

## CHAPTER 4

# Gang Membership in the Life Course

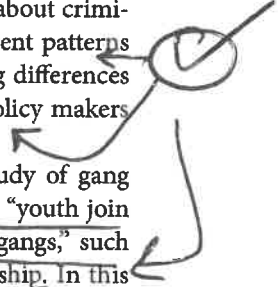
The study of criminal behavior over the life course has grown dramatically since the 1990s. Such an approach is by no means new, as classic life history studies of criminals resembled the spirit of life-course criminology (Anderson 1923; Shaw 1930). What is new is the ability to document patterns of criminal behavior because of survey information collected systematically over time and the availability of official criminal history information. As a result of this, researchers have been able to track when individuals start committing crime in their life, the rate at which they commit crimes throughout their life, and when they desist from their involvement in crime (Sampson and Laub 1993; Piquero, Farrington, and Blumstein 2003). What we have just described are the key questions about criminal careers: onset, continuity, and desistance. People maintain different patterns of involvement in criminal behavior in their life, and understanding differences across people is very important to researchers, practitioners, and policy makers concerned about crime.

The parameters of criminal careers naturally extend to the study of gang membership. Pyrooz, Decker, and Webb (2010, 2) argued that since "youth join gangs, participate in gang activities, then, for the most part, leave gangs," such a life-course framework should apply to the study of gang membership. In this chapter we focus on individuals and their involvement in gangs in relation to their broader life course. We address the following questions:

- Why do adolescents join gangs? And among those that do, why do they leave gangs?
- How do adolescents enter gangs? Likewise, how do they leave gangs?
- How long do adolescents remain in gangs?
- Are gang members equally involved in gangs?

These questions collectively address the motives, methods, and processes for joining and leaving gangs, the duration of gang membership and the factors associated with prolonged gang careers, and the heterogeneity or variability among

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Trajectory = Risk factors  
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Gangs + LCC.

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# Transitions (LOL)

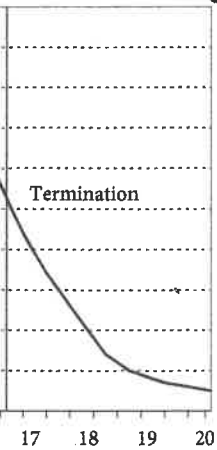
detailing the key life-course

## UNDERSTANDING IP

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### Life in the Gang



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the period in which the probability of gang membership surpasses or declines below the 50 percent threshold. This means that identification and de-identification as a gang member marks a point when the probability of gang membership is closer to 1 “yes” or 0 “no.”

In relation to life-course criminology and criminal career parameters, the onset and termination of gang membership takes on added significance. Glen Elder, the eminent University of North Carolina sociologist, referred to the life course as being comprised of transitions, trajectories, and turning points. The onset and termination parameters act as *transitions* in the life course, marking the movement into or out of the state of gang membership. Transitions are important events dotted throughout the life course that bring meaning to lives; graduating high school, moving away to college, getting married, or having a baby are examples of such events. These events foreshadow changes in lives, some larger than others. For some individuals, joining and leaving a gang are not significant events, as they are a part of standard, albeit deviant, adolescence-oriented behavior. For other individuals, transitioning into or out of gangs constitute significant life events. Life events known as turning points are key to understanding the larger life course, as such events redirect the life course in significant ways (Laub, Sampson, and Sweeten 2006, 314). The onset of gang membership is considered a turning point in the life course because it is associated with dramatic changes in the behaviors and attitudes of people who join a gang (Melde and Esbensen 2011; Sweeten et al. 2012; Thornberry et al. 2003). It is less clear if termination functions in the same way, but we will return to this issue later in the chapter.

Between onset and termination is *duration*, which answers the question: how long do individuals remain in gangs? In relation to Glen Elder’s life course concepts, the duration of gang membership can be thought of as a trajectory because it is something that is sustained over a period of time. Robert Sampson and John Laub (1993, 8) defined a trajectory as “a pathway or line of development over the life span.” It is the interweaving of life-course trajectories that helps us understand and explain what occurs throughout one’s life. In terms of gang membership, however, it is our contention that there are official and unofficial gang trajectories. The former refers to duration, which is bookended by the periods of onset and termination. The latter refers to the antecedent and ensuing periods of gang membership—pre- and postofficial gang membership—where the connection to the gang or the level of gang involvement is nonzero. While we concentrate on official gang trajectories in our following review, it is important for readers to recognize that future and former gang members may maintain social and emotional ties to the gang (Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Pyrooz et al. 2010), or what Pyrooz et al. (2012) referred to as gang embeddedness. As life-course researchers have commented, defining the onset and termination of criminal behavior can be muddy (Kazemian 2007).

Now that we have discussed the key life-course concepts for understanding gang membership, we turn to discussing the three prominent phases of gang involvement in the life course, including *joining the gang*, *life in the gang*, and *leaving*

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the gang. We focus on the motives and methods surrounding the movement into and out of gangs, aspects of life in the gang, emphasizing variation among gang members in their length of involvement and the nature of their involvement.

### JOINING THE GANG

#### Why Do Adolescents Join Gangs?

We begin by exploring the motivations for joining a gang. This differs from Chapter 2, where we discussed the risk factors associated with gang membership. Motivations for gang joining are more subjective, containing qualitative features relating to the justifications or reasoning for joining a gang. Given what we know about the nature of gangs, it is important to gain a better understanding of why youth would join a group that puts them at greater risk for personal victimization and increases their chances of getting arrested for bad behaviors and going to prison (see Chapter 5). Below, we review what researchers have found about the motivations for gang joining based not only on personal observations, but also on interviews with thousands of gang members.

No single path exists that can capture the reasons or the processes by which individuals come to join a gang. Responses to the question—why did you join a gang?—typically include (1) family or peer influences, (2) protection, (3) money or material influences, (4) belonging, excitement, or status, and (5) some other reason. Of course, there is considerable overlap across these components, but a key issue to understand in this context is whether individuals are pulled or pushed into gang membership. Young people who are pulled into membership join their gang because of the attractions it offers them—the promise or expectation of friendship, opportunities to make money, or the ability to provide something for the neighborhood. Being pushed into the gang conveys a very different motivation for joining the gang. Individuals who see themselves as pushed into gang membership join their gang out of fear for physical consequences if they do not do so, or because they see themselves as powerless to resist the temptations of gang life.

There is considerable evidence about the distinction between pushes and pulls, a distinction that is important because it can help guide responses to gang problems. Most available evidence supports the view that individuals are pulled toward their gangs because of what they see as the positive features of gang involvement. Most gang members report that they joined their gangs to maintain affiliations with their friends or because a number of their friends were members. Let's face it: teenagers have a powerful urge to be around their friends, and adolescence is a time of life when the need to affiliate with one's peers and reject or minimize the importance of relationships with parents is great. So the role of friendship in gang joining should come as no great surprise.

But friends are not the only strong influence on motivating youth to join gangs. Family and neighborhood plays an equal, if not greater, role. Indeed, among some families and in some neighborhoods, gangs represent a source of cultural pride and identification. Moore (1988), Vigil (1990), and Padilla (1992)

all document the important support for the neighborhood and Pyrooz (2009) detailed aunts, parents, and even grandparents not necessarily provide encouragement may not discourage gang involvement it or because they were involved when interviewing 252 gang members found that family or friends are the majority of gang members.

Other gang members describe their entry through drug sales, but often through family (Padilla 1992; Sanchez-Jarvinen 1992). They typically describe the opportunity that allows for a slow progression through the ranks, produces quick promotion, and provides other secondary benefits (work and money) (Decker 1992).

Indeed, in their interviews with a drug gang's foot soldier gang members, the appearance of the opportunity provides other secondary benefits (allows its members to satisfy needs, clothes), and to impress others.

It was Frederic Thrasher who popularized the idea of the "quest" for adventure, fun, and risky behavior. Gang members steal from stores, vandalize property, and smoke cigarettes. Gang membership provides social capital not normally provided by the neighborhood. Thus, joining a gang not only provides social capital via the access to neighborhood get-togethers (Moule, Decker, and Pyrooz 2009), but also provides a sense of belonging. Prospective gang members are often recruited through family or friends. For some, this is enough to join their gang.

There is a darker side to gang membership. A substantial source of protection, either from rival gangs or from urban neighborhoods. By joining certain schools with acting as a source of protection that most young men are afraid to join their gang. A substantial source of protection, either from rival gangs or from urban neighborhoods. By joining certain schools with acting as a source of protection that most young men are afraid to join their gang.

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all document the important role these gangs play in their communities by providing support for the neighborhood and broader cultural values. Likewise, Kissner and Pyrooz (2009) detailed the importance of having siblings, cousins, uncles and aunts, parents, and even grandparents in gangs. While these family members do not necessarily provide encouragement to enter gangs (although some do), they may not discourage gang involvement either because they see nothing wrong with it or because they were involved in gangs in their youth. For the above reasons, when interviewing 252 gang members in Rochester, NY, Thornberry et al. (2003) found that family or friends was the primary reason for gang joining given by the majority of gang members.

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Other gang members point to the promise of making money, typically through drug sales, but often through other crimes such as robbery or burglary (Padilla 1992; Sanchez-Jankowski 1991; Skolnick 1990). Gang members routinely describe the opportunity to make money that membership in a gang offers them. And that opportunity is not one that requires long hours, hard work, and slow progression through the ranks. Selling drugs, whether by gang members or others, produces quick profits and is consistent with the desire for quick gratification that characterizes many adolescents' view of the relationship between work and money (Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Levitt and Venkatesh 2000). Indeed, in their interviews with gang members in Chicago and supplementary analysis of a drug gang's finances, Levitt and Venkatesh (2000) reported that foot soldier gang members are poorly compensated for their efforts, but that the appearance of the opportunity for serious profits kept them motivated. Money provides other secondary attractions to gang membership, particularly as money allows its members to satisfy consumer needs (spending money on food, movies, clothes), and to impress members of the opposite sex.

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It was Frederic Thrasher (1927) who characterized the motivation to associate with gangs as the "quest for a new experience." Gang membership is exciting, adventurous, fun, and risky. When in the company of fellow gang members, youths steal from stores, vandalize buildings, get into fights, and drink alcohol and smoke cigarettes. Gang membership affords a level of respect, power, and sense of belonging not normally provided to youth, especially those from marginalized settings. Thus, joining a gang not only provides immediate status, but also an infusion of social capital via the access to a network of fellow gang members with resources (Moule, Decker, and Pyrooz 2013). Gang hangouts are often the central point for neighborhood get-togethers, where there is access to drugs and alcohol and girls. Prospective gang members recognize the status enhancements tied to joining a gang. For some, this is enough to tip the scale in favor of gang joining.

Adventure  
Challenge

There is a darker side to gangs and urban life that compels some young people to join their gang. A substantial fraction of young people join their gang seeking protection, either from rival gangs or just from the violence that lurks in many urban neighborhoods. By virtue of living in certain neighborhoods or attending certain schools with active gang members, there is sometimes an expectation that most young men are affiliated with a gang. Many young men in Felix Padilla

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(1992) and Scott Decker and Barrick Van Winkle's (1996) studies reported that they eventually joined a gang because they got tired of being accused of being a member of one gang or another. Certainly living in a neighborhood dominated by one gang would lead outsiders to presume gang membership over time. But there is another reason, one more troubling, that compels many young people to join their gang—fear of the consequences of not being a member. Quite simply, a number of individuals are targeted for membership, either because of where they live, who they are, or the perception that they can be coerced into gang membership. This is especially likely in those neighborhoods where gangs dominate the local scene, and is the likely reason that Decker and Van Winkle (1996) found that “protection” was the most common motivation for gang joining among gang members in St. Louis.

It is instructive to see once again the views of gang members. Reflecting their higher levels of organization (recall our discussion in Chapter 3), members of the Gangster Disciples, in the chronic gang city of Chicago, who were being held in Joliet Prison in Illinois stated their views:

I got cut across the face by opposition, Vice Lords, and although my family kept me away from that life, believe me, when this happened, they assessed the surrounding circumstances and automatically got in it.

I didn't even know at the time that I was in a gang. I was recognized because of my big brother and father were members.

And other imprisoned Gangster Disciples saw joining the gang as part of the normal turn of events in their neighborhoods.

I wouldn't say I joined it, I wasn't forced, I joined it because it was the right thing to do at that appropriate time. I didn't see that by joining them it would be prosperous in any form or fashion, it was just something to do at the time, back then.

The gang was a neighborhood thing, young, ignorant. It's not like people joined gangs for specific purposes, it's not like that.

Another inmate offered a similar opinion:

Mainly growing up, my friends was into it [the Gangster Disciples] and I was around it so I fell into it.

San Diego gang members, at the time an emerging gang city, echoed the same reasons offered by Chicago gang members for joining their gang. Despite the differences in cities, the reasons were very similar. One offered that they joined out of “curiosity.” For others, the neighborhood had a lot to do with getting in the gang.

I didn't really join. It was just where I stay, where I grew up at, that's where it was. Like you walk to the store or something or walk to school and they were all from the gang.

I think really I just wanted to get in it.

Actually what it is, it's just that you grow up with people and you hang together and you kind of watch each other's back. Someone come to your neighborhood

and as long as it's one on one 'em.

Gang members from St. Louis explain why they joined their gang, give explanations, or long-standing

I ain't going to say it's going to me where I was staying became one of them.

When I moved over here [to Chicago] together and stuff. I just stay. To be in a gang you have friends going out cause if you ain't

Other gang members in Chicago explain joining the gang. However, they discuss the informal aspects of gang

Money. Money and just be what you like to do.

Help me make money. Help

In Phoenix, a 42-year-old man joined their gang when they

[We] didn't have anything to do, know, anything to do some of that nature when I was

### How Do Adolescents Join

Regardless of the motivation, the process takes place over time, and the decision has been made in the gang process is initiated at onset. Nearly every document on the process, and there is variation in the current members of the gang

The most common form of initiation is the “circle” initiation. Observers of the gang scene in Milwaukee (among other cities) describe the initiation as a circle of gang members (also known as “the circle”) and must be initiated with their fists, feet, and occasional initiations are often quite brutal.

Beat

and as long as it's one on one you let it go but if they bring another then you check 'em.

Gang members from St. Louis provided similar responses to questions about why they joined their gang. Most offered explanations that focused on informal explanations, or long-standing friendships:

I ain't going to say it's going to be my life but it was just something that came up to me where I was staying. I was just with the fellas and it just happened that I became one of them.

When I moved over here [to St. Louis] I started hanging with them. We herded together and stuff. I just started hanging with them.

To be in a gang you have friends. It's kinda good to be with some friends instead of going out cause if you ain't got no friends, it's really hard to get along out there.

Other gang members in St. Louis pointed to money as their motivation in joining the gang. However, even these gang members recognize the importance of the informal aspects of gang membership:

Money. Money and just being around a whole bunch of guys that like to do stuff that you like to do.

Help me make money. Help me protect myself. Really everything.

In Phoenix, a 42-year-old former gang member said that he and his friends joined their gang when they were bored:

[We] didn't have anything to do. So we started GTA's (Grand Theft Auto). You know, anything to do something 'cause we didn't have Parks and Rec and things of that nature when I was growing up, you know.

**How Do Adolescents Join Gangs?**

*(Initiation)*

Regardless of the motivation for joining a gang, becoming a member typically takes place over time, and the individual gradually adopts a gang identity. But once the decision has been made (or in some cases, coerced), the next important step in the gang process is initiation. In relation to Figure 4.1, this occurs at the time of onset. Nearly every documented gang in the United States has an initiation process, and there is variation in how initiation rituals occur. Most are rather crude with few formal aspects to them and involve some form of violence, typically by current members of the gang directed against the initiate.

The most common form of initiation reported is that of being "beaten in." Observers of the gang scene in Los Angeles, San Diego, St. Louis, Chicago, and Milwaukee (among other cities) report that this is the preferred method in most gang initiations. In this scenario, the individual being initiated either stands in the middle of a circle and must fight his or her way out, or must run between two lines of gang members (also known as the "gauntlet") who pummel him or her with their fists, feet, and occasionally other objects like bricks, rocks, and sticks. These initiations are often quite brutal, but end with "hugs" for the new member and the

*1*  
*Joining*

*2*

*Beating* ←

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offering of a few words of unity for the gang. The fact that violence is a part of the very first experience within the gang is quite important. It sends a message to the new gang member that violence is important to the gang, is expected of all members, and constantly lurks beneath the surface of gang life.

This is not the only way that youths join their gangs. Often an older recruit or the sibling of a current gang member will be required to go on a "mission" against a rival gang. While this can take a variety of forms, it typically requires the recruit to fight or shoot a rival gang member, or conduct a crime such as robbery in rival gang territory. The initiation of female gang members merits comment at this time, though we address female gang membership in more detail in Chapter 6. Most observers of the female gang scene report that females tend to be initiated in the same way that males are, through beating in, often by both males and females. A number of highly publicized reports also document rapes of prospective female gang members. However, there is no widespread support for this as the typical way that females are initiated into their gangs. Rather, the patterns that occur for males and females appear to be similar.

The picture of life in a gang that has emerged to this point has emphasized the diversity of such experiences. The views of gang members are important in this regard. Again we present the views of active gang members on the issue of initiation. First, we examine the views of members of the Gangster Disciples from Chicago. They may be the most organized gang in the United States, yet they report initiation rituals similar to, if not less organized than, those in other cities.

For the initiation, I had to prove my loyalty, prove how much I wanted to become a part of it and basically what I believed in.

To become a part of it, you just have to become sincere.

Other Gangster Disciples said that they had to endure physical violence as part of their initiation:

Just get beat up.

And some members reported that they had to engage in crime:

Steal and hold drugs.

I proved myself through doing crimes.

Back then you had to prove your loyalty. So there was a guy that had turned State [evidence] on a member in the neighborhood and we took care of him.

The story was much the same in San Diego and St. Louis. Ironically, in these emerging gang cities, the initiation focused much more on violence. In almost all cases, potential gang members were "beaten in" as their initiation. In many cases, this was described as being "jumped in." The first three responses were from Chicano gang members in San Diego:

Some people get their ass kicked into the dirt.

I had to prove to them that I'm down. Prove to them, get in fights.

Actually, they beat the crap out of me.

Their initiation experience in African American gangs:

I had to have 15 dudes ju-  
Kill a couple of people, I  
them.

I had to get into a fight, I

Now that we have discussed gangs, we turn to discussing the context of the life course.

### Are All Gang Members

The answer to this question involved in the gang. From are different levels of em- als who are the most loos- like to use this term whe- may imitate gang behavior late 1980s, a number of c denied that they had real g the obvious signs of such efforts were counterprodu in their communities and, the influence of gangs and gang member being held t told us: **no such th**

There ain't no such thing real gang member.

It is instructive to exam their gang. As noted above, and those roles are not very Diego, San Antonio, Miami (Curry, Ball, and Decker 1: member in St. Louis told u:

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half will go this way.

These views were echo Diego gang members whos gangs with few roles and lit

3 Similar Patterns for women!

Same joining process for M & F

Their initiation experiences mirrored those of St. Louis gang members from African American gangs:

I had to have 15 dudes jump me.

Kill a couple of people, shoot them. Lay somebody on the ground and stomp them.

I had to get into a fight, I had to lie there and be hit, take the pain.

Now that we have discussed why youth enter gangs and how youth enter gangs, we turn to discussing life in the gang in relation to gang membership in the context of the life course.

## LIFE IN THE GANG

### Are All Gang Members Equally Involved in Gangs?

The answer to this question is no; clearly not all gang members are equally involved in the gang. From leaders to foot soldiers to fringe members, there are different levels of embeddedness in the gang. Some refer to the individuals who are the most loosely tied to the gang as "wannabes." We do not really like to use this term when referring to gang members or young people who may imitate gang behavior or styles but are not fully initiated members. In the late 1980s, a number of cities (such as Cleveland, Columbus, and St. Louis) denied that they had real gang problems and real gang members by dismissing the obvious signs of such activities as simply the product of wannabes. These efforts were counterproductive because they let gang members gain a foothold in their communities and, as a consequence, it was more difficult to minimize the influence of gangs and respond to the problems they created. As a young gang member being held for a crime in the St. Louis juvenile detention center told us:

*no such thing as a wannabe/LOL*

There ain't no such thing as a wannabe. He can shoot, he can kill you just like a real gang member.

It is instructive to examine what gang members say about the different roles in their gang. As noted above, gangs in emerging gang cities tend to have fewer roles, and those roles are not very well defined. Such gangs, in cities like Milwaukee, San Diego, San Antonio, Miami, Kansas City, and hundreds of other American cities (Curry, Ball, and Decker 1996) confirm this observation. For example, this gang member in St. Louis told us:

If we [the gang members] want something, all of us have to agree.

Somebody say, let's go do this. Like one person say, I'll go. It be like half the people go this way and then if you don't want to go with them half will go that way and half will go this way.

These views were echoed by many San Diego gang members. Most of the San Diego gang members whose views we are familiar with reflected loosely organized gangs with few roles and little stability to those roles:

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*-women!*

There ain't no shot callers. It's got nothing to do with a gang either.

They [all gang members] are equal, they are all hardcore, they are all treated equal.

In those rare instances when different roles were identified, they would hardly qualify as highly specialized jobs that require differentiated skills:

Yeah, there is different levels. There's some that just kick back and drink beer.

It's not like, it's not levels. I respect my homeboy and he respects me, but I don't respect him more than I respect others.

It's all one thing. It's just the older guys and then the youngsters.

However, our interviews with Gangster Disciples from Chicago, among the best-organized gangs in the country, revealed quite a different picture. GDs could identify different roles by name and job and knew what it took to move from one role to another. These observations suggest a much more organized gang than found in most emerging gang cities:

It goes from King, to the Board of Directors, the Generals, the First Captains. The rest is just the membership, the enforcers. Chairman, Board Members, Governors, Regents, Chief of Security, Foot Soldiers.

The Latin Kings, a Latino/a gang in Chicago, also had roles that were similar to those of the Gangster Disciples:

You got the Jefe, that's the highest. Then the Cacina, second. Soldiers, the lowest. There is the PeeWees and the Crowns.

Based on Malcolm Klein's (1971) study of Los Angeles gang members, many researchers distinguished gang members according to core and fringe status. Core gang members were individuals involved in the gang for more than a year, actively involved in the commission of crimes with other gang members, and tended to be older (at least age 16) and more involved in gang activities. Fringe gang members, on the other hand, have less involvement in the activities of the gang and are less often involved in key gang activities such as drive-by shootings, initiations, and, when they occur, meetings. As Mark Fleisher (1998), in his study of the Fremont Hustlers in Kansas City, put it: there is "Fremont," and there is "Fremont-Fremont." Clearly, the latter are the individuals most closely identified with the gang.

David Pyrooz and colleagues (2012) contended that there were additional levels of membership associated with being a gang member. After all, if, as Terence Thornberry and colleagues (2003, 6) recognized, "not all gang members are created equal," then a core/fringe categorization only loosens the restriction from one (gang member) to only two (core or fringe gang member) categories. Instead, based on their study of over 200 gang members in Philadelphia and Phoenix, Pyrooz and colleagues (2012) outlined the five components that distinguish gang members, including:

embed



1. Contact with the gang and time spent in gang
2. Position in the gang, member, which accounts of gang members in the
3. Importance of the gang their affiliation with the
4. Friends outside of the tion theory and peer
5. Participation in gang ment in serious, group

Together, these five iter embeddedness, which refers ant network (3). This conce gang associates to regular gar sters. Similarly, it accounts fc guish gang members, includi Importantly, gang embeddec OGs) who have logged a con (perhaps as many as five or si and, as a consequence, are af OGs do not necessarily "put i in the gang than a younger, Klein's (2011a, 1038) call that times you cannot take the ga ates different forms of identifi

There is a dynamic con time. Prospective gang men joining the gang or getting i after its entrance after greater ment in gang activities. At th embeddedness, by virtue of r remain much lower than ful bers' levels of embeddedness the gang, as their contact, pe We now turn to studies that. to termination, or the durati

### How Long Do Adolescen

There is the popular view th gang is in a coffin. Hence, th last two decades, access to lo ing the length of gang traje

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# Embeddedness

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1. *Contact with the gang*, which taps components of routine activities theory and time spent in gang settings;
2. *Position in the gang*, including leadership, top person/not a leader, and member, which accounts for rank or influence and the structural location of gang members in the gang;
3. *Importance of the gang*, a cognitive indicator of the value they assign to their affiliation with the gang;
4. *Friends outside of the gang*, which taps components of differential association theory and peer influence;
5. *Participation in gang assaults*, an indicator that captures individual involvement in serious, group-based activities.

Embed

Together, these five items capture what Pyrooz and colleagues called gang embeddedness, which refers to "individual immersion within an enduring deviant network" (3). This concept accounts for a wide range of gang members, from gang associates to regular gang members to gang leaders to OGs, or original gangsters. Similarly, it accounts for a wide range of ideas that are often used to distinguish gang members, including rank, status, behavior, involvement, and identity. Importantly, gang embeddedness recognizes that there are older members (i.e., OGs) who have logged a considerable number of years as members of their gangs (perhaps as many as five or six years as a member), are in a position to obtain rank and, as a consequence, are afforded special status and perform unique duties. Yet OGs do not necessarily "put in work" like they used to, and are thus less embedded in the gang than a younger, more active gang member. In appealing to Malcolm Klein's (2011a, 1038) call that "you can take the member out of the gang, but sometimes you cannot take the gang out of the member," gang embeddedness appreciates different forms of identity and adherence to gangs.

There is a dynamic component to gang embeddedness, as it fluctuates over time. Prospective gang members ramp up their level of embeddedness prior to joining the gang or getting initiated into the gang, reaching its peak some time after its entrance after greater immersion in the gang via participation and involvement in gang activities. At the same time, nongang youth can have levels of gang embeddedness, by virtue of neighborhood or family connections, but it will likely remain much lower than full-fledged gang members. Finally, former gang members' levels of embeddedness should decline as they continue to move away from the gang, as their contact, positioning, and identification with the gang declines. We now turn to studies that have examined the length of this process, from onset to termination, or the duration of involvement in gangs.

## How Long Do Adolescents Remain in Gangs?

There is the popular view that, once a youth joins a gang, the only way to leave a gang is in a coffin. Hence, the phrase "blood in, blood out." Fortunately, over the last two decades, access to longitudinal data has been instrumental in understanding the length of gang trajectories, and whether blood in/blood out is myth or

I'm brown in here, where it counts

Duration:  
(1 year)

✓

# One year.

72 CONFRONTING GANGS

reality. Longitudinal data ask youth about their gang involvement over systematic time intervals—for example, every six months or every year. From this, researchers can construct gang member trajectories to determine when youth join gangs (see Chapter 1) and how long they remain in gangs. These are important patterns to understand because, as we will document in Chapter 5, reducing the length of gang membership will reduce rates of criminal involvement and victimization experiences.

Table 4.1 displays the findings from longitudinal studies in Denver, Philadelphia and Phoenix (the two Pathways study sites), Pittsburgh, Rochester, a multisite US sample (GREAT), and a national study (NLSY97). They provided information on the trajectories of gang membership. Many readers might find the results in Table 4.1 surprising. The modal length of gang membership, or most common response, is one year. Of the 1,789 gang members included in these studies, 962 of them reported only one year of gang membership. Comparatively, only 355 gang members remained in gangs for three or more years.

These findings tell us several things. First, trajectories of gang membership are relatively brief, indicating that gang members move in and out of gangs fairly quickly. Second, as a result of the transient nature of gang membership, gangs exert very little control over their members and their decisions to leave the gang. Third, gangs must be replenished routinely, indicating a rather active recruiting strategy. Fourth, persistent gang membership is relatively rare, with this group constituting the minority group in all of the studies. This means that while most gang members

Table 4.1 Time (in Years) Spent in Gangs

|                         | N   | YEARS OF GANG MEMBERSHIP (%) |         |                 |          | STUDY                             |
|-------------------------|-----|------------------------------|---------|-----------------|----------|-----------------------------------|
|                         |     | 1 YEAR                       | 2 YEARS | 3 YEARS         | 4+ YEARS |                                   |
| NLSY97 <sup>a</sup>     | 837 | 48                           | 30      | 12              | 10       | Pyrooz (2013)                     |
| Denver <sup>b</sup>     | 90  | 67                           | 24      | 6               | 3        | Esbensen and Huizinga (1993, 575) |
| GREAT <sup>b,c</sup>    | 140 | 58                           | 34      | 6               | 2        | Melde et al. (2012)               |
| Pathways <sup>a</sup>   | 226 | 62                           | 13      | 8               | 16       | Pyrooz et al. (2011)              |
| Pittsburgh <sup>d</sup> | 165 | 48                           | 25      | 27 <sup>d</sup> | —        | Gordon et al. (2004, 67, 86)      |
| Rochester <sup>b</sup>  | 207 | 55                           | 28      | 12              | 5        | Thornberry et al. (2003, 39)      |
| Seattle <sup>b</sup>    | 124 | 69                           | 17      | 11              | 3        | Hill et al. (2001, 3)             |

<sup>a</sup>Based on excluding intermittent and missing waves of self-reported gang membership from the tally of years of gang membership (i.e., Year 1 gang, Year 2 no gang, Year 3 gang = 2 years of gang membership).

<sup>b</sup>Based on data where respondents completed questionnaires across the study period.

<sup>c</sup>Based on consecutive years of gang membership.

<sup>d</sup>Gordon et al. reported only for gang members with one and two years, or 48% and 25% of the gang subset of the sample; thus the 27% value is inferred from these figures.

diff J

cycle out of the gang without resources to persistent gang findings are overwhelmingly characterizing the nature of the d

Three studies have address (2001) in Seattle, Chris Meld Pyrooz and colleagues (2012 al. and Melde et al. studies wa year versus those who remaine in many of the traditional early violence involvement, a nalizing behavior (e.g., aggr differentiate one year and tw role of characteristics specifi motivations for joining—to in older individuals, gang me in violence and more victimi of gang membership. In addi tive purposes increased the l joining for economic reasons:

In the Philadelphia and included traditional risk fact also gang-related factors, inc organizational structure. Im length of gang membership, that gang members' level of indicators of continued gar dedness cycled out of the g with high levels of embedd they found that males, black in gangs for longer periods parts. Finally, they found th in gangs for longer periods. they found no relationship b of gang involvement.

Together, these findings ity), gang (embeddedness, g tors (low self-control, extern combine to explain how lon findings and demonstrate m membership. Importantly, th and various factors help expl shift our focus from life in th

# diff f for diff lengths

(new slide)

Research 1

Protect US  
Melde

2

3

Research Summary

00

cycle out of the gang without intervention, gang programming should direct their resources to persistent gang members. The problem, however, is that these findings do not tell us who stays in gangs for the longest periods. That is to say, these findings are overwhelmingly descriptive, albeit very informative, and avoid characterizing the nature of the duration of gang membership.

Three studies have addressed this line of questioning, including Karl Hill et al. (2001) in Seattle, Chris Melde et al. (2012) in the multisite US sample, and David Pyrooz and colleagues (2012) in Philadelphia and Phoenix. The goal in the Hill et al. and Melde et al. studies was to distinguish those who remained in gangs for one year versus those who remained in gangs for more than one year. Hill et al. examined many of the traditional risk factors we mentioned in Chapter 2, finding that early violence involvement, associating with antisocial peers, and exhibiting externalizing behavior (e.g., aggression, oppositional behavior, hyperactivity) could differentiate one year and two-plus year gang members. Melde et al. explored the role of characteristics specific to gangs—individual centrality, gang organization, motivations for joining—to differentiate these groups. They found that increases in older individuals, gang members in more organized gangs, greater involvement in violence and more victimization experiences, all corresponded to multiple years of gang membership. In addition, they found that while joining a gang for protective purposes increased the likelihood of two or more years of gang membership, joining for economic reasons was negatively related.

In the Philadelphia and Phoenix study, Pyrooz and his colleagues not only included traditional risk factors (e.g., strains, low self-control, social bonds), but also gang-related factors, including the concept of gang embeddedness and gang organizational structure. Importantly, they examined factors related to the entire length of gang membership, not just one or two years of involvement. They found that gang members' level of embeddedness in a gang was among the strongest indicators of continued gang membership. Those with low levels of embeddedness cycled out of the gang quickly, whereas the departure rates for those with high levels of embeddedness were delayed for several years. In addition, they found that males, blacks, Hispanics, and Phoenix gang members remained in gangs for longer periods than their female, white, and Philadelphia counterparts. Finally, they found that those with lower levels of self-control remained in gangs for longer periods. Importantly, unlike the Seattle and GREAT studies, they found no relationship between delinquency or victimization with the length of gang involvement.

Together, these findings tell us that demographic (age, gender, race, ethnicity), gang (embeddedness, gang organization, motivations for joining), risk factors (low self-control, externalization, violence involvement), and regional factors combine to explain how long individuals remain in gangs. These are important findings and demonstrate measureable indicators related to the duration of gang membership. Importantly, these findings also tell us that people move out of gangs, and various factors help explain why some do more quickly than others. We now shift our focus from life in the gang to the transition out of the gang.

ing involvement over systematic every year. From this, research-ermine when youth join gangs s. These are important patterns Chapter 5, reducing the length involvement and victimization

gitudinal studies in Denver, y sites), Pittsburgh, Rochester, udy (NLSY97). They provided p. Many readers might find the of gang membership, or most embers included in these stud- mbership. Comparatively, only ore years.

jectories of gang membership nove in and out of gangs fairly gang membership, gangs exert sions to leave the gang. Third, urther active recruiting strategy. e, with this group constituting that while most gang members

| MEMBERSHIP (%) |                                   |
|----------------|-----------------------------------|
| YEARS STUDY    |                                   |
| 10             | Pyrooz (2013)                     |
| 3              | Esbensen and Huizinga (1993, 575) |
| 2              | Melde et al. (2012)               |
| 16             | Pyrooz et al. (2011)              |
| —              | Gordon et al. (2004, 67, 86)      |
| 5              | Thornberry et al. (2003, 39)      |
| 3              | Hill et al. (2001, 3)             |

ed gang membership from the tally of gang = 2 years of gang membership). ss the study period.

years, or 48% and 25% of the gang res.

Leaving (exit)

LEAVING THE GANG

Leaving the gang is a process. Gang desistance is defined as the "declining probability of gang membership—the reduction from peak to trivial levels of gang membership" (Pyrooz and Decker 2011, 419). This definition refers to the entire "back half" of unofficial gang trajectories. That is, whereas the official gang trajectory concludes at the point a gang member no longer identifies with the gang, the unofficial trajectory concludes when a former gang member has few gang ties, trivial gang embeddedness, and a low likelihood of gang membership. The rate at which gang members reduce their involvement in the gang differs across individuals, regardless of whether we focus on the movement from peak gang involvement (around age 15) in Figure 4.1 to official (around age 17) or unofficial (around age 19) disengagement from gangs.

Scott Decker and Janet Lauritsen (2002) identified how the process of gang desistance varies across individuals. Based on semi-structured interviews with 24 former gang members in St. Louis, they found that some gang members left the gang abruptly ("knifing off") while others gradually desisted from the gang ("drifting off"). Knifing off is characterized by suddenly leaving the gang, which can be fueled by a significant event, such as the death of a friend as a result of gang violence. Drifting off takes place gradually as a result of shifting ties and social connections to the gang over a longer period of time. In essence, the slope from Figure 4.1 declines at a slower rate for "drifters" and at a faster rate for the "knifers." That said, Decker and Lauritsen (2002) found that it is more common for people to drift away from the gang rather than leaving quickly. Much of this is likely due to the natural progression from adolescence to adulthood where adolescents and young adults began to enter into new social arenas, continuing their education, taking jobs, and entering into relationships. These changes slowly disrupt social networks.

A former Phoenix gang member said,

I was like okay, I'm tired of, you know what I mean, havin' my Mom scrapin' her knees up every night praying for me that I come home safe.

A currently active Hispanic gang member in Los Angeles who was taking steps to pull himself out of his gang told us of his inspiration for wanting to get out: "It was God, bro." This theme was echoed by several other Hispanic gang members in Los Angeles, especially those in their thirties and older.

Over time, for both pathways of gang desistance, the departure is officially sealed as the individual spends less time with fellow gang members, and becomes involved in conventional activities (Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Vigil 1988; see also Spergel 1995, 105). In Figure 4.2, we use an indicator that allows us to understand how far out of the gang former gang members are, which we believe provides a more accurate characterization of the desistance process. Some former gang members waver, indicating they are barely removed, while others indicate unequivocally that they are completely removed from the gang. More importantly, what prompts this movement away from the gang?

O1  
entire back half  
O2  
knifing + drifting

1. Weakly

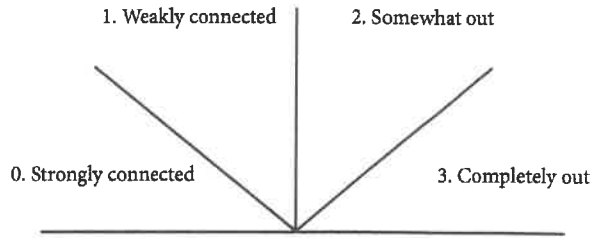
0. Strongly connect

Figure 4.2 How Far Out of the G

Why Do Gang Members I

Motives for leaving the gang to exit the gang. Much like t be thought of as the subjecti onset of gang membership, terms of push and pull factors internal to the gang tha ble. Typical push motives in to avoid trouble and violenc back." The factors inspire o Pull motives are factors exte away from the group. Typica as the motivation for exiting tuted attractions to the gang, external to the gang. Simila gangs, in the case of desistan continued participation.

In a recent article, two o Decker 2011) analyzed the 1 juvenile detention facilities a were asked about their expe tral factor that encouraged t and Decker found that two- due to push factors, or fact way: gang members did not babies, or girlfriends; most l enticing in the first place— caution that their study foc youth from the informal soc that might benefit older ga that gang members do not n own terms. Yet "the factors t cussed in Chapters 1, 3, and !



See book

Figure 4.2 How Far Out of the Gang Are Former Gang Members?

**Why Do Gang Members Leave the Gang?**

Motives for leaving the gang refer to reasons that influenced a gang member to exit the gang. Much like the onset of gang membership, this dimension can be thought of as the subjective component in this process. Again similar to the onset of gang membership, motives for leaving the gang can be organized in terms of *push* and *pull* factors (Pyrooz and Decker 2011). Push motives are factors internal to the gang that make persistence in gang membership undesirable. Typical push motives include "getting tired of the gang lifestyle," "wanting to avoid trouble and violence," and "getting tired of always having to watch my back." The factors inspire one to seek out and select into other social arenas. Pull motives are factors external to the gang that steer or "yank" gang members away from the group. Typical pull motives include girlfriends, jobs, or children as the motivation for exiting the gang. Unlike onset, where pull factors constituted attractions to the gang, in the case of desistance pull factors are attractions external to the gang. Similarly, whereas push factors compelled youth to join gangs, in the case of desistance push factors are internal pressures to discourage continued participation.

Push out  
0.1

Pull out  
0.2

In a recent article, two of the authors of this book (David Pyrooz and Scott Decker 2011) analyzed the responses of 84 former gang members in Phoenix juvenile detention facilities about their motives for leaving the gang. The youths were asked about their experiences with gangs and who or what was the central factor that encouraged them to renounce their gang membership. Pyrooz and Decker found that two-thirds of the former gang members left their gang due to push factors, or factors internal to the gang. Let us state this another way: gang members did not leave the gang because of social intervention, jobs, babies, or girlfriends; most left because of the very factors that made the gang enticing in the first place—action, parties, fights, violence. The authors did caution that their study focused on teenagers, which excludes many of these youth from the informal social controls (jobs, cohabitation, marriage, military) that might benefit older gang members. Nevertheless, such findings indicate that gang members do not need to be coerced to leave; they can leave on their own terms. Yet "the factors that might make gangs qualitatively unique [as discussed in Chapters 1, 3, and 5], such as their group processes and propensity for

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defined as the "declining proba-  
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ition refers to the entire "back  
as the official gang trajectory  
ntifies with the gang, the unof-  
mber has few gang ties, trivial  
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ng differs across individuals,  
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t some gang members left the  
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ifting ties and social connec-  
ence, the slope from Figure 4.1  
rate for the "knifers." That said,  
mmon for people to drift away  
this is likely due to the natural  
adolescents and young adults  
eir education, taking jobs, and  
rupt social networks.

havin' my Mom scrapin' her  
ne safe.

Los Angeles who was taking  
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violence, may also be contributing to turnover in the ranks" (Pyrooz and Decker 2011, 421).

These themes are echoed in our multisite study of gang desistance in Cleveland, Fresno, Los Angeles, Phoenix, and St. Louis (Decker and Pyrooz 2011), as well as in the research by Diego Vigil (1988; 2002) in Southern California, and Molly Moloney and colleagues (2009) in the San Francisco Bay Area. Many of the gang members from our multisite study told us that the gang lifestyle just got to be too much for them, exacting a toll due to serious pressures and difficulties associated with getting arrested, getting stopped by the police, and living under the victimization.

It was a young thing. I experienced the life and now it is time to experience something else (Decker and Pyrooz 2011, 13).

Initially, while violence might be exciting, there are consequences. These consequences work against gang life, especially when combined with what Giordano et al. (2002) called "hooks for change," and prompt gang members to venture away from it:

[I got out] because I got to realizing it wasn't my type of life. I didn't want to live that type of life [after getting stabbed] (Decker and Lauritsen 2002, 57).

The crazy stuff wasn't for me no more. I saw other guys go down and I knew it was just a matter of time before I paid the price, you know. I met my girlfriend and she was always on me about getting out of the gang. She gave me a reason, but I was already tired. I was tired of fighting all the time, running around all the time (Vigil 2002, 63).

While Pyrooz and Decker (2011) found more evidence to support push factors, pull factors are extremely important. A former gang member from Ontario, California commented that:

[My girlfriend] really kept me from going sour and hanging out with all of the vatos... She really made me what I am right now... She made me do my homework, she would go and help me read (Vigil 1988, 108).

A former Phoenix gang member told us that having a child was a turning point for him:

Uh, I mean, I have a child now, so I try to look at myself as a responsible man, a man that should go out, and uh, have money for my kid, you know what I mean? I look at myself as a father.

Similarly, as a result of his girlfriend's pregnancy, a gang member in the San Francisco Bay Area stated:

I didn't even wanna be out there [anymore]. I wanted to get a legal job... Instead of being out on the street, I was in the house or the hospital... I wasn't smoking weed or doin' drugs... Bein' more responsible, more disciplined. And stopped chillin' outside as much... I stopped robbin' people, stealin' cars (Moloney et al. 2009, 312).

### How Do Gang Members Leave?

Whatever their motivation for leaving, it is done. How does someone exit a gang? That is, what is that is unafraid of using violence? As mentioned above, it is common for gang members to leave with "blood in, blood out"—it is often believed that the cost of leaving is either the death of one's mother or murdering one's mother (Decker and Pyrooz 2011). It is reported that gang members who leave the gang without a ritual way to leave the gang was to leave the gang ritually (usually one's mother), or coming out process requires the presence of other forms of interpersonal communication, ceremonial actions, the individual paying their debt to the gang. An individual who is a gang member to commit a violent act before leaving the gang. Many gang members use ritual methods for joining the gang and leaving a gang against a rival gang.

To understand how gang members leave, Decker (2011) described the hostile and nonhostile departure methods, some degree of ceremony to formalize the process. In some methods, alternatively, do not formalizes leaving the gang. In other methods, gang members walked away without representation. Gang members reported being met with a ritual departure.

Importantly, especially for gang members, their reasons for leaving are often determined by the individual. For some of the individuals that left the gang, none experienced a hostile departure. In other cases, ritual methods are more of a myth than reality. Leaving gangs and gang-related behaviors are often determined by external pressures to leave. As Decker (2011) stated:

They [the gang] understand that if you leave (family or school), that's cool. You can leave anytime you want. You can't claim, but you can walk away (Decker 2011, 13-14).

Just leave when you want to. You can't claim, but you can walk away (Decker 2011, 13-14).

### How Do Gang Members Leave the Gang?

Whatever their motivation may be, leaving the gang appears easier said than done. How does someone exit a group they have been a part of, especially one that is unafraid of using violence to get their way? After all, as we have mentioned above, it is commonly believed that gang departures are synonymous with “blood in, blood out”—shedding blood to enter *and* exit the gang. In fact, it is often believed that the only way to leave the gang is by getting murdered or murdering one’s mother (Decker and Van Winkle 1996). Previous studies reported that gang members in Los Angeles and St. Louis indicated the only way to leave the gang was to be “beaten out,” shooting a family member (typically one’s mother), or committing a crime against a rival gang. The beating out process requires the person leaving the gang to endure punches, kicks, and other forms of interpersonal violence for a delimited time period. After these ceremonial actions, the individual is then “free to be on their way” having paid their debt to the gang. Another example of a departure method requires the gang member to commit a crime or a mission against a rival gang member before leaving the gang. Many of these methods for leaving are similar to the methods for joining the gang (e.g., getting jumped in, or committing a crime against a rival gang).

To understand how gang members left the gang, David Pyrooz and Scott Decker (2011) described the specific methods employed in order to exit the gang: hostile and nonhostile departures. Hostile methods, as described above, required some degree of ceremony to mark a gang-endorsed de-identification. Nonhostile methods, alternatively, do not involve any level of ritual violence or fanfare that formalizes leaving the gang. Instead, a gang member simply “walks away” from the gang. Pyrooz and Decker found that an overwhelming majority of gang members walked away without repercussions. In fact, only 20 percent of former gang members reported being met with some type of resistance that resulted in a hostile departure.

Importantly, especially for practitioners, is that the methods for departure are often determined by the motive for leaving. Pyrooz and Decker found that of the individuals that left the gang due to pull motives (e.g., pregnant girlfriend, job), none experienced a hostile method of leaving the gang. As a whole, hostile methods are more of a myth than a reality, which is not uncommon when studying gangs and gang-related behavior (Howell 2007), and the gang “understands” external pressures to leave. As two current gang members in St. Louis explained to us:

They [the gang] understand. We ain’t gon’ press you. Good reason for it (family or school), that’s cool. Not cool if you don’t wanna be from the hood anymore.

Just leave when you want to leave. But you are X’ed out from the hood; you can’t claim, but you can walk through the hood (Decker and Pyrooz 2011, 13–14).

2  
 O  
 ↓  
 20%  
 Hostile  
 vs  
 Non-hostile  
 exit  
 80%

## SUMMARY

In this chapter we have examined gang membership in the context of the life course. This is an emerging area of research in the area of gangs, most of it arising in the last decade. Because of the implications for researchers, practitioners, and policy makers, understanding why and how people join and leave gangs, how long they remain in gangs, and the factors associated with the duration of gang membership is of central importance for responding to gangs. We integrated gang membership into life-course theory and research, applying concepts such as transitions, turning points, and trajectories to the study of gang membership. We explored entrance into the gang and exit from the gang, identifying push and pull motivations that, although different, characterize both processes. Similarly, we examined how people enter and exit the gang and the ceremony associated with formalizing each process. Finally, we detailed life in the gang, particularly heterogeneity in the level of involvement—in terms of gang embeddedness—and the length of involvement.

## The Link and Crime Synonym

There is perhaps no better involvement in crime. Academies and news media—often reporting on prison riots, stabbings, and drug wars—History Channel's *Gangland* documenting the significant (and often violent) to notoriety and power. In ethnography and St. Louis, researchers have studied the gang members they interviewed (Decker and Van Winkle 1996). Their own estimates, using police data, show incarceration rates that are 100 times higher (2010a). Death rates of this magnitude (for men and women) are truly a cause for concern.

But not everyone agrees that the link between gangs and crime is as straightforward as critics argue that gangs are a source of sensationalized coverage, political gain for corrections officials for gains in their personal worldviews. In the relationship between gang membership and crime, the evidence on:

- The theoretical models of gang membership, delinquency, violence, and crime;
- The types of crimes that are associated with drug use, drug dealing, and organized offending;
- Gang homicide offending;
- The group processes that influence gang behavior.