck everybody else.' But really, you don't sit back and think with what nobody else going through because you build this bond with these people. So if this person got a messed up home and he hungry you know, this is your guy. Now you willing to go out and rob with him or do whatever because y'all built this type of family friendship. You forget about the people that's not in your gang. It's like you form a line and it's us against the world. (19 year-old African American male)

Gang members' experiences led many of them to believe that they had no, or severely limited, options to get away from their gang, neighborhood, the violent and delinquent lifestyles, and the centrality of the gang in their life reinforced their bond with their gang. This reliance on fellow gang members can be especially strong for individuals who have had particularly traumatic pasts (Vigil, 2003). Although participants generally viewed the gang and their fellow gang members positively, they also recognized the negative societal consequences associated with gang membership. When asked about future aspirations, one gang member expressed frustration over feeling stuck in his gang and inner-city neighborhood.

*Joel:* Like, just how the fuck do I end this, you know? Eventually I'm going to be a grown ass man, I'll be legal in two years, you know what I'm saying? What am I going to be doing? Is this it? This is all I see. I just need a way out. That's it. How? How can I get out? The gang ain't going to provide it for me. Somebody else show me a way out? (19 year-old Hispanic male)

Like Joel, many participants were so entrenched in gang life that their future aspirations were bleak. When asked where they saw themselves in five years, several male participants weighed the options of jail or death. Others noted they hadn't thought about their future or had too much going on in their lives to try and think that far ahead.

*Andre:* To tell you the truth, in five years, I see myself either dead, or in jail, or on the run... I got too deep into the gangbanging life. Like, I don't want to change. I got indebted to this life so I don't think I can ever change. Like, I'm addicted to

selling drugs and to carrying a gun, shootouts and stuff that like. (17 year-old African American male)

In contrast to this bleak outlook, some participants hoped to be out of the gang within the next five years and had dreams of stable, conventional lifestyles. Girls, especially those who were mothers, tended to have more positive outlooks and concrete goals.

**Interviewer:** Now where do you see yourself in five years?

**Gabby:** In five years, raising my family and working a good career. Not a typical job that I have to work every day. Well, I don't want to live paycheck to paycheck. I wanna have a job where I have money in the bank and not worry about it. (19 year-old African American/Latina female)

Many participants wanted to finish school and be "livin' a good life" with stable jobs and housing. They often noted they wanted to be able to raise their children in better circumstances than they had experienced and noted the desire to be financially stable. As Xavier, an 18 year-old Latino male noted: "I see business guys in suits and driving nice cars and working downtown or something like that, you know. That kind of thing is cool." One of the few participants with a high school diploma, Xavier sold drugs to help financially support his mom and two younger siblings but had aspirations of taking care of his mom one day through a "legit" job.

Although a few participants had unrealistic short-term financial and professional goals, several others recognized that their criminal histories or lack of education could limit future aspirations. For example, Melanie, a 17 year-old African American female noted, "I wanted to be a nurse, but I doubt it 'cause I'm a felon now until my four-year probation's up." Although gang life was often idealized, the consequences of gang involvement were not lost on these youth. Once in the gang, members generally perceived an inability to leave the gang or distance themselves from gang violence. Youth noted that their reputation as gang members, coupled with felony convictions, repeated arrests, and visible gang tattoos made it difficult for them to distance themselves from the gang, feel safe in the community without the protection of weapons and fellow gang members, and obtain legitimate financial opportunities.

## Discussion

Findings from this study shed light on the experiences of polyvictimization and cumulative nature and consequences of traumatic and adverse events experienced by gang-involved youth. Although many of our findings are in concert with existing literature, the qualitative nature of this study offers additional insight into the experiences of youth and the context in which trauma and violence occur in their lives. Youth in this study experienced repeated exposure to violence and trauma in nearly all areas of their lives, including the gang. Frequent exposure to violence and trauma contributed to the normalization of such events and for some, decisions about gang membership. Yet, despite this normalization, youth were also traumatized by experiences of violence. Further, although gang membership was frequently viewed as offering reprieve from community and familial stressors, gang membership itself brought continued exposure to violence and additional victimization.

As our findings indicate, adolescent gang members' exposure to and normalization of community and family violence may influence their perceptions of violence and problem-solving. The normalization of violence has been well-documented (Mrug et al., 2016; Ng-Mak et al., 2002), and can lead to an increased propensity for later violence, aggression, and deviant behavior (Fowler, Tompsett, Braciszewski, Jacques-Tiura, & Baltes, 2009; Hartinger-Saunders et al., 2011; Terr, 2003), further perpetuating the cycle of violence and ongoing victimization. Yet, although normalized, youth in this study were also negatively affected and traumatized by experiences of violence within their homes and communities. A growing body of literature strongly indicates the negative effects of multiple exposure to violence in homes and communities (Cudmore, Cuevas, & Sabina, 2015; Cyr et al., 2013; Elsaesser & Voisin, 2015; Voisin & Elsaesser, 2013). Violent victimization and exposure to violence are associated with a variety of mental health concerns in youth including anxiety, depression, PTSD, and aggression (Ford et al., 2010; Hartinger-Saunders et al., 2011; Ng-Mak et al., 2002). As a result of high levels of exposure to violence, youth may accept violence as an effective and appropriate method of problem-solving, increasing their own use of violence and aggression (Fowler et al., 2009). As evident among youth in this sample who described the normalcy of neighborhood violence, youth can become desensitized to high rates of violence, and may attempt to cope with fear of harm or violence by joining aggressive or violent individuals in their neighborhoods (Schwab-Stone et al., 1995). As evident in this study, some youth saw the gang as offering reprieve and protection from violence in their homes and communities. Youth surrounded by violence may feel continually at risk for victimization and fear for their own and others' safety. Such fears may result in chronic hyperarousal and insecurity (Fowler et al., 2009), which are associated with increased likelihood of gang membership (Lenzi et al., 2014).

Yet, it was clear that gangs offered little, if any, reprieve from family and community violence. In fact, exposure to violence and risk of victimization actually seemed to increase once participants joined the gang. Our findings are in concert with recent research which demonstrates how gang membership increases involvement in violence and crime, thereby increasing their likelihood of becoming victims of violent crimes (via retaliation from other gangs, violence within their own gangs, or increased opportunities/environments for violence (Gover, Jennings, & Tewksbury, 2009). Several participants in this study noted joining the gang after feeling unsafe or victimized in their own communities, not recognizing they were increasing their risk of victimization and exposure to violence as gang members. Once members of the gang, youth reported feeling stuck in a lifestyle and community consumed by drugs, violence, and crime. The initial draws of the gang (money, excitement, friendship) seemed to fade as youth got older, more involved, and experienced the realities of crime and violence. Several youth discussed aspiring to a conventional lifestyle; college, reliable employment, traditional family structure. Other, primarily male members, saw either jail or death as their only options, if they had considered their futures at all. This bleak outlook is more common among racial and ethnic minority adolescents living in disadvantaged neighborhoods and exposed to high levels of violence (Swisher & Warner, 2013; Warner & Swisher, 2015), although it is unclear why some youth in this study had more positive outlooks than others. Recent research found positive future expectations were associated with higher community collective efficacy and youth community engagement.



(Stoddard & Pierce, 2015) Future research is needed to understand these differences and why and how some adolescent gang members maintain positive future aspirations.

Future research should also continue to consider the co-occurrence of multiple types of victimization and how they interact to produce negative health and psychosocial outcomes. Additionally, research should explore the myriad negative psychosocial factors associated with polyvictimization that may influence delinquency in addition to anger. For example, anxiety and depression, and in some cases, PTSD, may result from stress associated with victimization and should be explored as factors contributing to delinquency and future victimization among gang members. Further, such work should examine the acceptability of violence as compared to other expressions of emotion (e.g. sadness, fear) to understand the associated psychological and social consequences.

Findings from this research highlight several opportunities for intervention. First, interventions for adolescent gang members should bear in mind the traumatic experiences of gang-involved youth, including the effects of perpetration-induced trauma. Trauma-informed care approaches should be fully incorporated to the juvenile justice, education, and primary care systems. It may be appropriate to conceptualize trauma among gang members in a way that acknowledges its chronic nature and accounts for the effects of poverty and ongoing exposure to violence. Early interventions for youth exposed to violence are also needed, including interventions for those who witness but are not victims of violence. These early interventions may be beneficial in preventing gang membership, especially if coupled with opportunities to teach children exposed to chronic community and family violence how to express emotions and cope with negative events in adaptive and positive ways. Although not explored in this study, there is evidence of important factors that may reduce the consequences of polyvictimization. For example, protective factors, including resiliency, future orientation, religious involvement, and positive peer behavior, may help reduce the burden of trauma, particularly for adolescents with more risk factors (Stoddard et al., 2013). As such, interventions should focus on helping youth develop the skills, resources, and opportunities necessary to help limit the consequences of trauma.

Additionally, it is clear that poverty was a significant driver of gang membership and delinquency. Inner-city youth need opportunities in the labor market, which will allow them to support themselves and their families if necessary. Chronic poverty led many participants to express hopelessness about their futures and a desire to obtain legitimate employment. Providing well-paying jobs that allow current and former gang members to work while also continuing their education will provide significantly greater opportunities. Such efforts may reduce the need to sell drugs and participate in other criminal behavior and meet the immediate financial needs youth face. Finally, interventions are needed to reintegrate gang members back into the community. Such efforts have included providing ongoing education and skills training, family and community mediation, and intensive individualized mental health treatment (Williamson, 2006), all of which could be replicated for youth gang members. Many of the youth in this study already had extensive involvement with the criminal justice system, including felonies, and they recognized how this limited their ability to get jobs and go to college. Collaborations with the criminal justice and mental health

systems can ensure that youths' criminal histories do not completely limit opportunities for mainstream employment and formal education.

Despite the study's contributions, there are limitations to note. First, the findings from this sample cannot be generalized to all gang members. The findings reflect the experiences of African American and Hispanic gang members in a single urban city, and future research may want to draw on data from multiple cities to explore further variations in adolescent gangs. Data were analyzed to explore differences across race and ethnicity, although few notable differences emerged. Future research may benefit from examining the role of race and ethnicity in polyvictimization and protective factors for adolescent gang members. This study relied on self-report data from adolescent gang members on a number of sensitive issues and participants may have underreported traumatic events. Some participants were reluctant to discuss family situations, including parental substance use, child abuse and neglect, and other traumatic experiences, explicitly stating they did not want to discuss those experiences. Additionally, given the high levels of exposure to trauma and potential desensitization to community violence, it is important to consider that youth gang members may have different definitions of what they consider to be violence or victimization than commonly accepted. For example, some youth may not have reported violence that occurs among gang members or intimate partner violence as exposure to violence or experiences of trauma given high rates of exposure. Work with youth gang members may require a broad conceptualization of trauma and acknowledge the effects of cumulative adversity and traumatic life events.

Youth gang research overwhelmingly focuses on the individual risk and protective factors associated with gang membership, but as our results demonstrate, greater attention is needed to understand youth gang members' experiences of trauma and victimization. Our findings highlight a need to continue to examine the interconnectedness of multiple forms of trauma, as well as the effects of polyvictimization and cumulative violence exposure. Considering multiple types of victimization and trauma are important for a comprehensive understanding of the effects of these stressors on adolescent gang members and can greatly inform needed clinical and social services.

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