Moving Beyond Race:

Revisiting the Roles of Childhood Poverty and Other Environmental Risks as Predictors of Adolescent Gang Membership

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Abstract

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Historically, adolescent gang membership has had pervasive effects on society, with even greater effects falling on specific communities of color. There has been a significant amount of research aimed at attempting to understand why youth join gangs; however, there seems to be a disconnect between the literature on predictive factors of gang membership and the racial-ethnic stereotypes that are often perpetuated through popular media outlets. Popular media has often portrayed gang members as young, socially unattached African American males residing in urbanized areas. Although the role of race-ethnicity in gang membership appears salient throughout virtually all gang-related studies, findings regarding the notion of a racialized paradigm in relation to risk factors for adolescent gang involvement are severely limited. Therefore, this study examines the link between race and gang membership by revisiting the roles of childhood poverty and other environmental risks. Data used in this sample were drawn from the Seattle Social Development Project (SSDP), a longitudinal study of positive and negative aspects of childhood and adolescent development. The racial effect seen in predicting

gang membership was ultimately accounted for by childhood poverty and various neighborhood and familial factors. These findings suggest that popular media's depictions of who joins a gang and why are serving to perpetuate stereotypes without providing appropriate context into the complexity of our current gang problem; it is not one's racial-ethnic identity that creates and sustains gangs and related violence, but larger systemic issues that also need to be taken into consideration. Policy implications are drawn, which discuss the role of contemporary America's racialized society and its effects on current rates of gang membership and subsequent violence.

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Introduction

Historically, adolescent gang involvement has been highly problematic with pervasive effects on society as a whole. With the turn of the late-twentieth century, adolescent gangs began receiving a considerable amount of academic and media attention; as a result of this, violence and crime more often became attributed to gang involvement (Esbensen et al., 2008). The 2004 National Youth Gang Survey, a survey of police departments across the country, reported that youth gangs were active in about 80 percent of cities with a population of 50,000 or more (Walker and Katz, 2008). Alongside this heightened awareness of gang prevalence, a perception surfaced – American gangs were typically comprised of young, African American males residing in socially dysfunctional urban areas (Esbensen and Tusinski, 2007). Consequently, American policies aimed at gangs and gang-related violence have disproportionately targeted specific racial groups as the main source of this epidemic.

Although there has been a heightened awareness of gangs in academia and popular media, the prevalence of gangs and adolescent gang membership has remained relatively unknown (Esbensen et al., 2008). While a precise census of gangs and gang membership is virtually impossible, the 2009 National Youth Gang Center survey data indicated that, based on law enforcement reports, there were an estimated 28,100 gangs and 731,000 gang members throughout 3,500 jurisdictions in the United States. It has been stated that this growth was closely connected with rising rates of violent crime among adolescents, especially minority males living in more urbanized areas (Barlow ed., 1995). These increases may be due partly to changes in the shape of crime itself, but arguably more so to an increasingly conservative, hard-line public policy. Consequently, racial-ethnic minorities have continued to be

disproportionately affected as compared to their white counter-parts, creating the idea of gang-crime as a racialized phenomenon.

In his work on color-blind racism and racial inequality in contemporary America, Bonilla-Silva (2010) provides context for what it means to live in a society that is racially structured. He argues that U.S. society is a racialized social system in which political, social, economic, and ideological aspects of society are partially structured along racial lines. This organization is hierarchical, with one racial group (i.e., whites) being dominant and the clear beneficiary of societal rewards, while the remaining groups are subordinate and concurrently disadvantaged. This type of social system is maintained through the racial distinctions made in everyday interactions as well as institutional practices. Those in the dominant position act to maintain their benefits by preserving rather than challenging the status quo – in this case, using the media and police state to perpetuate the gang problem as a "minority" problem, allowing the dominant group to reap the benefits that come from criminalizing certain behaviors and groups of people.

Systematic Research

The examination of the individual, social, and economic factors involved in the relationship between race-ethnicity and gang membership is sparse. Results from the National Youth Gang Study (Egley, Howell and Major, 2006) and from a multisite gang survey (Esbensen and Winfree, 1998) have consistently shown that gang members are disproportionately members of racial and ethnic minorities. However, race itself is not a cause, but merely a proxy for a set of experiences. Therefore, identifying those childhood experiences that account for the racial disproportionality in gang membership rates may provide a more in-depth understanding of how this social phenomenon may be negatively impacting certain groups within society. By

exploring these relationships more deeply and systematically, the proposed study offers the potential to inform the development of gang-related preventative interventions along with policy reform implications to benefit our youth, their communities, and greater society. Although the current research examines the trends of gang membership from a more criminalized framework, it is also important to note that gangs often serve positive functions in the lives of youth and should be studied as an alternative perspective of the current work.

Empirical Research on the Predictive Factors of Gang Membership

It is imperative to learn why youth join gangs to better understand how to prevent them from doing so. One means to accomplish this is to examine and analyze the risk factors experienced in childhood that may likely predict later adolescent gang involvement. Generally, risk factors are defined as individual or environmental hazards that increase an individual's vulnerability to negative developmental outcomes (Shader, 2001). Initially, these factors were used in studies to predict adolescent drug use and general delinquency (Hawkins et al., 1992). However, a majority of the risk factors that had been found to cause delinquency were also found to be predictive of gang involvement in adolescence. This evidence has been well documented throughout the literature on predictive factors of gang membership (Esbensen et al., 2009; Hawkins et al., 1992; Hill et al., 1999; Kosterman et al., 1996.)

To date, there have been a number of longitudinal studies of youth that have examined the risk factors predictive of gang involvement, including studies conducted in Rochester, New York (Thornberry et al., 2003) and Seattle, Washington (Hill et al., 1999). Each study included a sub-sample of gang-involved youth, from whom data were collected at various points in time. The longitudinal design allowed researchers to determine causal relationships between risk factors and gang membership (Howell and Egley, 2005). From these studies, and throughout the

theoretical literature on predictive factors of gang membership, there has been general agreement that risk factors for gang involvement can be grouped into five developmental domains: individual characteristics, family, school, peers, and community (neighborhood) conditions – see Howell and Egley (2005) for a brief summary of these studies. Logically, risk factors have a cumulative effect; that is, the more risk factors a youth is exposed to, the more likely he or she is to join a gang (Esbensen et al., 2009; Howell and Egley, 2005; Thornberry et al., 2003). A brief literature review of these is provided.

Peer Factors

One consistent finding from the gang research realm is the overwhelming influence of peers on adolescent behavior (Esbensen et al., 2002). In spite of the well-documented association between problem peers and juvenile delinquency, however, few studies have actually examined the role of peer behavior as it relates to youth gang membership (Walker-Barnes and Mason, 2001). Nevertheless, these limited studies have found significant results indicating that the influence of peers on adolescent behavior may have parallel outcomes for gang involvement. Association with delinquent peers has been found to be among the strongest peer-related risk factors of sustained gang involvement (Curry and Spergel, 1992; Fagan, 1996; Hill et al., 1999; Kosterman et al., 1996; Maxson et al., 1998). Combined with this finding, studies have indicated that a low level of interaction with pro-social peers is also significant in predicting later gang affiliation (Klein and Maxson, 2006).

A study conducted by Curry and Spergel (1992) found that having gang-involved peers was significantly related to gang membership among Black males. Association with friends who use and sell drugs was shown to be significant within this study and others (Battin et al., 1998; Curry and Spergel, 1992). Bjerregaard and Smith (1993) found that peer delinquency was a

strong predictor of both male and female gang involvement. Additionally, it has been reported that gang members are more likely than their non-gang peers to have friends who tend to resolve conflict through threatening or yelling (Maxson et al., 1998). Regardless of how peer affiliation is measured, the results appear similar throughout the literature: all of the findings seem to indicate that there is consensus among researchers that association with anti-social peers has a strong relation to later adolescent gang involvement.

Family Factors

There has been a great deal of speculation that gang membership is the result of deficient family relationships (Walker-Barnes and Mason, 2001). While the amount of literature from the family domain is limited, empirical evidence does exist and provides some support for the notion that family environment exerts a significant influence on youth gang membership. In one study, Katz and Schnebly (2011) found that familial disadvantage – families with high levels of economic deprivation – was significantly linked to gang membership rates. Some studies have noted the role of poor family management practices in predicting adolescent gang affiliation. These include low familial involvement, inappropriate parental discipline (i.e., more severe abuse), and low parental control and monitoring (Hawkins et al., 2000; Hill et al., 1999; Howell, 2003; Yoder et al., 2003; Klein and Maxson, 2006; Maxson et al., 1998; Yoder et al., 2003). In regards to family structure, gang members were found to be more likely to live with a single parent than non-gang members (Hill et al., 1999; Vigil, 1988). A history of antisocial familial behaviors, including parental use of alcohol and drugs as well as sibling involvement in delinquency and antisocial behaviors, have also been linked to gang involvement (Hill et al., 1999; Kosterman et al., 1996; Maxson et al., 1998). Youth whose parents had at least some college education were less likely to report gang affiliation whereas youth whose parents had

only a high school diploma had the highest rates of gang membership as compared to their non-gang peers (Esbensen et al., 2008).

A study conducted by Walker-Barnes and Mason (2001) examined racial differences in parenting of gang-involved youth. Findings from this study indicated that for youth from specific racial backgrounds, the role of parenting on changes in problematic behaviors is robust; for Black youth, parenting appeared to play a particularly prominent and clear role. This finding was consistent with the literature in finding that poor family management practices overall were significantly and directly influential on adolescent gang behavior (Hill et al., 1999). This is especially true when considered simultaneously with exposure to deviant peers (Walker-Barnes and Mason, 2001). All of this suggests that there may be qualitative differences in the living situations between gang and non-gang youth (Esbensen, 2002; Hill et al., 1999).

School Factors

Similar to family risk factors, school-related factors have remained less commonly examined by researchers; nevertheless, there is evidence supporting the influence of some school variables on gang membership (Esbensen et al., 2009). Research indicates that youth who have lower levels of commitment to school are more likely to join a gang in adolescence compared to other youth who experience higher levels of commitment to school (Esbensen et al., 2002; Hill et al., 1999; Maxson et al., 1998). Additionally, academic difficulties, failure and low educational aspirations have been shown to be strong predictors of gang involvement (Bjerregaard and Smith, 1993; Curry and Spergel, 1992; Hill et al., 1999; Kosterman et al., 1996). Research has also documented the relationship of individuals who experience low bonding to school and dropping out of school before age 15 to gang affiliation (Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Hill et al., 1993; Maxson et al., 1998). Additionally, gang members are more likely to report negative

teacher perceptions of them [as delinquents, often upset, and having personal problems] than their non-gang peers (Maxson et al., 1998).

Community and Neighborhood Factors

Community and neighborhood level risk factors have been shown to predict gang membership. Within the community or neighborhood domain, numerous studies have noted that poverty, unemployment, and social disorganization contribute to the presence of gangs (Curry and Spergel, 1992; Esbensen et al., 2009; Vigil, 1988). Individuals who reside in socially disorganized, low-income communities with high levels of residential mobility were found to be more likely to become gang members (Fagan, 1996; Katz and Schnebly, 2011; Thornberry et al., 2003; Vigil, 1988). Curry and Spergel (1992) note that this is particularly the case in neighborhoods where gangs already exist. This is also true in areas with high incidences of violence and crime, and more neighborhood youth in trouble (Curry and Spergel, 1992; Fagan, 1996; Hill et al., 1999; Howell, 2003; Kosterman et al., 1996; Maxson et al., 1998; Vigil, 1988). It has been found that the availability of drugs within a neighborhood is the strongest risk factor for gang membership at the community level (Curry and Spergel, 1992; Hill et al., 1999; Howell, 2003; Kosterman et al., 1996). In addition, the availability of firearms in a neighborhood was also found to predict gang involvement (Maxson et al., 1998). These findings indicate that economic and social composition of the neighborhood and specific communities in which youth live play a critical role in the likelihood of later gang involvement.

Individual Factors

The study of individual factors predictive of gang membership remains a significant focus throughout the literature. However, it is my opinion that the preoccupation with individual-level factors is akin to racial stereotyping given that the relationship being examined

here attempts to account for differences in the likelihood of gang membership between members of various racial groups. Although these will not be examined in the current study, given the importance of this domain throughout the literature, a brief review is provided for context.

Throughout the literature, individual characteristics have been substantially supported and linked to adolescent gang involvement. Prior delinquency is a strong predictor of gang involvement in that youth already involved in deviant behavior are more likely to join gangs than those who are not (Bjerregaard and Smith, 1993; Curry and Spergel, 1992; Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Kosterman et al., 1996). Additionally, youth holding fewer conventional beliefs – pro-gang and generally deviant attitudes – are more likely to be gang involved than their pro-social peers (Esbensen et al., 1993; Hill et al., 1999; Kosterman et al., 1996; Winfree et al., 1994). Alcohol and drug use has also been shown to predict gang membership with gang members being three times as likely to be involved in selling drugs (Bjerregaard and Lizotte, 1995). Additionally, it is suggested that higher rates of violence exist among gang members as compared to non-gang members (Hill et al., 1999) and juveniles who dropped out of gangs were more likely to own guns when they were gang members (Bjerregaard and Lizotte, 1995).

Empirical Research on the Link Between Race and Gang Membership

Gang research in the early 1990's relied heavily on law enforcement records to describe gang members and gang-related offenses (Esbensen and Winfree, 1998). Unfortunately, this body of research aided in setting the stage for the dominant culture in picturing gang members as disproportionately male and members of racial-ethnic minority groups. Essentially, this image was often reinforced by the popular press who continued to perpetuate gang-related stereotypes. A second approach to studying gang behavior was to employ survey methods. As noted previously, several longitudinal studies collected useful and important information on gang

members, and these study designs allowed researchers to examine predictive factors associated with later gang involvement in adolescence. In their examination of race on gang affiliation, Freng and Esbensen (2007) note that future research into this phenomenon should include examining the link between race-ethnicity and gang membership longitudinally:

> "Utilizing longitudinal data would permit the consideration of temporal ordering and allow for the complete exploration of whether gang membership is actually a more marginalizing experience for certain groups. In settling these issues, a better understanding of the role of race/ethnicity in gang affiliation will be discernable" (page, 621).

As noted previously, the questions of who joins and why have been central concerns for many studies regarding gangs (Adler and Adler, 2006). Although the majority of gang research has examined potential risk factors for gang involvement in general, there appears to be a gap and/or significant limitation in research concerning the effects of race-ethnicity in relation to gang membership. However, perspectives examining this relationship remain scarce and rarely have been examined outside the realm of ethnographies; it has been too often the case that the issues surrounding gang membership and subsequent problem behavior have been treated as symptomatic of specific racial-ethnic groups and their communities (Freng and Esbensen, 2007).

In one study, although African American youth were at higher risk than other racial groups to join gangs, they represented a minority of the sample who became members (Hill et al., 1999). Another study conducted by Curry and Spergel (1992) found that having gang-involved peers was significantly related to gang membership among Black males. Walker-Barnes and Mason (2001) note that for youth from specific ethnic backgrounds, the role of parenting on changes in these behaviors is robust; for Black youth, parenting appeared to play a particularly prominent and clear role. Findings such as these could be potentially harmful consequences of past and current gang-related research, as they may be perpetuating and reinforcing the

stereotypical myth that the American gang problem is a race-related problem by playing into the dominant views of who joins gangs and why. However, if we know that African Americans are disproportionately represented within virtually every negative social domain in society – criminal justice, education, employment, etc. – (Reskin, 2012) including gang involvement, then we should not be solely interpreting the demographics of gang data as problematic to society's well being, but questioning why and how this continues to be the status quo.

The current study uses longitudinal data to determine whether the environmental experiences discussed above account for racial-ethnic disproportionality in gang membership. The potential to contribute to the limited pool of knowledge regarding such a relationship is crucial in attempting to debunk the notions that the American youth gang problem is a "minority" problem; providing more information concerning this relationship can be important when developing preventative intervention methods that are racially-ethnically appropriate. Becoming a gang member is not a phenomenon that can be attributed to an individual's racial identity; rather, it is a phenomenon that must be examined within the greater, complex realm of poverty and other environmental risks using sound research methods.

Theoretical Foundation for the Current Study

There has been considerable interest concerning the proliferation of gangs and how they came to be. Regardless of how they are defined or measured, gangs have continually been characterized as resulting from the breakdown of various social systems, and the rapid deterioration of living conditions in many post-industrialized urban areas (Fox et al., 2010). The implication that this deterioration has for youth involvement in gang-related activity can be interpreted through the lens of social disorganization theory. Specifically, social disorganization theory, as pioneered by Shaw and McKay (1942), assumes that delinquency emerges in

neighborhoods where community relations and other social institutions (family, for example) have broken down and can no longer maintain effective social controls (Harvard Law Review Association, 1943; Wtulich, 1970). It also suggests that disorganized communities are generally characterized by poverty, ethnic heterogeneity, and residential mobility, all of which contribute to weakened social stability within community settings (Sampson, 1986; Sampson and Groves, 1989). Elaborating on this basic definition, it can be assumed that in disadvantaged neighborhoods, less parental supervision results in greater opportunity for exposure to deviant peers either in or outside the school systems, which in turn increases the likelihood of adolescents' association with gangs. Some researchers have postulated that the presence of gangs can be reflective of the level of disorganization within specific areas (Lane and Meeker, 2004; Sampson and Groves, 1989). Projecting this traditional criminological theory onto gang involvement provides fundamental insight into why youth join gangs, and why this continues to disproportionately affect certain geographic and ethnic communities, specifically communities of color.

In their groundbreaking research on race, place, and crime, Peterson and Krivo (2010) attempt to explain why and how race and ethnicity are fundamental in the shaping of urbanized experiences, particularly the exposure to crime. To do so, they developed and utilized a framework which links race-ethnicity and social disorganization. By embedding the fundamentals of social disorganization theory in a racialized perspective, the authors illuminate the central importance of inequality in the social and economic conditions of racial and ethnic groups and their communities within American society. The wider racial order that privileges whites at the expense of other groups, and in particular African Americans, is a significant consequence of this inequality. Specifically, the authors conclude that the disproportionate

distribution of crime rates across and between neighborhoods of color is one significant result of the current system of inequality.

Building on this theoretical conceptualization, the current research will examine similar phenomenon with respect to race, place, and gang membership. In similar respects to those found regarding crime rates in Peterson and Krivo's (2010) work, I am hypothesizing that racial disparities seen in adolescent gang involvement can similarly be attributed to differential distributions of disadvantage in childhood poverty and environmental risks experienced by different racial-ethnic groups. That is, it is not race or ethnicity that inherently causes gang membership, but the various social and economic factors that contribute to the phenomenon of stratification and continued social disorganization seen within specific communities. The race-based hierarchy embedded within American society plays a critical role in generating racial-ethnic inequality in neighborhood crime patterns (Peterson and Krivo, 2010), which may also be the case for adolescent gang membership and subsequent criminal behaviors. This framework is the theoretical basis for the current research question, the creation and inclusion of predictive measures, and analysis of subsequent models.

Research Question

In their study of the multiethnic sample from schools serving higher risk neighborhoods, Hill, et al. (1999) identified risk factors at ages 10 through 12 that were predictive of joining a gang between the ages of 13 and 18; factors from five domains of a child's experience (the neighborhood, family, school, peer, and individual) significantly predicted gang membership in adolescence. Although African American youth were found to be more likely than other racial groups to join gangs, they constituted a minority of the sample overall who became gang members. Using data from the same longitudinal panel, the current study builds on this previous

research by examining the role of race on gang membership after controlling for a variety of risk factors.

As noted previously, there is limited literature that attempts to empirically explain the relationship between race and gang membership. It is common knowledge that racial-ethnic differences do not inherently cause individuals to join gangs, yet this factor has continued to persist as a dominant paradigm of gang studies, and even more so in the media which has continued to characterize the stereotypical gang member as a young, poor, African American male. This research will attempt to challenge this notion by revisiting the roles of poverty and other environmental risks associated with later adolescent gang involvement as shown by Hill et al. (1999) and others. Thus, the following research will examine this phenomenon with the question: ***To what extent is racial disproportionality in gang membership accounted for by differences among racial groups in the distribution of early childhood poverty and other environmental risks?***

Sample

Data for the present study are drawn from the Seattle Social Development Project (SSDP), which is an ethnically diverse and gender balanced sample (n=808) following respondents prospectively from age 10, who were from 18 Seattle elementary schools that served students from high-crime neighborhoods. The schools represented approximately 25 percent of the total number of elementary schools in Seattle at the time. The schools were selected based on the neighborhoods with the highest crime rates as indicated by statistics obtained from the Seattle Police Department. The 808 youths and their families who consented to participate in the longitudinal study represented 77 percent of the population of fifth graders in these schools serving high-crime neighborhoods (Hill et al., 1999).

Of the 808 students, 396 (49 percent) were female, 372 (46 percent) were European American, 195 (24 percent) were African American, 170 (21 percent) were Asian American, 45 (2 percent) were Native American, and the remaining 26 students were of other ethnic backgrounds (including Hispanic). A majority of the participants were from low-income households. More than half of the student sample (52 percent) had participated in the National School Lunch/School Breakfast Program at some point in the fifth, sixth, or seventh grade. Alongside this, a significant majority of participants were from low-income households – forty-six percent of parents reported a maximum family income of less than $20,000 per year.

The SSDP panel was interviewed annually from fifth (1985) through the tenth grades, then again in 12th grade, and every three years until present. Retention rates for the sample have remained above 91% since 1989, when the panel members were 14 years old. In addition to interviews of panel members, SSDP also interviewed parents and teachers, and collected information regarding respondents from school, court, and police records. Study findings based on this sample may be generalized to populations of similar demographic compositions.

Research Design

Longitudinal quantitative research designs permit measurements of risk factors for gang membership at earlier points in time, which allows for better determination of causal relationships (Howell and Egley, 2005). Therefore, the present study uses longitudinal data to predict gang membership in adolescence from factors measured in childhood. A sequential logistic regression analysis strategy is employed where race is initially used to predict gang membership. Subsequent steps examine whether demographic and environmental factors (divided into four social domains including neighborhood, family, school, and peer risk measures) account for the initial observed effect.

Measures

Outcome Variable

Gang membership will be the outcome variable for this study. This was measured prospectively from age 13 to 18 by the question, "Do you belong to a gang?" followed by "What is the name of the gang?" The latter question was used to distinguished gangs from informal peer groups. Gang specific questions were not asked of the youth prior to age 13. In addition to this initial measure, the survey given in adulthood included a retrospective measure of gang membership ("Have you ever belonged to a gang?"). Initially, youth who reported that they were a member of a gang and could provide the name (i.e., Bloods, Crips, Black Gangster Disciples, etc.) were coded as belonging to a gang. After obtaining survey results from adulthood, respondents were coded as having joined a gang if they ever reported having done so, either prospectively or retrospectively. Both the prospective and retrospective measures were used to establish the gang membership variable used in the current study. It is important to note that the use of a self-reporting tactic to determine gang membership has been advocated for, and used widely in previous gang studies as well as various anti-gang program evaluations (Bjerregaard and Smith, 1993; Esbensen et al., 1993; Esbensen et al., 2001; Esbensen et al., 2011; Fox, et al., 2010; Freng and Esbensen, 2007; Hill, et al., 1999; Klein, 1995; Sampson and Laub, 1992; Savitz et al., 1980; Sullivan, 2006; Tapia, 2011; Thornberry et al., 2003).

Control Variables

Gender (male = 1) and race (Caucasian, African American, Asian American, and Native American) were based on self-report. Socio-economic status was created as a composite using three variables – free and reduced lunch eligibility, parents' occupation, and per capita household income.

A majority of the risk factors that were included have previously been shown to be associated with gang membership (Hill et al., 1999). Social domains including peer, family, neighborhood, and school categorized the risk factors used in this analysis. Standardizing the inclusive variables and averaging them across the appropriate grade levels created the measures included within each domain. All of the measures were broadly conceptualized as either being a positive (protective) factor or negative (risk) factor. This allowed for the theoretical distinction between those factors that would be considered as protective or risk-related in their relation to the likelihood of a youth joining a gang in later adolescence. See Figure 1 below for a variable list for each domain.

Environmental Controls	
Peer Environment	**Family Environment**
Positive Peer	Parent Alcohol Use
Anti-social Peer	Parental Drinking Attitudes
	Child Involvement in Parent Alcohol Use
Neighborhood Environment	Sibling Anti-social Behavior
Neighborhood Bonding	Family Management
Neighborhood Prosocial Opportunities	Family Cohesion
Neighborhood Safety	Positive Family Involvement
Negative Neighborhood Environment	Family Bonding
Neighborhood Drug Environment	Family Conflict
Neighborhood Disorganization	Parental Criminality
	Family Type-Structure
School Environment	Two Parent Household (Bio or Adoptive)
School Bonding	Two Parent Household (One Stepparent)
School Opportunities	One Parent Household (Alone)
School Involvement	One Parent Household (with Other Adults)
School Rewards	No Parents

Figure 1. Item list of measures categorized by environmental domain

The majority of childhood risk factors for this analysis were measured at ages 10 and 11 (5^{th} and 6^{th} grades) so as to establish temporal order in predicting later adolescent gang involvement. One variable, family type and transition, was only available in 5^{th} grade and therefore did not include 6^{th} grade data. In addition, a small number of variables were measured in the 7^{th} and 8^{th} grades when the youth were 12 and 13 years old because the questions were not

asked in previous survey years. These later variables were included because they captured various environmental factors that were hypothesized to potentially influence later adolescent gang affiliation. These variables include neighborhood disorganization (8th grade), family conflict (8th grade), and parental criminality (7th grade). Examples of specific items that went into each measure are provided below – a full item list can be seen in Appendix A of this paper.

Peer Factors

The peer domain was measured using multiple variables that were divided into positive and anti-social risks. Examples of items included in the positive peer measure include "Do your friends try to do well in school?" and "Are your friends involved in after-school activities?" Examples of items included in the anti-social peer measure include "In the past year, have any of your friends used alcohol?" and "Have your friends ever done anything that could have gotten them in trouble with the police?"

Family Factors

The family domain was examined by including various positive and negative measures from different family dynamics. These measures included the alcohol specific family environment, anti-social sibling behaviors, family conflict, parental involvement in the criminal behaviors, positive family involvement, management, bonding to family members, and family type and transition measures. Examples of items included in the measurement of a family domain are "Do you have siblings who have been arrested?," "Does your family get along?," "How often do you participate in meal-time with your family?," and "When you are away from home, do your parents know where you are and who you are with?" Including the parental criminality measure furthers on Howell and Egley's (2005) suggestion that parental criminality

may prove to be an important variable, but has yet to be examined in longitudinal risk factor gang studies.

School Factors

School-related factors were examined predominantly as protective (positive) factors. The measures included in the school environment include bonding to school, opportunities, involvement, and rewards received in the school environment. Examples of items included in the measurement of the school domain include "Most mornings, do you look forward to going to school?," "Do you feel safe at school?," and "Does your teacher give you help learning when you need it?"

Neighborhood Factors

Similar to the other domains, the neighborhood environment was examined through various measures. This domain was also theoretically organized into positive and negative measures and included neighborhood bonding, prosocial opportunities, safety, drug specific environment, and neighborhood disorganization. Examples of positive items included in the measurement of the neighborhood environment are "Do you like your neighborhood?" and "Do you feel safe in your neighborhood?" Examples of more negative items include "Do a lot of people in your neighborhood get into trouble?" and "If you had money and wanted to get some, could you get pot and/or other drugs?"

Analytic Method

The data presented in this study were analyzed using M-Plus version 6.1 in order to address missing data using a maximum likelihood estimation to come up with the best estimates of the relationships between variables using all available data without deleting cases. Utilizing this method preserves the natural variability in the data so that the presented estimates are not

biased (Graham, 2009). For this analysis, a 6-step sequential logistic regression was run, as specified by Tabachnick and Fidell (2007). In the first step the focal relationship between race and gang membership was examined. Second, the demographic measures of gender and socio-economic status were added to the model. In this step, the extent to which race remained a significant predictor of gang membership after controlling for potential mediators was examined. The following four steps consisted of adding measures within four developmental domains: neighborhood, family, school, and peer domains. The majority of the variables included in these measures were measured during 5th and 6th grades, with a few exceptions where 7th and 8th grade measures were included in order to best capture environmental effects. With these steps comes the determination at which point the association between race and gang membership will drop to non-significance, if this is the case at all.

The study hypothesis was that the statistically significant relationship between race and gang membership could be accounted for by controlling for gender, poverty, and the family, school, peer and neighborhood environmental risk measures.

Results

Within the SSDP sample, 21.4 percent (n = 173) reported ever joining a gang. Similar studies with high-risk population samples have found lower and higher lifetime prevalences of gang membership from 14 percent in Denver (Huizinga and Schumann, 2001), to 30.9 percent in Rochester (Thornberry et al., 2003). The present analysis includes the 173 participants reporting lifetime occurrence of gang membership at some point through age 27. The average age of joining a gang in the sample was 14.9 years, and there were no individuals who reported joining a gang after age 19.

On a national level, gang members are disproportionately racial and ethnic minorities. Based on 2009 data from the National Youth Gang Center, it was reported that in larger cities where gang concentrations are generally higher, the majority of gang members are Hispanic or Latino (46.7 percent), followed by African American (38.4 percent), Caucasian (8.4 percent) and all other ethnicities comprising 6.6 percent of gang members. The racial-ethnic diversity of gang membership in Seattle is similar to the national numbers in that racial minorities disproportionately comprise those who join gangs, although the diversity of the SSDP sample varies between racial groups, as reflected in Table 1: almost 42 percent of those who joined a gang in this sample were African American, about 20 percent were Asian American, about 30 percent were Caucasian, and approximately 9 percent were Native American.

Table 1. Means and Percentages of Demographic Variables

Demographics	Non-Gang (n=635)	Gang (n=173)	Chi-square	p-value
Male* **	44.3%	75.7%	52.6	.000
Race* **			43.5	.000
African American	21.3%	41.6%		
Asian American	22.5%	19.7%		
Caucasian American	52.0%	29.5%		
Native American	4.3%	9.2%		
Race Percentage Totals	*100%*	*100%*		
		Means	t (df)	
Average Poverty (standardized)* **	-.06	.32	-5.43 (806)	.000

*p <.05.
**p <.01.
***p <.001.

While there has been an increase in the number of female gang members in recent decades, males continue to comprise the majority of gang members nationwide (National Youth Gang Center, 2009; Sharpe et al., 2003). The sample used for this analysis follows a similar

pattern, with roughly 76 percent of the gang members being male. Also included Table 1 is the average poverty measure for gang versus non-gang members. On average, those joined a gang were significantly more likely to come from a childhood of impoverishment than their non-gang peers. This included a high likelihood of eligibility for the free or reduced lunch program, lower parents' occupation status, and lower per capita household income.

Bivariate Analysis

Table 2 presents the bivariate associations in averages (t-tests) and percentages (crosstabs) between gang membership and each of the environmental measures. Regarding the peer environment, on average, those who did not join a gang were significantly more likely to have a more positive peer environment than those who did join a gang. As would be expected, the opposite is true for an anti-social peer environment, which presented as a significant relationship. For the neighborhood environment, neighborhood safety was predictive of gang involvement – on average, those who did not join a gang reported feeling higher levels of safety within their neighborhood. However, those who lived in neighborhoods with higher disorganization, including drug environment and higher amounts of people getting into trouble, were more likely to join a gang. Parental attitudes surrounding alcohol and drinking were significant in predicting later gang involvement. Also, youth whose families experienced conflict were significantly more likely to join gangs in adolescence than those youth whose family did not experience regular conflict. In regards to family structure, youth were significantly less likely to join a gang if they lived in a two-parent (biological or adoptive) household (52.9 percent for non-gang versus 33.9 percent for gang) and more likely to join a gang if they lived in a one-parent household (22.3 percent non-gang versus 35.6 percent gang).

Also, youth who had siblings who exhibited anti-social behaviors were significantly more likely to join a gang than their peers who did not have anti-social siblings.

Table 2. Means and Percentages of Environmental Controls for Gang vs. Non-gang

	Non-Gang (n=635)	Gang (n=173)		
	Mean (SD)		**t (df)**	**p-value**
Positive Peer***	.03 (.51)	-.16 (.71)	3.81 (780)	.000
Anti-social Peer***	-.03 (.52)	.20 (.65)	-4.78 (756)	.000
Neighborhood Bonding	.04 (.82)	-.12 (.96)	1.94 (793)	.053
Neighborhood Prosocial Opportunities	.03 (.96)	-.12 (1.11)	1.74 (724)	.082
Neighborhood Safety***	.05 (.84)	-.21 (1.10)	3.31 (792)	.001
Negative Neighborhood Environment***	-.09 (.84)	.36 (.95)	-5.93 (780)	.000
Neighborhood Drug Environment***	-.06 (.62)	.27 (.71)	-5.88 (790)	.000
Neighborhood Disorganization[b]***	-.12 (.68)	.44 (.97)	-8.45 (775)	.000
School Bonding	.02 (.61)	-.07 (.64)	1.49 (257.89)	.139
School Opportunities	.01 (.46)	-.01 (.47)	.33 (228.17)	.739
School Involvement	.59 (.59)	.65 (.65)	1.48 (252.08)	.139
School Rewards	.01 (.50)	-.08 (.55)	1.92 (252.40)	.056
Parent Alcohol Use	.00 (.87)	-.07 (.83)	.97 (254.29)	.332
Parental Drinking Attitudes**	.03 (.65)	-.13 (.65)	2.80 (715)	.005
Child Involvement in Parent Alcohol Use	.00 (.91)	-.01 (.89)	1.23 (246.96)	.219
Sibling Anti-social Behavior*	-.02 (.66)	.15 (.73)	-2.61 (709)	.009
Family Management	.01 (.54)	-.07 (.64)	1.63 (799)	.104
Family Cohesion	.01 (.73)	-.01 (.73)	.25 (268.42)	.806
Positive Family Involvement	.00 (.43)	-.00 (.48)	.13 (248.08)	.898
Family Bonding	-.00 (.57)	-.01 (.65)	.10 (239.07)	.918
Family Conflict[b] **	-.04 (.67)	.14 (.75)	-2.96 (775)	.003
	Percentages		**Chi-square (df)**	
Parental Criminality[a]	14.3%	14.6%	.09 (1)	.930
Two Parent Household (Bio or Adoptive)***	52.9%	33.9%	13.49 (1)	.000
Two Parent Household (One Stepparent)	13.3%	9.3%	1.34 (1)	.248
One Parent Household (Alone)**	22.3%	35.6%	8.74 (1)	.003
One Parent Household (with Other Adults)	6.6%	11.9%	3.59 (1)	.058
No Parents	4.9%	9.3%	3.41 (1)	.065

a Measure includes 7th grade only
b Measure includes 8th grade only
*p <.05.
**p <.01.
***p <.001.

One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were conducted to examine the relationship between race and each of the environmental measures (Table 3). There were significantly different levels of both the anti-social and positive peer measures between different racial groups. The same is also true for all of the neighborhood and school-related measures.

Table 3. Means and Percentages of Environmental Controls by Race

	Race				p-value[a]
	Caucasian	African American	Native American	Asian American	
	Mean (SD)				
Anti-social Peer***	.03 (.56)	.12 (.61)	.10 (.67)	-.15 (.40)	.000
Positive Peer*	.01 (.53)	-.08 (.61)	-.18 (.94)	.08 (.43)	.013
Neighborhood Bonding*	.07 (.84)	.01 (.88)	.05 (.78)	-.16 (.85)	.032
Neighborhood Prosocial Opportunities*	.05 (.96)	.06 (1.04)	.06 (.16)	-.22 (1.02)	.030
Neighborhood Safety*	.08 (.87)	-.14 (.98)	.08 (.73)	-.08 (.84)	.019
Negative Neighborhood Environment*	-.06 (.88)	.16 (.94)	.04 (.86)	-.01 (.81)	.048
Neighborhood Drug Environment***	.08 (.68)	.11 (.67)	.16 (.73)	-.29 (.42)	.000
Neighborhood Disorganization***	-.16 (.64)	.35 (.97)	.24 (.82)	-.10 (.67)	.000
School Bonding***	-.09 (.59)	.03 (.64)	.08 (.61)	.14 (.61)	.000
School Opportunities***	-.09 (.45)	.09 (.49)	.10 (.45)	.09 (.42)	.000
School Involvement***	.03 (.58)	.03 (.65)	-.05 (.52)	-.21 (.57)	.000
School Rewards*	-.04 (.49)	-.05 (.55)	.10 (.46)	.08 (.53)	.022
Parent Alcohol Use***	.26 (.86)	-.15 (.88)	.04 (.78)	-.56 (.59)	.000
Parental Drinking Attitudes***	.11 (.55)	-.12 (.66)	-.28 (.43)	-.07 (.87)	.000
Child Involvement in Parent Alcohol Use***	.24 (.94)	-.26 (.78)	.04 (.98)	-.41 (.70)	.000
Sibling Anti-social Behavior***	-.03 (.64)	.23 (.82)	.31 (.74)	-.18 (.44)	.000
Family Management***	.00 (.55)	.08 (.56)	.08 (.46)	-.15 (.60)	.000
Family Cohesion	.02 (.74)	-.02 (.78)	.07 (.74)	-.01 (.67)	.861
Positive Family Involvement**	-.00 (.43)	.07 (.46)	.03 (.36)	-.08 (.46)	.008
Family Bonding	.00 (.58)	.01 (.60)	.06 (.67)	-.05 (.57)	.619
Family Conflict**	.05 (.67)	.06 (.77)	.03 (.84)	-.18 (.58)	.002
	Percentages				
Parental Criminality**	14.9%	19.0%	21.4%	2.4%	.003
Two Parent Household (Bio or Adoptive)***	52.2%	24.6%	56.3%	70.3%	.000
Two Parent Household (One Stepparent)*	16.1%	11.6%	6.3%	5.0%	.019
One Parent Household (Alone)***	21.4%	42.8%	25.0%	4.0%	.000
One Parent Household (with Other Adults)	7.4%	10.1%	12.5%	4.0%	.238
No Parents**	3.0%	10.9%	0%	8.9%	.002

[a]If the p-value is significant at <.05 level, there are overall statistically significant differences between groups as indicated in the analysis of variance.
*p <.05.
**p <.01.
***p <.001.

The majority of family measures indicated significant differences between the racial groups, with the exception of family cohesion, bonding, and living in a one-parent household with other adults, which were not shown to have significant differences between groups.

Multivariate Analysis

All regressions in this analysis were prospective, predicting joining a gang between the ages of 10 and 19 from constructs assessed at ages 10 through 12, with the exception of a few measures at taken at ages 13 and 14. Given the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable, gang membership during adolescence, a sequential logistic regression approach was used. Regarding race, African Americans comprise the referent group for all analyses.

Table 4 illustrates the regression results for all six models, which are presented as odds ratios for sequential logistic regressions predicting adolescent gang membership. Model 1 presents the odds ratios for race on gang membership. In this model, whites were about 71 percent less likely as blacks to join a gang in adolescence, with Asians being 55 percent less likely as blacks to join a gang in adolescence. Both of these relationships were statistically significant. Native Americans however were not significantly different from blacks in their likelihood of later gang involvement.

In model 2, gender and socio-economic status were controlled for and the results remained similar to those seen in model 1. In this model, both white and Asian remained significantly different from blacks, with the odds ratios increasing slightly for whites and decreasing for Asians. With the addition of these measures, Native Americans were still not significantly different from blacks. Both gender and socio-economic status were significant in this model. Males were about five times more likely to join gangs than their female counterparts and poverty increased a youth's likelihood of gang involvement by approximately 77 percent.

Table 4. Results of Logistic Regression Analysis Predicting the Odds Ratios of Adolescent Gang Membership

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Race – African American Referent						
Caucasian American	0.29***	0.38***	0.42***	0.55	0.55	0.64
Asian American	0.45***	0.37***	0.61	0.72	0.72	0.61
Native American	1.11	1.60	1.70	2.33	2.30	1.33
Demographics						
Gender		5.05***	4.90***	5.81***	6.04***	7.35***
Poverty		1.77***	1.46**	1.66**	1.68**	1.76**
Neighborhood Environment						
Neighborhood Bonding			1.03*	0.84	0.85	0.78
Neighborhood Prosocial Opportunities			0.94	0.97	0.98	1.03
Neighborhood Safety			0.92	1.02	1.00	0.96
Negative Neighborhood Environment			1.25	1.19	1.20	1.16
Neighborhood Drug Environment			1.82***	1.65*	1.65**	1.60
Neighborhood Disorganization			1.80***	1.81***	1.84***	1.90***
Family Environment						
Parent Alcohol Use				1.22	1.13	1.17
Parental Attitudes on Alcohol Use				0.60**	0.59**	0.62*
Child Involvement in Parent Alcohol Use				0.95	0.95	0.94
Anti-social Sibling Behavior				0.93	0.93	0.93
Family Management				0.53*	0.53*	0.44*
Positive Family Cohesion				0.57*	0.57*	0.55*
Positive Family Involvement				1.15	1.16	1.38
Family Bonding				0.90	0.89	0.87
Family Conflict				1.31	1.31	1.33
Parental Criminality				0.99	1.02	1.08
Family Type – Two Parent (bio-adoptive) Referent						
Two Parent Household (One Stepparent)				0.99	0.99	0.59
One Parent Household (Alone)				1.29	2.03	1.06
One Parent Household (with Other Adults				1.45	1.48	1.70
No Parents				2.14	2.03	1.81
School Environment						
School Bonding					0.69	0.72
School Opportunities					1.24	2.09
School Involvement					1.02	1.08
School Rewards					1.24	1.04
Peer Environment						
Anti-social Peer						1.06
Positive Peer						0.85

*p <.05.
**p <.01.
***p <.001.

After controlling for the effects of socio-economic status, gender, and the neighborhood measures, race continued to be a predictive factor of gang membership in adolescence. However, the only difference that remained significant was the relationship between whites and blacks – whites were approximately 58 percent less likely than blacks to join a gang in adolescence. In this model (3), the inclusion of the neighborhood measures resulted in the relationship between Asians and blacks to be reduced to non-significance. In addition, Native Americans continued to remain non-significant when compared to gang membership rates of blacks.

In model 4 the racial difference in gang membership was reduced to non-significance for whites (as compared to blacks) with the inclusion of the family measures.

Model 5 introduces the school measures and the results parallel those seen in model 4 – with the inclusion of school measures the relationship between race and gang membership remains non-significant.

In the final model (6) pro-social and anti-social peer variables are introduced. As seen in the previous model, with the inclusion of peer measures, the relationship between race and gang membership remains non-significant.

Ultimately, the overall goal of this research was to determine if the racial effect seen in adolescent gang membership could be accounted for by the differential distribution of disadvantage that disproportionately affects these groups and their communities. All environmental factors were related to gang membership and to race. In the logistic regression analyses, after controlling for gender, poverty, neighborhood characteristics and family environmental factors, the relationship between race and gang membership became statistically non-significant, and remained so after including school and peer factors.

Discussion

There have been increases in street violence, drug trafficking, homicides, crime activities, and weapon use among delinquent youth over the last three decades (Miller, 2001). The spatial distribution of delinquency and crime within the research realm has often been used politically to ascribe immorality to specific population groups or ethnicities (Kontos et al., 2003; Peterson and Krivo, 2010). Essentially, a majority of these activities have been disproportionately associated with African American, Latino, and Asian youth gangs in large metropolitan areas (Kontos et al., 2003). In addition to these activities, racial-ethnic minorities continue to make up an overwhelming number of existing gang members. As previous theoretical literature indicates, this can partly be attributed to a significant proportion of these communities living in highly disorganized neighborhoods characterized by poverty and other environmental factors that have essentially resulted in their degeneration. However, although this has been highly theorized, there have been few studies produced in the academic realm that discuss the role of these economic and environmental factors in racial-ethnic gang membership.

Logistic regressions were used to identify early childhood risk factors associated with the relationship between race and gang membership. Initially, the effect of race on gang membership was significant for whites and Asians as compared to blacks, indicating that African American youth were significantly more likely to join a gang in later adolescence when compared to these two groups. This initial relationship continued to exist until a combination of poverty, neighborhood, and family measures were included (socio-economic status, neighborhood disorganization, parent alcohol use, family management, and family conflict) which ultimately reduced the racial effect to non-significance. This indicates that these

neighborhood and family measures, including poverty, were accounting for a majority of the racial effects seen in the initial model.

The findings presented in this study may provide important information concerning the link between gang membership and differential distributions of disadvantage often disproportionately experienced by communities of color. The results lend support to the original hypothesis examined in this study; after controlling for gender, poverty, and other environmental risks, race was no longer predictive of gang membership. Although race was significant in predicting gang membership initially, with the inclusion of poverty and other environmental risk factors, the racial effect was reduced to non-significance. This indicates that it is not an individual's racial identity that predicts whether or not they are likely to join a gang, but that other external causes are accounting for future membership likelihood.

Many of the risk factors that were predictive of gang membership in this study were also found to be predictive in previous risk factor studies. For instance, those who did not join a gang reported feeling higher levels of safety within their neighborhood (Kosterman et al., 1996). Neighborhood disorganization (Fagan, 1996; Katz and Schnebly, 2011; Thornberry et al., 2003; Vigil, 1988) and drug use (Curry and Spergel, 1992; Hill et al., 1999; Howell, 2003; Kosterman et al., 1996) were also significant in predicting later adolescent gang involvement both in this study as well as previous studies. Availability of marijuana and the number of neighborhood youth in trouble were also significant (Hill et al., 1999). Similar to findings from Hill et al. (1999), family composition (one parent household versus two), poor family management, and sibling antisocial behavior significantly predicted later gang membership. Association with anti-social peers who engage in delinquency or other problem behaviors was significant in predicting gang involvement (Bjerregaard & Lizotte, 1995; Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Hill et al., 1999;

Lahey et al., 1999). Unlike the literature, there were no significant measures of school experiences that were predictive of gang membership in this analysis.

Overall, the findings presented here parallel the theoretical notion that racial-ethnic gangs are predominantly clustered around poor, socially dysfunctional neighborhoods. These findings support the hypothetical belief that adolescent gang involvement can be accounted for by differential distributions of disadvantages that are often seen as impacting very specific communities of color. To what extent is racial disproportionality in gang membership accounted for by differences among racial groups in the distribution of early childhood poverty and other environmental risks? Based on the current findings, there is support in favor of early childhood poverty and neighborhood and family influences that are stronger in communities of color that may be affecting the likelihood of youth in joining a gang in later adolescence. In their research on early childhood risk factors of adolescent gang membership, Hill et al (1999) note that gang membership appears to result from antisocial influences in neighborhoods, families, and peer groups. Although this research did not specifically aim to address this, it provided a foundation for future racial-ethnic research into why youth of color are more likely to join gangs in adolescence as compared to their white counterparts.

Study Limitations

Although the findings in this study contribute to the previous literature on race-ethnicity and predictive factors of gang membership, there were also a number of important limitations to discuss. First, it is important to note that the data taken from the Seattle Social Development Project come from a community sample located in Seattle, with participants who were adolescents in the 1980s and early 1990s. Therefore, caution should be applied when generalizing these findings to other geographic areas or time periods. Communities vary widely,

not just based on racial-ethnic demographics, but also economically and environmentally. Thus, predictive factors for youth of color who join gangs in Seattle communities may differ from communities in other jurisdictions and geographic areas.

The use of older data also provides limitations in generalizability – specifically, the racial-ethnic composition of gangs has changed drastically on a national level over the past decade. There is a significant amount of Hispanic gang members currently, both in Washington and in other geographic regions. There were no Hispanic youth who reported gang affiliation in the sample used here, which provides a significant limitation when attempting to address the concept of racial-ethnic disproportionality. Although there is no reason to believe the findings presented here (that environmental factors, not race, account for gang membership) would differ currently, these findings should be replicated in contemporary samples including Hispanic youth.

Despite these limitations, this research also had a number of strengths. First, the study was based on data that came from a long-term prospective longitudinal design that stretched across 17 years, with high retention into adulthood. This is important because it allowed for the consideration of temporal ordering and therefore the complete exploration of why specific racial groups are disproportionately gang involved, which was advised by Freng and Esbensen (2007). Second, the panel data are ethnically diverse and gender balanced, permitting a strong test of the primary hypothesis. Third, data on environmental and demographic controls were drawn from a variety of reporters including the youths themselves, their parents and school records. And finally, analyses were conducted using state of the art methods for accounting for missing data, thus maximizing the validity of regression parameter estimates.

Implications for Further Research

Esbensen and colleagues (2008) note in their conclusion on the role of race-ethnicity in gang membership, that policymakers, more often than not, have continued to base the development of gang-related policies on information portrayed by media depictions that gangs are typically comprised of young, African American males residing in urban areas. This type of portrayal has continued to disproportionately target racial-ethnic minority groups as a main source of gang behavior and subsequent crime – implications of such stereotyping has taken a toll on many youth of color and their families and communities. Because of this, it is crucial that the findings presented here serve as a foundation, not a means-to-an-end, for understanding the current racialized paradigm of adolescent gang membership. In order to debunk the traditional classification of the young, poor urban African American male as the stereotypical gang member, further research into this arena should continue to examine the larger societal factors that contribute to the perpetuation of these communities being forced to live in poor, socially disorganized areas. By using the current findings as a catalyst, future race-gang research should attempt to further link these phenomena in an effort to shift the traditional racialized paradigm to one that identifies economic and social factors as contributors and perpetuators of the inequalities we see in the neighborhoods that produce gangs and gang-related crime.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Studies on the fear of crime have indicated that fear of gangs is not solely about crime and risk of victimization (Lane and Meeker, 2003). Because of this, developing and implementing policies and programs that focus solely on eradicating gangs and creating harsher suppression and punishment strategies will not likely eliminate gang crime or community fear of gang-related behaviors. Although being "tough on crime" has persisted as a safe and often

conservative political strategy, it has proven to be costly, both financially and in human terms (Barlow, 1995; Lane and Meeker, 2003). Relying on media depictions and stereotypical assumptions about who joins gangs has resulted in support for policy responses that are based within the criminal justice realm – often resulting in disproportionate criminal justice sanctions for youth of color. The findings of the current study lend support for the notion that race is not a significant predictor of gang membership after other external factors are controlled for, suggesting that the current trend of criminalizing gang membership is a misguided approach. If these types of suppressive and dominant typecasting practices continue to go undisputed, the unequal stereotyping of poor, minority youth as gang members and perpetuators of gang crime is likely to persist. Consequences of these practices experienced by youth of color and their communities may be more damaging and may carry more serious social justice implications than the results felt by current levels of gang-related violence and crime.

Esbensen and colleagues (2008) found that gang membership provides a similar experience for its members regardless of race or ethnicity. While taking a colorblind approach in developing gang policies and programs at the prevention and intervention levels may seem more politically feasible, it is still crucial that researchers and policymakers are conscientious with respect to racial-ethnic differences in youth who join gangs when developing and implementing anti-gang programming. However, as it may be apparent, the line between considering differences and making stereotypical assumptions is extremely murky and must be approached with caution. Acknowledging racial-ethnic differences among gang-involved youth is important for the development of culturally sensitive treatment; however, differential treatment for youth of color can also be seen as discriminatory and must be approached with caution.

Ultimately, policymakers must understand that gang membership is a complex and intricate social problem, and one that carries a significant burden of social justice implications. The risk factors for adolescent gang involvement may exist simultaneously within multiple social contexts. Policy work in this realm must explore this issue using a multisystemic and culturally competent framework. Currently, a majority of gang-prevention and intervention programs are oriented toward the individual and have demonstrated little or no impact on overall rates of gang membership (Walker-Barnes and Mason, 2001). Therefore, policy and program development in this arena must be comprehensive and address all social domains of life in order to be effective in reducing youth gang involvement while concurrently attempting to address stereotypes of who joins gangs and why.

In general, the findings presented here lend support for the need to address gang-related issues with a critical and complex lens. As advocates for racial, social, and economic justice, we must begin by educating our political leaders and policymakers on what it means to live in a racialized society, and the consequences this has for our communities of color. Although developing prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies to address current rates of gang membership and crime may seem tangible and fiscally responsible, we simply cannot expect these programs to be successful if a basic conceptual understanding of the problem is lacking in the first place. It is my opinion that we are doing more harm to our communities by continuing to allow policymakers to develop and implement policies and programs without first educating them on the underlying systemic issues that often affect why youth join gangs. This is especially true given the overrepresentation of dominant group members (affluent white males) in positions of power and political authority. Hence, it is crucial to first educate and orient those political leaders who come from the dominant group to the historical oppressions that have been

perpetuated against communities of color. Once this group accepts and understands the privilege they have benefited from at the expense of other groups, only then should they be allowed to sit at the table and participate in conversations regarding the implications of disproportionality in racial-ethnic rates of gang membership. Thus, my policy recommendation is simple in nature but difficult in application. Education and acceptance are just the beginning steps; however, if we are not able to accomplish this, we will continue to implicitly lend support for the status quo (i.e., existing racial order and the further criminalization of gang-related behavior) and gang membership and subsequent crime will continue to persist. If gang membership is not based on racial-ethnic identity, but on environmental and economic factors, then why are we perpetuating the gang problem as a "minority" problem? Although this may be a difficult answer for many to accept, this type of stereotyping allows dominant group members to continue to reap societal benefits at the expense of communities of color. In order to counteract this, we must begin to educate our political leaders on the consequences these actions have for our youth and their communities so that we may one day have the opportunity to live in a more equitable and just society.

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Appendix A: Item List for Measures of Predictors of Gang Membership

Outcome Variable

Adolescent Gang Membership

- Have you ever joined a gang?

Control Variables (Categorized by Domain)

Peer Domain:

Antisocial Friends: 5th and 6th Grades-

- Friends in trouble with teacher (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th others)?
- Friends done anything that could have gotten them into trouble with police (1st, 2nd, 3rd, others)?
- Friends suspended or expelled from school?
- Friends ever asked or expected you to do troublesome things?
- Friends tried beer, wine, or liquor without parents' knowledge (friends #1,2,3)?
- In the past year, has your friend used beer, wine, or liquor (friends #1,2,3)?
- How many times in past month has friend gotten drunk (friends #1,2,3)?
- In the past year, have your friends used marijuana (friends #1,2,3)?

Positive Peer Environment: 5th and 6th Grades-

- Friends try to do well in school (friends #1,2,3,4).
- Friends involved in after-school activities (friends #1,2,3).
- Friends let you know when you have done something well (friends #1,2,3).
- Friends think well/highly of you when you work hard and/or do well in school (friends #1,2,3).

Neighborhood Domain:

Bonding: 5th and 6th Grades

- I like my neighborhood.

Prosocial Opportunities: 5th Grade

- Kids from my neighborhood have a chance to be successful.

Rewards: 5th and 6th Grades

- I feel safe in my neighborhood.

Anti-Social Neighborhood Environment: 5th and 6th Grades

- Lots of people in the neighborhood get in trouble.
- Do you know anyone personally who has tried marijuana?

- How many adults have you personally known who use and/or deal drugs?
- If you had money and wanted to get some, could you get pot and/or other drugs?

Disorganization: 8th Grade

- Tell me how much the followings describe your neighborhood?
  - Crime
  - “Poor people"
  - "Drug selling"
  - "Gangs"
  - "Disorderly [rowdy] or undesirable neighbors"

Family Domain:

Alcohol Specific: 5th and 6th Grades

- How often the parents drink
- How often the parents spouses drink
- What are parent norms/attitude around the following?
  - occasional drinks
  - drinking every day
  - child using alcohol
- Child involved in parent drinking
  - Bought drinks

Sibling: 5th and 6th Grades

- Do you have siblings who smoke cigarettes?
- Do you have siblings who smoke marijuana?
- Do you have siblings who have been suspended or expelled from school?
- Do you have siblings who have been arrested?

Conflict: 8th grade

- Family talks things out
- Family gets along
- Do people in your family often criticize each other?
- Do you and your family often argue?
- Do people in your family often yell at each other?

Parental Criminality: 7th grade

- At least one parent had criminal behavior

Involvement: 5th and 6th Grades

- How often do you participate in the following?
  - Work around the house

- Walk with parents
- Activities with parents
- Crafts with parents
- Cook with parents
- Theater with parents
- Meals with family
- Talk about school
- Get homework help from family

Management: 5th and 6th Grades-

- When you are away from home, do your parents know where you are and who you are with?
- The rules in my family are clear.
- [Take time to calmly] discuss what you did [have done wrong]?
- My parents praise me for my school achievements.
- My parents notice when I am doing a good job and let me know about it.
- My parents put me down.

Bonding: 5th and 6th Grades- *Note: No siblings coded as missing.*

- Do you share thoughts and feelings with your siblings?
- Would you like to be like your father?
- Do you share thoughts and feelings with your father?
- Would you like to be like your mother?
- Do you share thoughts and feelings with your mother?

Family Type and Transition: Items from 5th Grade-

- Two parent household, biological or adoptive
- Two parent household with one stepparent
- One parent household alone
- One parent household with other adults
- No parents

<u>School Domain:</u>

Bonding: 5th and 6th Grades

- I like school.
- I like my teacher this year.
- Most mornings, I look forward to going to school.
- I like my class this year.

Opportunities: 5th and 6th Grades

- There are many chances for students in my school to get involved in sports, clubs, and so forth.
- Even students who don't do well in school help decide things.
- During a lesson, everyone gets to show the teacher they understand by telling.
- During a lesson, everyone gets to show the teacher they understand by writing.
- In my classes, we sometimes work in groups or teams to help each other.
- I have lots of chances to take part in class activities.
- My teachers check to see that each student in the classroom understands the lesson.
- My teachers let us know what we are going to learn and why it is important.
- My teacher's find out what we already know before we begin a new unit.

Involvement: 5th and 6th Grades

- I take part in class discussions and activities.
- In how many school clubs or activities outside of class, did you participate?
- My teacher gives me help learning when I need it.

Rewards: 5th and 6th Grades

- My teacher embarrasses me for not knowing the right answer.
- My teachers praise or compliment me when i work hard.
- My other teacher's notice when i am doing a good job and let me know about it.
- I feel safe in the neighborhood around my school.
- I feel safe at my school.
- My teachers are fair in dealing with students.
- Other students in my class want me to do my best work.

Demographic Variables

- Race- Self-reported

- Sex- Self-reported

- ***Socio-Economic Status: 5th and 6th Grades-***
  - Free/Reduced Lunch Eligibility
  - Parent's Occupation
  - Per Capita Income