

# Goals, Control, & Empowerment: A Comparison of Boy and Girl ever gang Involvement

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## TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Daniel Scott & Brittany Hood (2023). Goals, Control, & Empowerment: A Comparison of Boy and Girl ever gang Involvement. *Journal of Crime and Criminal Behavior*, 3: 2, pp. 433-456. <https://doi.org/10.47509/JCCB.2023.v03i02.09>

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**Abstract:** Extensive research has examined the relationship between crime and gang involvement. Additional scholarship has determined a significant relationship between gang membership and mental health. However, limited work has examined how this differs between male and female gang-involved youth. The current study will contribute to this gap in the literature by analyzing mental health and gang involvement among male and female youth. Specifically, this work utilizes school survey data to compare the relationship between perceived stress, psychological empowerment, and goal orientation among male and female gang-involved youth. The findings reveal both similarities and differences in mental health among gang-involved male and female youth. The results contribute to an improved understanding of both female and male gang involvement from a mental health standpoint and have implications for theory specialized policy and program development among gang-involved youth.

**Keywords:** gang, gender, mental health, juvenile

## Introduction

In response to significant growth in gang membership over the past two decades, considerable attention has shifted to youth gang members due to the relationship between early gang involvement and later adult offending (Hayward & Honegger, 2014). Although estimates vary widely, research suggests that there are nearly 30,000 active gangs and related groups in the United States (Egley *et al.*, 2012), comprised of up to one million youth gang members c. While not as common as male gang members, female gang members are more frequent than initially identified (Esbensen *et al.*,

1993; Peterson *et al.*, 2001); therefore, although limited, research has also continued to proliferate in this area (Bell, 2009; Panfil & Peterson, 2015).

Approximately 70% of the juvenile justice population has a history of mental illness (Shufelt & Coccozza, 2006); youth gang members, and girls in particular, disproportionately experience some mental health-related variables (Esbensen *et al.*, 1999). For example, girls are more likely to experience childhood trauma (De La Rue & Espelage, 2014). For these juveniles, compared to their non-mentally ill counterparts, recidivism rates are also disproportionately higher (McReynolds *et al.*, 2010; Yampolskaya & Chuang, 2012). Therefore, it is important to better understand mental illness's role in youth gang membership. While these studies provide relevant insights into youth gangs and mental illness, this body of research remains in its infancy (Osman & Wood, 2018), and much remains unexplored. The growth of these bodies of research and heightened interest in research analyzing mental health among young female offenders, make this a timely moment to consider mental health in girl gang members. This study addresses this intersection by exploring current, ever, and former gang-involved boys and girls and differences in their mental health.

## Background

### *Youth Gangs in the United States*

Scholars disagree on how gangs and gang membership should be defined (Maxson & Esbensen, 2012; Spergel, 2009). Research comparing definitions of gang membership reveals noticeable variation in the number of youth gang members depending on the definition used (Esbensen & Maxson, 2011; Matsuda *et al.*, 2012; Spergel, 2009). Although various definitions of gang involvement have been utilized in gang scholarship (Esbensen *et al.*, 2001; Matsuda *et al.*, 2012; Maxson & Esbensen, 2012), ultimately, self-nomination has been widely acknowledged as a reliable method of measuring gang involvement (Esbensen *et al.*, 2001). Additionally, research analyzing gang desistance reveals the lasting impact gang involvement has on both former gang members and those in the process of desisting (Pyrooz *et al.*, 2014; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Sweeten *et al.*, 2013). This highlights the importance of measuring current gang membership, former gang membership, and general gang involvement among youth.

A considerable amount of empirical research has focused on youth gangs in the United States, and recent statistics suggest that although youth gang membership decreased in the 1990s, membership rose in the 2000s and has remained relatively steady since (Egley *et al.*, 2012). Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1977 in combination with population age estimates from the 2010 U.S. Census, it was estimated that youth gang members comprised over one million members between

the ages of five and seventeen, domestically (Pyrooz & Sweeten, 2015). These members tend to be male, and while the prevalence by race and ethnicity may vary by jurisdiction, they are more likely to be Hispanic or black (National Gang Center, 2012; Pyrooz & Sweeten, 2015).

### *Girls in Gangs*

Although research has primarily focused on gang-affiliated boys, in response to the continued growth in research on youth gangs, there has been an increased focus on gang-involved girls (Bell, 2009; Panfil & Peterson, 2015). Regarding female youth prevalence in gangs, some research indicates that girls make up less than 8% of the membership in the United States (National Gang Center, 2012). In contrast, other findings suggest that gangs are more likely to have females than not (Peterson *et al.*, 2001) and that their prevalence is as high as 20–46% (Esbensen *et al.*, 1993). Regardless, research consistently finds a lower but growing prevalence of girls in youth gangs (National Gang Center, 2012; Pyrooz & Sweeten, 2015). Although much of the inconsistency in the findings reviewed here is undoubtedly due to methodological variation, it may also reflect law enforcement's *lack of* perceived threat of girl gang members. For example, in the 2012 report by the National Gang Center, the authors indicated that law enforcement's reporting on girl gang members had been an issue; the report explained that girls were of "secondary or lesser significance for law enforcement" (para. 4). Other research has also found administrative data to underestimate the prevalence of girls in youth gangs (Curry, 2000).

Researchers cite similar explanations, or goals, for boys and girls who join gangs (Bell, 2009). Goal orientation is the "motivation and ability to make viable plans and take action toward desired goals" (*Goal Orientation*, n.d., para. 1). Gang-involved youth tend to have goals such as gaining a family or sense of belonging (Ruble & Turner, 2000), for some protection or socialization (Finelli, 2019; Taylor, 2013), as a means of earning income (Melde *et al.*, 2012; Stone, 1999), or as a method of addressing social marginalization by changing one's status and respect (Descormiers & Corrado, 2016; Melde *et al.*, 2012). Despite noted similarities, some differences do exist. For example, it is more likely that females who join gangs come from households with familial issues (Archer & Grascia, 2006; Petersen & Howell, 2013), and therefore, they have goals of seeking a sense of family unlike that of male youth (Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995). Comparatively, boy gang members self-report joining for reasons that girls do not, such as for the attention of females or sex (Curry, 2000; Watkins & Carson, 2021) and social experiences such as partying (Decker & Curry, 2000).

When females are involved, even in all female gangs, the gang functions based on a male-dominated structure emphasizing status hierarchies (Miller & Brunson,

2000). Female gang members are seen as less than males in gangs and, therefore, are more likely to take on supportive roles and less likely to hold positions of power (Esbensen *et al.*, 1999). As such, roles and experiences in gangs vary regarding sex (Miller & Brunson, 2000; Sutton, 2017). For example, Peterson and colleagues' (2001) findings suggest that females who are involved in gangs adopt masculine behavioral norms like delinquency. Relatedly, although both male and female youth gang members engage in violence and other crimes, they do so for different reasons (Lanctôt & Le Blanc, 2002; Miller, 2001) and at different frequencies (Esbensen *et al.*, 1999). Other differences between boy and girl gang members can be accounted for based on ethnicity, gender composition of the gang, and the community context (Miller, 2009; Miller & Brunson, 2000).

### *Mental Illness and Youth Gang Membership*

Much of the research examining mental health in youth gangs has focused on differences between current gang and non-gang members and the extent of and differences in prior trauma (De La Rue & Espelage, 2014; Petering, 2016; Ross & Arsenault, 2018), the prevalence of anxiety, depression (Petering, 2016; Watkins & Melde, 2016), PTSD (Harris *et al.*, 2013; Petering, 2016), operational defiance and conduct disorders (Harris *et al.*, 2013), dimensions of psychopathy (Ang *et al.*, 2015; Dhingra *et al.*, 2015; Joseph & Rembert, 2022), and substance abuse (Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Harris *et al.*, 2013; Katz *et al.*, 2005; Thornberry *et al.*, 1993). Less research explores mental health in former (Katz *et al.*, 2005; Valdez, 2021) and ever (De La Rue & Espelage, 2014) gang members. Although research on mental health and gang membership remains in its infancy (Osman & Wood, 2018), the findings from this body of research offers several promising explanations as to the association between mental health and gang membership before and during gang involvement.

Research on early childhood experiences, even outside of gang scholarship, has clearly established a correlation between children who grow up in tense and violent environments and their adult behavior (Ross & Arsenault, 2018). Many gang members share histories of being physically abused at one point in their childhood (Petering, 2016). Children facing these adversaries before the age of twelve are more likely to be involved in violent situations, sometimes even before adulthood starts (Ross & Arsenault, 2018). Parents who fail to protect their children's needs, such as preventing them from experiencing abuse and violence, could make the child enhance violent and aggressive impulses, which are typically seen in the most dangerous gang members (Belitz & Valdez, 1994). This body of literature, indicates that gang-involved girls are more likely to have histories of childhood trauma compared to non-gang girls (De La Rue & Espelage, 2014). Other studies generally focused on justice-involved youth also

found that girls needed more mental health services and resources than boys (Marston *et al.*, 2012; Quinn *et al.*, 2005; Timmons-Mitchell *et al.*, 1997).

Traumatic experiences throughout school years also show a strong correlation with gang membership during young adulthood and could lead to impairment in learning and reasoning, which can increase the chances of later gang involvement (Ross & Arsenault, 2018). Research suggests that youth who choose not to continue their high school education are more likely to show interest in gang membership and to engage in other delinquency, such as consuming drugs (Ang *et al.*, 2015; Henry *et al.*, 2012). Poor academic achievement or lack of educational attainment (Kirk, 2008; Sampson, 2003; Snyder & Sickmund, 2006) and delinquent peer associations (Altschuler & Armstrong, 2002; Moffitt, 1993) are several of the strongest risk factors for later delinquency and criminal justice involvement. Relatedly, poor engagement in school and school transience are predictive of higher risk too (Bullis & Yovanoff, 2002; Coffey & Gemignani, 1994), low self-control, and problematic social skills (Benda, 2003). Moreover, there are cumulative effects related to risk factors and one's pro-social connectedness, feelings of marginalization, as life-skills development (Buckle & Walsh, 2013).

Many of the concepts discussed in this literature review are related to psychological empowerment, which has been studied in other areas of crime (Peterson & Reid, 2003) and even more extensively in research on delinquency (Cargo *et al.*, 2003; Eisman *et al.*, 2016; Messman *et al.*, 2022; Opara *et al.*, 2022). Psychological empowerment is empowerment at the individual level and describes how a person exerts control over their own decisions (Zimmerman, 2012). These bodies of research suggest that psychological empowerment is correlated with taking responsibility for quality-of-life issues, improved decision-making, behavior, and better outcomes. Despite this, the larger concept of psychological empowerment has not been explored in relation to youth (or adult) gang involvement. In fact, the only mention of psychological empowerment and youth gangs has been referenced in grey literature – a doctoral dissertation from the University of Hawaii in 1994 (Chin, 1994). In the author's review of the literature, she stated, “[p]sychological empowerment is a multi-dimensional construct consisting of personality, motivation, and cognitive components...among college students and community residents, participation in community activities and organizations was associated with higher levels of psychological empowerment” (p. 13). Participation in pro-social activities such as those mentioned are considered protective factors related to different forms of delinquency (May *et al.*, 2014), including youth gang membership (Berdychevsky *et al.*, 2022).

*Mental Health After Joining.* Youth exposed to gang-related activities and environments also have higher chances of developing serious mental health problems

after they join a gang, which is correlated with school problems and future criminal involvement (Koffman *et al.*, 2009). Gang involvement is also correlated with considerable decreases in the quality of mental health and increased feelings of depression (Petering, 2016; Watkins & Melde, 2016). Moreover, continued exposure to violence has been correlated with suicide attempts, emotional breakdowns, and violent acts toward others, caused not only by the lack of discipline in their younger years or not having someone who would lead them to the right path but the severe downfall of their mental state (Watkins & Melde, 2016).

Research conducted by Watkins & Melde (2016) suggests that gang membership is a coping mechanism for managing stress. Life before gang membership can be difficult for marginalized youth who are the most likely to join gangs. Affiliation in a gang offers family or a sense of belonging, protection, and socialization (Finelli, 2019; Taylor, 2013). Unfortunately for youth, research suggests that gang membership *increases* the likelihood of a stressful and high-risk life course (Gilman *et al.*, 2014; Thornberry *et al.*, 1993), as well as worsens depression and suicidal ideations (Watkins & Melde, 2016). Similarly, the psychological negativity from being around violence due to being a part of a gang has a lasting impact behaviorally, socially, and psychologically (Beresford & Wood, 2016). Overall, this body of research suggests that gang affiliation exacerbates the issues that youth are trying to address by joining gangs in the first place.

*Gang Desistance.* At some point, some gang-affiliated youth decide to prepare to disengage from their gang. The findings from a growing body of research on gang-affiliated youth has explored the reasons for leaving gangs. The majority of this research suggests youth are either pushed out of gangs due to their experiences or pulled out of gangs as a result of psychological empowerment or due to a change in goals; either the violence associated with gang membership pushes individuals out of gangs (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011) or they are pulled out due to familial ties, a more appealing option, and even pregnancy (Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Varrialle, 2008). One qualitative study asked youth where they saw themselves in five years and concluded that those who leave gangs, particularly pregnant girls, are likely to have more positive outlooks and concrete goals (Quinn *et al.*, 2017). These goals concerned finishing their education, maintaining employment and housing, raising children, and financial stability.

*Lasting Effects on Mental Health in Former Youth Gang Members.* Research on life after gang desistance is scarce. Bulboz & Lee (2021) noted that much research focuses on the period of desisting and persisting social ties from the gang world. Few studies have examined mental health after gang membership. Those studies that have tend to focus narrowly on PTSD symptoms (Kerig *et al.*, 2015; Valdez, 2021). The scant research on adult former gang members distinguishes between gang membership, and the violence witnessed or perpetrated during gang membership and PTSD symptoms (Wood *et al.*,

2017). This research suggests that, at least for British gangs, it is not gang membership itself but rather the violence during gang membership that is associated with PTSD. A related study conducted by Kerig and colleagues (2015) underscores the importance of how perpetrating violence can contribute to developing a gang member's PTSD. Also, former gang members are nearly as likely as current gang members to experience high levels of victimization (Katz *et al.*, 2011) or to witness violence (including death) toward others (Li *et al.*, 2002). These experiences are associated with higher levels of psychological distress.

Collectively, this body of research suggests that boys and girls have different experiences that lead them to join gangs and, further, that their experiences while affiliated vary from that of boys. Despite the recent increased focus on mental health and youth gang members, much of this research ignores mental health in girls, and other areas of mental health have yet to be explored. Although limited, some research does explain the role of stress in relation to gang membership and the goals associated with joining gangs. Yet, minimal research has examined stress and goal orientation in relation to girl youth gang involvement (see Petersen & Howell, 2013 for a review). Also, notwithstanding general findings suggesting the importance of psychological empowerment (Cargo *et al.*, 2003; Eisman *et al.*, 2016; Messman *et al.*, 2022; Opara *et al.*, 2022) and goal orientation (Gálnander, 2020; Williams & Schaefer, 2021) in crime desistance, this is notably missing or limited in gang literature. Therefore, this paper aims to respond to gaps in our knowledge within the intersection of mental health and sex in gang-affiliated youth. Three research questions guide this study: Is there a significant difference in the mental health of boy and girl youth gang members in relation to 1) perceived stress, 2) psychological empowerment, and 3) goal orientation? We hypothesize that:

- (a) Girl gang-involved youth are more likely to have a higher perceived level of stress than boy gang-involved youth.
- (b) There will be a significantly different level of psychological empowerment among girl and boy gang-involved youth.
- (c) Girl gang-involved youth are more likely to have a higher level of goal orientation than boy gang-involved youth.

## The Current Study

### *Data and Methods*

The data used for this study come from the 2016 Arizona Youth Survey (AYS). This survey is given to a sample of 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup>-grade youth throughout the state every

two years. The current study only analyzes the 2016 survey data. After 2016 select mental health questions were removed from the survey, and our analyses of mental health and gang involvement would be limited if additional waves were included. This data collection effort covered youth demographics, family structure, mental health perceived support, academics, substance use, and gang involvement.

### *Dependent Variable*

Gang involvement has been measured in a variety of ways (Bjerregaard, 2002; Esbensen *et al.*, 2001), and the long-lasting effects of gang involvement on criminal behavior have also been examined (Carson *et al.*, 2013; Pyrooz *et al.*, 2014; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Sweeten *et al.*, 2013). Given that there is no official definition of gang membership, it is essential to measure involvement from the youth's perspective in as many ways as possible (see Esbensen *et al.*, 2001). Therefore, the dependent variable is represented in two different ways: current female and male gang members, and ever female and male gang members. For current gang involvement the youth were asked if they currently belong to a gang, in which they responded yes or no. The variable current gang involvement for boys and girls was then created with the cases that responded "yes" to current gang involvement. This resulted in a dichotomous variable where 0 = male current gang involvement and 1 = female current gang involvement. For the variable ever gang involvement the youth were asked if they have ever belonged to a gang, in which they responded yes or no. The variable was then created with the cases that responded "yes" to ever gang involvement. This resulted in a dichotomous variable where 0 = male ever gang involvement and 1 = female ever gang involvement.

### *Independent Variables*

The independent variables included three mental health measurements including summated scores for perceived stress, psychological empowerment, and goal orientation. Perceived stress was constructed through a combination of four 5-item Likert scale variables (*Never: 0, Almost Never: 1, Sometimes: 2, Fairly Often: 3, Very Often: 4*) where the youth were asked, "In the last month, how often have you felt?" and then proceed to ask (1) that you were unable to control the important things in your life; (2) confident about your ability to handle personal problems, (3) that things were going your way, and (4) that difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them." These questions derive from the most widely used and validated instrument measuring one's perception of stress (Cohen *et al.*, 1983). To create the perceived stress scale, these individual survey items were combined. The mean response was 2.04. The perceived stress scale generated an adequate Cronbach's alpha score of 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Pallant, 2001).

Psychological empowerment was constructed through a combination of three 5-item Likert scale variables (*Not at all like me: 1, A little like me: 2, Somewhat like me: 3, A lot like me: 4, Exactly like me: 5*) where the youth were asked to “indicate how much these statements describe you: (1) I expect good things to happen to me; (2) I am excited about my future; (3) I trust my future will turn out well.” These questions were derived from questions related to hope and self-efficacy (Roy *et al.*, 2016). To create the psychological empowerment scale, these individual survey items were combined. The mean response was 3.42. The psychological empowerment scale generated an adequate Cronbach’s alpha score of 0.86.

Goal orientation was constructed through a combination of six 5-item Likert scale variables (*Not at all like me: 1, A little like me: 2, Somewhat like me: 3, A lot like me: 4, Exactly like me: 5*) where the youth were asked to “indicate how much these statements describe you”: (1) I develop step-by-step plans to reach my goals; (2) I have goals in my life; (3) I set goals; (4) I take action to reach them; (5) it is important to me that I reach my goals; and (6) I know how to make plans happen.” These questions were derived from a validated scale meant to measure a child’s motivation and ability to make realistic plans and to take the necessary action(s) to accomplish them (*Goal Orientation*, n.d.). To create the goal orientation scale, these individual survey items were combined. The mean response was 3.62. The goal orientation scale generated an adequate Cronbach’s alpha score of 0.92.

### **Control Variables**

The control variables in the model included racial groups (white, Hispanic, black, and other) due to the complex relationship between race and crime (Gabbidon & Greene, 2018). As shown in Table 1, the percentage of boy and girl gang members of different

**Table 1: Control Variable Descriptives**

	<i>Current (n = 1325)</i>		<i>Ever (n= 2898)</i>	
	<i>Male (910)</i>	<i>Female (415)</i>	<i>Male (2021)</i>	<i>Female (877)</i>
<i>Race%</i>				
White	32	29.2	31	25.5
Latino	25.3	27.7	28.9	31.2
Black	14.8	13.5	13.4	12.5
Other	27.9	29.6	26.7	30.7
Mean Age in Years	15.63	15.01	15.66	15.08
Lunch%	50	55.6	51.8	59.7
Have Sibling(s)%	57.4	61.2	58.7	62.1
Caretaker Completed High School %	70.2	67.7	69.6	68.1

racial groups are quite similar for White, Hispanic, Black, and other. Some noticeable differences include a higher percentage of boys that identify as White who are also gang members. Conversely, a higher percentage of girls in the Other racial group category identify as gang members.

Additionally, whether they receive free lunch is included as a control variable due to the connection between socioeconomic status and crime (Aaltonen *et al.*, 2012; Fergusson *et al.*, 2004). Interestingly, at least half of boys and girls gang members received free lunch, but this was noticeably more frequent for gang girls than gang boys. Additionally, whether or not the youth have siblings and whether or not their primary caregiver completed high school due to the relationship between parental education and delinquency (Chalfin & Deza, 2019) were included as control variables in the multivariate analyses.

### Analytic Plan

The current study utilizes both bivariate and multivariate statistical analyses. For the bivariate analyses, t-tests are utilized to determine if there are significant differences between current, and ever-gang boys' and girls' perceived stress, psychological empowerment, and goal orientation. Logistic regression analyses are also conducted due to the dichotomous dependent variable representing female and male gang involvement. Utilizing logistic regression allows for control variables to be included in the analyses, which helps to reduce the likelihood of spuriousness in the findings. Additionally, odds ratios are utilized for ease of interpretation in explaining the probability of mental health differences among male and female gang-involved youth.

### Results

The information in Table 2 includes the bivariate analysis results comparing male and female gang involvement and mental health. The results reveal a significant difference in the level of perceived stress between male and female ever-gang involvement. However, there is a lack of significance between perceived stress and current gang membership.

**Table 2: Bivariate Results of Mental Health and Gang Involvement**

	<i>Current Gang Involvement mean (s.d)</i>		<i>Ever Gang Involvement mean (s.d.)</i>	
	<i>Girl</i>	<i>Boy</i>	<i>Girl</i>	<i>Boy</i>
Perceived Stress	2.09 (.7)	2.07 (.7)	2.2** (.73)	2.06 (.73)
Psychological Empowerment	2.92 (1.5)	2.93 (1.5)	2.89 (1.42)	2.94 (1.5)
Goal Orientation	3.1† (1.5)	2.96 (1.5)	3.1 (1.42)	3.02 (1.49)

\*\*\* p < .001; \*\* p < .01; \* p < .05; † p < .10

Additionally, the analyses identify a lack of significance between current gang involvement, and ever-gang involvement with both psychological empowerment and goal orientation. Due to the significant differences between the level of perceived stress with both ever-gang membership among boys and girls, multivariate analyses are also conducted.

**Table 3: Logistic Regression Results Comparing Gang Membership and Mental Health for Boys and Girls**

<i>Independent and Control Variables</i>	<i>Model 1 Current Gang Membership (n = 579)</i>	<i>Model 3 Ever Gang Membership (n = 1095)</i>
Perceived Stress	1.13	1.38***
Psychological Empowerment	0.904	0.923
Goal Orientation	1.12	1.02
age (years)	.796***	.831***
White	0.929	0.891
Hispanic	0.939	1.06
Black	0.767	0.774
lunch	1.02	1.17
Sibling	0.996	1.04
Caregiver Completed HS	1.07	1.09

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; †  $p < .10$

The information in Table 3 includes the results of two logistic regression models. Model 1 compares current male and female gang members. The results identify a lack of significance between current male and female gang membership with the level of perceived stress, psychological empowerment, and goal orientation. Furthermore, when comparing male and female current gang members, the results reveal a lack of significance with the included control variables.

The results in Model 2 compare male and female ever gang members. There is a significant and positive association with the level of perceived stress. Females that report ever being in a gang have a greater probability of reporting higher levels of perceived stress. The findings also reveal a lack of significance with psychological empowerment and goal orientation. Furthermore, a significant association is revealed when examining age and male and female ever gang membership. Female ever gang members at a greater probability of being younger compared to male ever gang members. Furthermore, when comparing male and female ever gang members, the results reveal a lack of significance with the included control variables.

## Discussion

### *Theoretical Implications*

Examining the differences between male and female gang involvement is crucial because “the gender oppression and sexual double standards present in society often are amplified in the gang context, where masculinities play out and intersect with the female gang experience” (Peterson, 2012, p. 75). There are different life experiences and motivations and rationales for joining or ending gang affiliation. Scholarship on female gang involvement and theory is extremely limited, but progress is slowly being made. Some more recent work written by Peterson & Panfil (2014) argues for more research on female gang involvement due to potential differences in gang joining, gang activity, and gang desistance. Additionally, research examining youth in the system reveals that girls have a significantly greater amount of mental health needs than boys (Kataoka *et al.*, 2001; Timmons-Mitchell *et al.*, 1997), but the current study suggests that there is a meaningful relationship between gang involvement and mental health among both boys and girls that need improved comprehension.

According to Maxson and Whitlock (2002), most females may join gangs due to family or friend participation in gangs and to gain status, while males are more likely to join a gang for excitement, territory/protection, and/or belonging. Overall, the results of the current study reveal that both boy and girl current and ever gang members have similar perceived levels of psychological empowerment and goal orientation. The main significant difference is in perceived level of stress when comparing boy and girl ever gang members. Females are more likely to join gangs due to friend or family participation, or to gain status, which may be perceived as more stressful than males, who are mainly looking for excitement, and belonging. Girls may act at an elevated level of aggression to gain status, but also need to not act too aggressive as to not be viewed negatively by both their male and female affiliates (Peterson, 2012). Due to the conflicting pressure of gang involvement their mental health tends to suffer more than males, but not necessarily while gang-involved. The current study’s results suggest that the stress level persists and is higher among girls upon gang desistance. This is consistent with previous research examining gang desistance and lingering effects of gang involvement (Bolden, 2013; Carson *et al.*, 2013; Pyrooz *et al.*, 2014; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Sweeten *et al.*, 2013), but this scholarship primarily focused on male gang members.

Research highlights that the gang environment frequently involves a culture of masculinity (Baird, 2012; Davies *et al.*, 2017; Deuchar & Weide, 2019) and an increased likelihood of involvement in violence generally among male gang-involved youth (Decker *et al.*, 2013; Melde & Esbensen, 2012), which arguably suggests that

gangs are not necessarily the most comfortable space for females (Magnus & Scott, 2021; Panfil & Peterson, 2015). This is further supported by work highlighting females as secondary in gangs (Panfil & Peterson, 2015). It is possible that because of this, once a female gang member desists, their separation is perceived as more stressful than male desistance. They may feel less in control than a male would due to their environment and may be concerned about direct victimization from gang members (Pyrooz *et al.*, 2014; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Sweeten *et al.*, 2013). Research has also highlighted how a gang for females is more regularly viewed as a familial group for those involved, while for males it is more frequently viewed as utilitarian (Peterson & Panfil, 2014). The higher perceived stress level among female gang members may be due to the higher likelihood of having more negative experiences in their past.

Scholarship has also suggested that female gang members are more likely to have more negative personal histories, such as issues with unemployment, addiction, death, and system involvement, when compared to their male counterparts (Peterson & Panfil, 2014; see also Moore, 1991). Thus, although joining a gang may be a way for females to become independent, the gang is also arguably an environment of dated gender stereotypes and behaviors (Peterson & Panfil, 2014). Although the male connection to gangs continues longer than female upon gang desistance, females that have left their gang struggle with minimal paying jobs, the stresses of motherhood, and drug use (Hagedorn, 1998). These different experiences arguably result in a higher perceived stress level for ever gang members, highlighting the lasting impact of gang involvement on girls, which has implications for specialized gang intervention and policy. The results of the current study suggest that there should be at least some specialized mental health programming and policies for female gang members.

### *Program Implications*

Within juvenile justice and criminology, there has been a push for both gender-neutral and specialized programming and treatment for boys and girls (Petersen & Howell, 2013; Schram & Gaines, 2007), and specifically gang boys and girls (Petersen & Howell, 2013). This is partly due to research highlighting the differing experiences of male and female youth that ultimately result in delinquency (see Petersen & Howell, 2013). Similarly, gang scholarship has found different experiences among gang boys and girls (Peterson & Panfil, 2014), and the current study helps to highlight both similarities and differences. Given that perceived stress, goal orientation, and psychological empowerment were similar for both boys and girls that are currently gang-involved, the gender-neutral OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Suppression Model has proven to be successful at gang involvement and crime reduction for both boys and girls (Spergel, 2009; Spergel *et al.*, 2006). Additionally, the Gang Resistance

Education and Training program was found to prevent both boy and girls from joining gangs (Esbensen *et al.*, 2012).

Girls may act at an elevated level of aggression to gain status, but also need to not act too aggressive as to not be viewed negatively by both their male and female affiliates (Peterson, 2012). Due to the conflicting pressure of gang involvement their mental health tends to suffer more than males, and girls may have a higher level of perceived stress than boys. Programs that focus on specific sexual demographics need to respond to the specific needs of that group (Kempf-Leonard & Sample, 2001). The Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) program specializes in risk factors for offending in order to effectively provide individually tailored treatment to juvenile offenders, including female gang and non-gang members (Schram & Gaines, 2007). Specialists in social services, probation, public health, and the community collaborate to produce treatment plans tailored to specific juveniles. Successful completion of the MDT program resulted in a lower likelihood of being rearrested among females (Schram & Gaines, 2007). Another crucial factor increasing the likelihood of rearrest among females was not living with their natural parents, which may contribute to the higher level of perceived stress, highlighting the importance of family dynamics in reducing the likelihood of delinquency.

Research highlights that juveniles with a history of delinquency frequently report suicide attempts and consulting with a mental health specialist, and mental health struggles continuing into adulthood (Corneau & Lanctôt, 2004). The findings of the current study help to show not only that mental health interventions are needed for juveniles consistent with Corneau & Lanctôt (2004), but the importance of select tailored interventions for male and female gang-involved youth. Brief Strategic Family Therapy (BSFT) focuses on delinquency prevention that is also successful with gang members (Petersen & Howell, 2013). The program reinforces healthy parenting, monitoring, discipline, and cohesion. The Upward Movement Program focused specifically on Mexican American girls to help prevent gang joining and decrease gang participation (Williams *et al.*, 2002). The program results in a significantly lower level of delinquency and a higher level of school achievement.

The results of the current study highlight a need for at least some specialized mental health treatment for boy and girl gang members. Treatment for former female gang members should arguably focus more on stress reduction and coping mechanisms for handling stress, with the ultimate goal of reducing gang involvement, delinquency, and effectively helping girl gang members (both current and ever) to cope and function healthily in society. For example, a program that could include these specializations would be Reaffirming Youth Sister's Excellence (RYSE), which provides both community treatment and intervention programming in the form of resources specific

to adjudicated girls (Le *et al.*, 2003). Specific goals include decreasing re-offending and improving social, academic, and vocationally skills. Furthermore, this has family-specific resources for pregnant girls or parents.

### **Limitations & Future Directions**

The AYS was distributed to schools in Arizona in 2016, 2018, and 2020. Due to the instrument being slightly altered over the waves, only the 2016 data were utilized in the current study. Select mental health items were excluded after 2016. Given that one of the foci of the present paper is mental health, we wanted to include all possible mental health factors in the survey. This resulted in a cross-sectional study where causation cannot be determined. However, ultimately, this allowed for multiple mental health factors to be included in the analyses, and various control variables were also utilized to increase accuracy by reducing the likelihood of spuriousness. Furthermore, the study is limited to schools in Arizona. Future studies will need to be conducted in other states, both in schools, in the community, and the juvenile justice system, to help increase the generalizability of these findings.

Future research should also further explore the mental health of girl gang members. In depth interviews could help shed light on girl gang members experiences, and specifically why they feel more stressed than boys do. This would help to better inform if specialized programming/treatment is needed, to what extent, and how to tailor such programming more effectively. Additional studies comparing more specific mental health struggles, as well as other gang factors such as time in gang, age at joining, and gang structure among boy and girl gang members would also be beneficial.

### **Conclusion**

It is essential that evidence-based programs specific to girls and gang girls are provided (Petersen & Howell, 2013), but it's also important to understand when a gender-neutral program may be the most effective option. This study compared perceived stress, goal orientation, and psychological empower among boy and girl current gang members and ever gang members. The results revealed a significant different in perceived level of stress between male and female ever gang involvement. This suggests that gangs have more of a lasting influence on gang-involved girl youth, which needs to be taken into consideration in the development of theories related to gang desistance, and the creation of specialized policies and programming.

### **Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback, as well as the work of undergraduate Salma Torres for her work in identifying relevant limited literature related to mental health and youth gang involvement.

### *Disclaimer Statement*

The findings for this study are the results of the authors' work, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Arizona Criminal Justice Commission.

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