

Confronting Gangs

Crime and Community



G. DAVID CURRY

SCOTT H. DECKER

DAVID C. PYROOZ

THIRD EDITION

New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

ers the University's objective of excellence in research,
ship, and education by publishing worldwide.

BRIEF CONTENTS

New York

nd Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
umpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
Shanghai Taipei Toronto

ices in

na Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
ala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
orea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

1997 © 2014, 2003, 1997 by Oxford University Press

les covered by Section 112 of the US Higher Education Opportunity
lease visit www.oup.com/us/he for the latest information about
g and alternate formats.

ed by Oxford University Press
lison Avenue, New York, NY 10016
p.com

s a registered trademark of Oxford University Press.

s reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
ic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,
the prior permission of Oxford University Press.

of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

. David.
onting gangs : crime and community / G. David Curry,
cker, David Pyrooz.
es cm
r edition published in 2003.
les bibliographical references.
978-0-19-989191-7
ngs—United States. 2. Gangs. 3. Juvenile delinquency—United States.
cker, Scott H. II. Pyrooz, David. III. Title.
USC85 2014
50973—dc23 2012044984

number: 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

1 the United States of America
ree paper

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS xiii

PREFACE xv

<i>Chapter 1</i>	What Is A Gang? And Why Does It Matter?	1
------------------	---	---

<i>Chapter 2</i>	Explaining Gangs and Gang Membership	25
------------------	--------------------------------------	----

<i>Chapter 3</i>	From Play Groups to Al-Qaeda: How Are Gangs Structured?	44
------------------	--	----

<i>Chapter 4</i>	Gang Membership in the Life Course	61
------------------	------------------------------------	----

<i>Chapter 5</i>	The Link Between Gangs and Crime: Why Is “Gang” Synonymous with Crime?	79
------------------	---	----

<i>Chapter 6</i>	Girls, Women, and Gangs: Does Gang Membership Differ for Females?	99
------------------	--	----

<i>Chapter 7</i>	Gang Members, Gangs, and Gang Crime Around the World	117
------------------	---	-----

<i>Chapter 8</i>	Gangs and Social Institutions: Causes and Consequences	134
------------------	---	-----

<i>Chapter 9</i>	Gangs and the Juvenile and Criminal Justice Systems	150
------------------	--	-----

his chapter, definitions are
early in how the magnitude

CHAPTER 2



Explaining Gangs and Gang
Membership

allenge of understandings
of gang problems, gangs
involvement. It is impor-
his book: a key to under-
nd what they are like. The
that is not characterized
should not be surprised
ormal organizations and
mes haphazard nature of

Every teenager does not join a gang. Nor is a gang present in every neighborhood or community. The previous chapter discussed the prevalence of gangs and gang membership in America. In particular, it focused on the demographic—age, gender, race, regional—correlates that differentiated people in gangs from people who avoid gangs and neighborhoods with gangs from neighborhoods without gangs. In other words, if the previous chapter answered *who* and *what*, this chapter answers *why* individuals end up in gangs and *why* some neighborhoods have gangs while others do not. This chapter explains the presence of gangs and gang membership in communities. We turn to prominent theories and the data that support them in order to understand the patterns of gangs and gang membership across the population and across cities and neighborhoods. Of course, not all theories are correct; after all, they are theories. This is why researchers test these theories with data. We expect that readers have their own reasons and expectations as to why some neighborhoods and communities have a greater concentration of gangs and gang members. We also expect readers to have their own reasons why some people are in a gang while others are not.

We begin by discussing *macro-level theories* that explain aggregate patterns of gangs and gang membership across places. By macro we are referring to the patterning of gangs and gang membership within geographic boundaries, including neighborhoods, communities, cities, states, regions, and even countries. Next, we detail *micro-level theories* that explain gang membership, which refers to the characteristics that differentiate individuals who are or are not involved in gangs. Eminent gang researcher and sociologist Jim Short reminds us that it is imperative to understand the different levels of explanation (or the unit of analysis): people, groups, or places. Studying gang members (people), gangs (groups), and gang neighborhoods (places) sometimes requires different theories tailored to the problems, such as delinquency, gang violence, or fear of gangs. Readers and researchers are then forced to view an issue under a different theoretical lens, because theories created to explain group formation are different from theories designed to explain

individual gang joining. Additionally, a theory is not supported without evidence. Therefore, after outlining the respective theoretical perspectives, we present the empirical evidence that supports or refutes the theory.

WHY DO SOME PLACES HAVE GANG PROBLEMS AND OTHERS DO NOT?

Macro-Level Theories

Gang-related problems are not distributed evenly across places. That is to say, some neighborhoods, communities, and cities have much greater concentrations of gangs and gang members than other areas. This is one of the most important facts about crime and criminals—only a small proportion of neighborhoods or individuals are responsible for a large proportion of crimes (Wolfgang et al. 1972; Sherman and Weisburd 1995). This logic extends to gangs as well. Los Angeles, as the “gang capital” of the United States (Klein 2009), has many more gangs than Omaha, Nebraska. But if we were to study the neighborhoods of Los Angeles it would reveal an important fact: only a small proportion of neighborhoods have gangs. Macro-level theories are designed not only to explain the differences between the number of gangs in Los Angeles and Omaha, but also the differences in the number of gangs in Los Angeles neighborhoods. The key question that macro-level theory answers is, therefore, why do some neighborhoods and communities have many gang problems, but others experience little to none?

Attempts to answer this question are divided into two classes of theories: *structural control* and *structural adaptation* perspectives. By structure we are referring to the larger forces that arrange the positions, roles, and networks of social relationships in fundamental institutions such as the economy, family, education, and the political system (Wilson 2009). Structural factors include poverty, joblessness, racial composition, residential turnover, single parent households, and income inequality. Structural control and structural adaptation classes of theories have different explanations for why the social structure is responsible for gangs and gang-related behaviors in communities. These explanations rest on three important differences:

1. Structural control perspectives answer “why not” instead of “why,” these theories examine the structural conditions that prevent gangs from forming, while structural adaptation perspectives examine the structural conditions that encourage gang formation. The difference in how this question is asked is important and leads to the second divergence.

2. Structural control perspectives discount the role of culture in the formation of gangs. By culture we refer to shared outlooks, values, and traditions, as well as the cognitive maps, social fields, symbolic boundaries, and social hierarchies created and acted out in physical and social environments (Sampson and Bean 2006; Wilson 2009).

3. Both structural control and structural adaptation theories argue that social and economic structural disadvantages (i.e., poverty, unemployment, single parent households) operate as the starting point in the theoretical causal chain leading to gangs, but they differ in their identification of what researchers call “mediating mechanisms” or “social processes.”

Now that we have described some of the important differences between these perspectives, we turn to a more detailed discussion of the theories and in particular the social processes responsible for the presence of gangs in American communities.

Structural Control

Structural control perspectives hold that gangs are naturally occurring deviant social networks that are a product of a weakened system of social controls in communities. Frederic Thrasher’s (1927, 57) classic statements on gangs in Chicago concluded that gangs are found in the “interstices” of the city and that gangs “integrate through conflict.” This means that gangs form spontaneously, not because of rejection, school dropout, poverty, unemployment, or other factors; gangs form out of normal peer groups in conflict with other normal peer groups. Importantly, in addition to conflict, the other social process at work is social control. Gangs are less likely to form in neighborhoods where there is greater oversight of peers and conflict incidents. For Thrasher, gangs were “interstitial” in the sense that they filled gaps in the institutional fabric in which youths grew into adulthood. Where families or schools were weak or ineffective in socializing a youngster, the gang filled those gaps.

Social disorganization theory is most closely tied to the structural control perspective. Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay’s (1943) social disorganization theory had elements of both structural control and structural adaptation perspectives. The structural control elements of social disorganization have received considerable attention in contemporary criminology, beginning with Ruth Kornhauser’s (1978) major critique and reorganization of the theory, and followed by Bob Burisk and Harold Grasmick (1993) and Rob Sampson and colleagues’ (1997) extensions of the theory.

If gangs are naturally occurring groups that form in the absence of social control, where is this most likely to take place? While we discussed above (point 3) that social and economic structural disadvantages were the starting point, the next step in the causal process includes two other structural factors: racial/ethnic heterogeneity and residential instability. Neighborhoods characterized by structural disadvantage attract diverse racial and ethnic groups, especially immigrants. In addition, residents in these neighborhoods move out at their earliest opportunity, leading to greater population turnover that prevents relationships from forming. In classic social disorganization theory, the “social distance” between residents complicates the informal social control of problems.

Sampson and his colleagues (1997) held that neighborhoods with these characteristics lacked collective efficacy. Collective efficacy is comprised of neighborhood social cohesion and informal social control. If neighbors know each other, trust each other, and are capable of identifying collective neighborhood problems, they are more likely to have the cohesion to secure resources to control and respond to problems informally. In other words, these neighborhoods would be able to prevent the conflicts that serve as the tipping point among peer groups from turning into gangs. In some neighborhoods there are severe perceptions of direct and indirect forms of threat and institutionalized conflicts between groups that create a demand for kinship and protection; gangs function as the institution to fill the void in the market when the police, families, and schools are not able (Adamson 2000; Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Suttles 1972).

Bursik and Grasmick (1993) pointed out that Shaw and McKay's (1993) version of social disorganization theory had one great pitfall: gang problems did not emerge only in communities where there were weak personal ties between residents. Many poor inner-city communities had very stable patterns of residency, strong personal ties among community members, and persistent gang problems. This pitfall was critiqued by Ruth Kornhauser (1978). What Kornhauser observed had already begun to trouble Clifford Shaw, who had begun to make modifications in social disorganization theory and had joined others in speaking of "differential social organization." Differential social organization meant that there was not a universal cultural system, thus moving outside of the realm of pure control theory. To account for this observation while staying in a control framework, Bursik and Grasmick (1993) proposed a systemic theory of neighborhood crime control. They borrowed from Hunter's (1985) idea that there are three levels of community social control in urban settings: personal, parochial, and public. The personal level of social control was the cornerstone of classic social disorganization theory. Personal social control is based on the interpersonal ties between individual community residents that we discussed above. These ties have come to be known as "social capital"—the links between people that allow them access to opportunities, role models, and other networks that can expand their opportunities.

The latter two levels of control were neglected in the earlier version of social disorganization theory. The parochial level of social control consists of ties between community residents and secondary institutions such as schools and businesses. Ties such as those created by employment opportunities for residents, or the role of school activities in engaging young people in productive activities, are examples of parochial social control. The public level of social control addresses the control of community residents over public resources. Using political power to exert influence on government and the economy is an example of the public level of social control. The public level of social control encompasses such important resources as access to and control over law enforcement and the justice system. Thus calling the police to respond to crime or using government services to solve community problems such as loitering or littering are examples of public social control. While personal social control in a community can be high, low levels of parochial and

public social control can result in social isolation. By introducing additional levels of community control, Bursik and Grasmick helped make social disorganization theory and its applicability to gang problems a more complete explanation.

Structural Adaptation

Structural adaptation perspectives argue that gangs emerge as an adaptation to the conditions of neighborhoods and their position in the social hierarchy. Gangs are not formed spontaneously and conflict is not a prerequisite for their emergence and cohesion. Instead, gangs are a product of the limited distribution of opportunities and the normative orientations of neighborhoods in the pursuit for status and economic resources. Structural adaptation perspectives began with Shaw and McKay (1943), who saw shortcomings in their theory of social disorganization. They turned to what some term "subcultural" theory, which focuses on the values and beliefs among subgroups that differ from those of the mainstream. Because Shaw and McKay and others in the Chicago School of sociology observed the stability of juvenile delinquency in neighborhoods despite residential turnover of the population, gangs were viewed as a vehicle in the "cultural transmission" of deviant normative orientations from older to younger adolescents.

Three major versions of structural adaptation theory were put forward in the middle of the twentieth century to explain gangs and gang behavior, including Cloward and Ohlin (1960), Cohen (1955), and Miller (1958). These theories combine to form classic structural adaptation perspectives of gang emergence, which emphasized reactions to structural barriers and the discrepancies in the means to achieve economic goals. These theories may be familiar to many readers of this chapter as they are fundamental to criminological theory in general. Cloward and Ohlin's (1960) *differential opportunity theory* emphasized that gangs formed as an adaptation to blocked opportunities, or strains produced by structural factors. However, the type of the gang that emerged—their adaptation, the social roles, and functions—would differ according to illegitimate opportunities, the level of community social organization, and structural strains. For example, criminal gangs oriented around drug use and vandalism emerge in "slum" communities with greater integration, while conflict gangs oriented around fighting and violence emerge in communities with weaker integration.

Cohen's (1955) *reaction-formation* thesis suggested that gang-joining youth fail to succeed in meeting standards of the middle-class system they encounter in school. In reaction to this failure, gangs turn the middle-class value system "upside down." The result is a set of negative values that, when collectively shared, becomes a subculture. The gang is an organizational form of the subculture that has adapted to structural conditions associated with the hierarchy of the social class system. Contrary to reaction-formation, Miller (1958) argued that gangs were not a product of frustration with middle-class values. Based on his extensive work with gangs in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston, Miller held that gangs grow out of the *lower-class norms or focal concerns*—trouble, toughness, smartness, autonomy, fate, and excitement—they share with their community, not opposition to middle-class

value systems. The gang then adheres to these focal concerns, which in turn dictates status among gang members. Gang members do not achieve status by getting good grades; rather, they achieve status for being tough and fearless. Such values distinguish the peer groups of the lower class from those of the middle class. Miller's (1958) classic focal concern thesis was supplemented by his extensive writings on gangs in Roxbury neighborhood in Boston (Miller 2011).

Contemporary structural adaptation explanations of gang emergence emphasize earning respect and achieving economic success in a highly segregated, postindustrial America. Unlike the structural and cultural context of the 1950s, contemporary urban America is replete with the instrumentalities of violence, including drugs and guns. There are two major contemporary spin-offs of the structural adaptation perspectives: street codes and urban economy. Both perspectives concentrate on inner-city America, but their statements are applicable outside of the urban environment. Anderson's (1999) "code of the streets" portrays life for inner-city African Americans that is dictated by a street code that governs interpersonal relationships. The perception of dirty looks, wayward stares, and seemingly benign insults could result in violent encounters. Such an oppositional street context emerges as a result of a sorting process that creates stable pockets of poverty, residential segregation, labor market inequality, and other disadvantages. While Anderson (1999) did not focus explicitly on street gangs, many of the references to street codes and related behaviors are commonly referenced in research on gangs. For example, the expectation for deferential treatment in public, violent responses to trivial insults, retaliatory violence, status attainment through physical means, and the code of honor are themes in many gang-related studies (see, e.g., Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Horowitz 1983; Miller 1958; 2011; Short and Strodtbeck 1965).

The neighborhood context where these street codes emerge has been described by the sociologist William Julius Wilson. Specifically, Wilson's (1987; 2009) *deindustrialization* thesis held that changes in the structure of the labor market disproportionately affected those from socially and economically marginalized groups. The transition from a manufacturing to a service oriented economy brought about many social dislocations in urban America beginning in the mid-twentieth century, as the demand for low-skill or blue collar labor waned. These jobs were a natural fit for marginalized youth and young adults (who were often undereducated and undertrained), because these jobs did not require the "soft skills" for face-to-face interactions with consumers. Gang researchers saw face validity in this thesis and extended Wilson's arguments to gangs, holding that marginalized youth turn to gangs for economic purposes (Hagedorn 1988; Moore 1991; Moore and Vigil 1993; Sullivan 1989; see also Klein 1995). As Venkatesh (2006) excellently illustrates in Chicago, diminished legitimate job prospects for young men in turn promoted underground markets and a secondary economy that is governed by gangs. As a result, gangs are an adaptation to the social and economic landscape and they confer status and economic opportunities on their constituents through

Macro-Level Evidence

We now examine the research that has tested macro-level explanations of gang-related behaviors including geographic patterns of gang territory, where gang members live, and the location of violent gang-related incidents. We organize macro-level research on gangs according to (1) studies of gang violence and (2) studies of gangs/gang members in geographic areas. The goal of this research is to explain the clustering of these problems. The reason we focus on both gang violence *and* gangs/gang membership is that they tell us about gang activity as a whole. Studies of gang violence focus only on places where gang-related fights, stabbings, and shootings occur. Studies of gangs/gang members focus on the places where gangs claim territory or where gang members live. Because gangs are so deeply involved in violence and contribute prominently to the overall tallies of gun assaults and homicides in cities, especially beginning in the 1980s (Decker and Pyrooz 2010a; Howell et al. 2011; Miller 2001), more research has focused on explaining the concentration of gang violence.

Gang Violence Across Places

Studies of gang violence attempt to explain why some neighborhoods and some cities have higher rates of gang violence than others. Because gangs are heavily involved in violence, such studies are quite important. These studies use the structural factors and social processes to determine their relationship with violence. We begin by first focusing on neighborhoods within cities. This research has been conducted in the cities of Chicago, Los Angeles, and St. Louis. All three of these cities have well-established gangs, although St. Louis's serious gang problems did not emerge until the late 1980s. Yet St. Louis has stubbornly high rates of violence (much higher than Chicago or Los Angeles), and gangs are a major contributor to the problem. Further, in Chicago and Los Angeles, gang-related homicide comprises as much as 50 percent of the total homicides in these cities. As such, these cities are good testing grounds for the theories we discuss above.

There are three important features of these studies. First, all of the studies include what researchers call a measure of *concentrated disadvantage*. Several structural factors drawn from US Census Bureau data on neighborhoods are condensed to create this construct or variable. This single construct is comprised of the poverty rate, the rate of female-headed households with children, the rate of male unemployment, the rate of public assistance, and the rate of African American population composition. These factors are typically so strongly related to each other that they cannot be meaningfully separated. In other words, neighborhoods with high levels of poverty are also neighborhoods with high levels of male unemployment. Across all three cities, this measure ranks among the strongest predictors of gang violence in neighborhoods. As the level of concentrated disadvantage increases, so too does the rate of violent gang-related events. This finding is consistent with both structural control and structural adaptation theories that view concentrated disadvantage as their starting point.

Second, several studies examined the spatial patterns of gang violence (Kubrin and Wadsworth 2003; Mares 2010; Rosenfeld et al. 1999). Neighborhood gang violence is likely to be influenced by gang violence in the neighborhoods that are nearby. Ecological researchers often use gang violence as a primary example of contagion and diffusion processes, as the neighborhood factors leading to gang violence in neighborhood A spreads to surrounding neighborhoods B, C, and D. Retaliatory violence is also very common among gangs and may be linked to the proximity of neighborhood gang violence. Gang members may not know what started the violence, but they know whom to target. This institutional knowledge of conflict has spatial properties. For example, a Crips set in a Los Angeles neighborhood may be in conflict with a Bloods set in a nearby neighborhood. Their conflicts are likely to occur not only in their neighborhood territories, but spill over into surrounding neighborhoods. There is support for this thesis in Chicago and St. Louis (Los Angeles was not studied), even after taking into account concentrated disadvantage and a number of other factors related to gang violence. This finding is consistent with both the conflict themes of structural control theories and the street code themes of structural adaptation theories.

Third, although only one study has addressed the mediating mechanisms between structural disadvantage and gang violence, its findings are telling. Papachristos and Kirk (2006) examined the relationship between structural factors, collective efficacy, and gang violence. They used data gathered by the Project for Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, which consisted of interviews with around 25 residents in each of Chicago's 343 neighborhoods in 1994–95. These interviews asked the residents about trust and cohesion among neighbors and their willingness to intervene in problems—in other words, collective efficacy. Papachristos and Kirk then linked this information with the number of gang homicides in and around these neighborhoods in 1995. Consistent with structural control perspectives and Sampson et al.'s arguments, neighborhoods with higher levels of collective efficacy had lower rates of gang homicide. These findings are consistent with the thesis that some neighborhoods, where residents trust each other and are willing to identify and tackle problems, are able to combat the negative influences of gang and gang-related violence.

City-level studies of gang violence ask a different question: why do some cities have higher rates of gang violence than others. Pyrooz (2012) examined this issue using data collected by the National Gang Center in 88 large US cities between 2002 and 2006. The National Gang Center collects information from police and sheriff's departments throughout the United States about their gang problems. Part of the information they collect is on the number of gangs, gang members, and gang homicides they experience on a yearly basis. Pyrooz found three key factors distinguished cities with higher gang homicide rates, including structural disadvantage (similar to concentrated disadvantage), population density (persons per square mile), and the rate of gang membership (gang members per 10,000 persons). Importantly, as the rate of gang membership increased in a city, so too did the rate of gang homicide. An additional 93 gang members per 10,000 persons

CHAPTER 2 • Explaining Gangs and Gang Membership 33

would raise the gang homicide rate by one per 100,000 people. Yet even after taking into account rates of gang membership in cities, structural disadvantage and population density were related with gang homicide rates. This suggests, as discussed above, that there are additional factors taking place that influence gang-related violence processes.

Gangs and Gang Membership Across Places

Studies of gangs and gang membership across places determine why some neighborhoods and cities are home to more gangs and gang members than others. For example, Kennedy et al. (1997) reported that gang "turf" covered only 1.6 of Boston's 48 square miles. What distinguishes this 4 percent of Boston different from the remainder of the city? This research shares similarities with studies of macro-level gang violence, but important differences between the two remain. Simply because there is gang violence in a neighborhood or a city does not necessarily mean there is an established presence of gangs. It could be that some neighborhoods (e.g., where schools or shopping malls are present) attract rival gangs who then engage in violence. Three studies have examined three very different questions about the nature and presence of gangs and gang members in US cities (Katz and Schnebly 2011; Pyrooz, Fox, and Decker 2010; Tita, Cohen, and Engberg 2005).

In Pittsburgh, Tita et al. (2005) studied what they called "gang set space." Gang set space refers to small block areas within a city where gangs are located. They focused on areas within a neighborhood where the gang comes together to hang out, not simply the territory that is claimed by a gang. Gangs emerged in Pittsburgh in the early 1990s, and their study was interested in the ecological attributes of set space. They found that gang set space was located in Pittsburgh block areas with elevated levels of population density, vacant buildings, structural disadvantage, and African American population composition. Tita and his colleagues viewed their findings as being consistent with themes of informal social control, where abandonment and an absence of guardianship allowed gangs to assert their control over these areas.

In Mesa, Arizona, a suburb of Phoenix with a population of 440,000, Katz and Schnebly (2011) detailed the neighborhood variations in the concentration of gang members. They used data from the Mesa Police Department's gang unit on the home addresses of gang members. Katz and Schnebly found that neighborhoods with higher levels of structural disadvantage had higher rates of gang members living there, as well as neighborhoods with greater residential instability an issue raised by Bursik and Grasmick (1993) in their systemic model of community control. They also found that neighborhoods with very high levels of economic disadvantage (e.g., poverty, unemployment) had much higher rates of gang membership than neighborhoods with high levels of social disadvantage (e.g., female headed households with children, renter-occupied housing). These findings provide a new twist in macro-level gang research because they find that economic disadvantage is more strongly related to gang activity than are social disadvantages.

Finally, Pyrooz and his colleagues (2010) extended this line of research to cities. They used police gang data collected by the National Gang Center to study gang membership patterns in the 100 largest cities in the United States. They argued that while most research on gangs focused on structural disadvantage, race and ethnicity also play an important role in the prevalence of gang membership in communities. They examined the racial and ethnic heterogeneity in cities—a key component of social disorganization theory—and its relationship with structural disadvantage and gang membership. As expected, gang membership was more numerous in cities with higher levels of structural disadvantage, but that greater racial and ethnic diversity had a much stronger relationship with gang membership. In addition, they found that structural disadvantage mattered much less in cities with low diversity than it did in cities with high diversity. Their findings provided support for social disorganization theory and for future theorizing about race, ethnicity, and social distance in the study of aggregate gang membership.

WHY DO SOME PEOPLE END UP IN GANGS AND OTHERS DO NOT?

Micro-Level Theories

As we learned in the previous chapter, only 8 percent of people join a gang in the first three decades of their life. For every one youth who enters a gang there are another 11 who do not. Are youth who join a gang different from youth who do not join a gang? In this section of the chapter, we focus on theoretical perspectives that explain gang membership. We avoid discussion on the precise *motivations* for joining a gang (we refer readers to Chapter 4), instead focusing on the *attributes* and *contexts* among individuals that various theories contend as factors leading to gang membership.

Before delving into the list of theories, some ground rules are in order. There is no such thing as a one-man (or one-woman) gang. Gangs are groups, as we learned in Chapter 1. As we discussed in the previous sections on gangs at the macro level, not all areas of a city or regions of states or even countries have gangs. This means that in areas where gangs are present, there will of course be more opportunities for gang involvement, and as Cloward and Ohlin (1960) argued, structure dictates opportunity. If the social structure does not produce gangs, it is unlikely that a youth will be involved in a gang. From numerous studies we have been involved in and the hundreds of interviews we have conducted with gang members, it is rare that one individual cleanly “starts” a gang absent any prior gang ties. Not all theories recognize this assumption equally, but it is important that readers are made aware of this.

We begin by detailing several general theories of crime (the “big four” theories) that have been applied to gang membership. The specific connection of each general theory to gang membership is made explicit, as we identify the precise mechanisms that increase the likelihood that someone ends up in a gang. We also discuss two additional classes of theories that were designed specifically for gang

membership: gang membership trait theory and gang membership integrated theory. Similar to the macro-level section, we then provide readers with evidence supporting or refuting the theories.

Criminal Propensity Theory

Some people are more likely to engage in crime than others. That is to say, some people have a greater *propensity* for criminal behavior. Criminal propensity theories assume that this likelihood does not change substantially over the life course. Traits that do not change—physical, temperamental, and psychological—are responsible for one’s “proneness” to engage in criminal behavior. This theoretical perspective is tied to gangs and gang membership because propensity theorists argue that there is a natural selection process that leads the criminally prone to come together. Glueck and Glueck (1950) notably stated “birds of a feather flock together.” In this case, the similarities that draw gang members together are the deficits they share in self-control, neuropsychological functioning, psychopathic tendencies, or some other stable trait. Self-control theory, for example, contends that people with self-control deficits are impulsive, seek immediate gratification, and engage in risk-taking and crime-analogous behaviors (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). Thus, gang membership is simply a risky behavior that some people select into, provided the opportunity is available. From a criminal propensity perspective, there is nothing special about gangs, as they are nothing more than collections of crime-prone individuals.

Social Bond Theory

People with stronger social bonds to society are less likely to deviate from conforming behavior (Hirschi 1969). Elements of the social bond include attachment, commitment, involvement, and beliefs. For example, the social bond between young people and their parents is usually strong, and strong bonds work to promote conformity. Young people with strong bonds to their parents or teachers do not want to disappoint their parents or damage their reputation with their teachers at school. When social bonds are weakened, similar to criminal propensity theories, there is a process that leads individuals into delinquent groups such as gangs. Criminal propensity and social bond theories are classified as social control perspectives—greater controls internal or external to the individual prevent problem behaviors, such as gang membership. Unlike propensity theories, however, social bonds shift over the life course (Sampson and Laub 1993). Adolescents with weakened social bonds might navigate into gangs in their early teenage years, but as people age, greater attachments to others and stakes in conformity decrease the likelihood of joining a gang. Because social bond theory shares a theoretical lineage with control theory, gangs are simply collections of individuals with who are weakly bonded with conventional society. Thus, as social integration increases, the likelihood of someone being a gang member should decrease. It is for this reason that many gang prevention programs are focused on increasing social bonds or ties.

General Strain Theory

When experiencing strains, people are pressured by anger or emotions for internal correction (Agnew 1992). Sources of strains include blocked access to goals, loss of positive stimuli, or the presentation of negative stimuli. Examples of strains include experiencing discrimination, the death of a loved one, or getting jumped or beat up. There are several adaptations to strains, include cognitive, behavioral, and emotional coping strategies. People cope with strain differently, however, which means that getting involved in delinquency (or gangs) will depend on constraints such as external coping resources (e.g., family and peer support), access to illegitimate means (e.g., weapons), internal coping resources (e.g., self-efficacy, problem-solving skills), prior coping experiences (e.g., drinking, going for a run), and attribution (who is to blame). The likelihood of gang membership is elevated when individuals experience strains *and* conventional coping mechanisms are unavailable. From this point of view, gangs are a mechanism to correct the pressures and potential rejections experienced in other life domains, such as family, school, and pro-social peer groups. If there was any theoretical perspective consistent with “gangs act as a surrogate family,” general strain theory would be it. That said, Agnew (2009, 264) has argued that general strain theory explanations of gang membership work best in conjunction with social control and, as we discuss next, social learning theories.

Social Learning Theory

People are influenced to engage in criminal and deviant behavior based on small-group interactions and communication. This perspective refers to social influences, such as peer pressure. Within this context there is an evolving learning process that involves the transmission of defining behaviors as right or wrong through imitation, modeling, conditioning, and reinforcement (Akers 2009). Put simply, the people adolescents are associated with—family, mentors, and especially peers—will influence them in significant ways. This can occur through mechanisms such as fear or ridicule and loyalty that produce compliance, and status enhancement (e.g., acceptance, reward systems) in adolescent peer networks (Warr 2002). People will be influenced according to the frequency, intensity, duration, and priority of their relationships with others, who in turn help create and mold definitions of behaviors (Akers 2009). The likelihood that someone ends up in a gang is influenced by “gang favorable” definitions they are exposed to. Social learning theory explanations of gang membership focus on the reinforcement of gang membership among their friends and acquaintances. Thus, having family members in gangs, peers in gangs, and neighborhood gang influences will likely lead to positive evaluations of gang membership, increasing the likelihood that youth join gangs.

Gang Membership Trait Theory

Based on qualitative gang research, where researchers have observed and carried out in-depth interviews with gang members, several studies have revealed

common characteristics among gang members. Yablonsky (1962), for example, argued that there are specific traits associated with gang membership. He held that gang members could be distinguished from nongang youth by socio- or psychopathic personalities. Similarly, Sanchez-Jankowski (1991) argued that there were personality differences between gang and nongang members, something he called defiant individualism. In areas characterized by structural disadvantages, he argued that the characteristics of gang members included intense competitiveness, a sense of mistrust, self-reliance, isolation, defiance, and survivalism. These perspectives share many similarities with criminal propensity and social control theories of gang membership, whereby people with these characteristics “end up together” in groups that are referred to as gangs.

Integrated Gang Membership Theories

Three groups of researchers have proposed integrated theories of gang membership. Thornberry (1987) proposed an *interactional theory* of adolescent delinquency, which he and his colleagues (2003) extended to explain gang membership. There are several fundamental components of interactional theory as it is applied to gang membership. First, the theory starts with structural disadvantage and argues that it increases the likelihood of gang membership. But, secondly, structural disadvantage does not operate directly on gang membership. Instead, it “sets off” several of the mechanisms described in the micro-level theories of gang membership. These mechanisms include weakened social bonds, precocious behaviors (e.g., early dating), and antisocial beliefs systems. Third, social bonds, differential associations, and early dating not only independently lead to life stressors and delinquency, but they also combine to increase the likelihood of entering a gang. Importantly, this theory is tied to specific age-related behaviors and thus has a developmental foundation that is linked to behaviors appropriate for a certain age.

Howell and Egley (2005) proposed an extension of Thornberry and colleagues’ (2003) interactional theory as it applies to gang membership. Like interactional theory, Howell and Egley’s proposal is developmental, but their main objective was to explain gang membership at younger ages. They held that there was a “stepping stone” pattern to gang membership that encompassed four stages: (1) a preschool stage, beginning with conduct problems at age three to four; (2) a school entry stage, where aggressive and disruptive behavior during early school years is coupled with elementary school failure; (3) a later childhood stage, where delinquency, pro-social peer rejection, and antisocial peer associations take place; and (4) the adolescence stage, where risk factors accumulate and interact across a range of life domains and lead to gang membership. Unlike many other theories of gang membership, Howell and Egley contend that, without positive intervention at later stages, the origins of gang membership are in play as early as preschool.

Research conducted in England by Wood and Alleyne (2010) also proposed an integrated theory of gang membership that they termed *unified theory*. Similar to Thornberry et al. (2003), they emphasized that previous theories “pay scant

attention to the social psychological processes involved in joining a gang" (106). They begin by arguing that there are environmental and social factors, as well as individual characteristics, that shape adolescent social perceptions, including gangs. These perceptions, in turn, lead to selection into peer groups. Similar to social learning theory, peers groups reinforce and help mold worldviews, attitudes, and behaviors. If peer groups lead to greater social controls, the likelihood of gang membership declines. However, if peer groups provide opportunities for criminal learning, then psychological factors such as moral disengagement and antisocial cognitive schemas (i.e., street codes) may provide the psychological infrastructure that facilitates adolescent gang membership. Wood and Alleyne's theory, although it shares many similarities with other theories of gang membership, makes explicit that social psychological processes are the only direct or immediate factor leading to gang membership.

Micro-Level Evidence

There has been a great deal of research examining the risk factors for gang membership. When Klein and Maxson (2006) assessed this research prior to 2006, there were twenty articles. Today, that figure has nearly doubled. There are two reasons for this explosion of research. The first reason is practical. If gang members can be identified *before* they join a gang based on certain characteristics, then policy makers should direct their limited resources to these youth. The second reason is empirical. A large debate rages on about whether gangs actually influence delinquent behavior, with criminal propensity and control theorists claiming that background risk factors are what really drive delinquency, not gang membership. Researchers have stepped up to test the claims of theorists, adding to the volume of research on risk factors for gang membership.

Table 2.1 presents the evidence that has been found about each theoretical perspective. We organized the evidence according to the larger classes of the "big four" theories. As we discussed above, each of the theories specify several variables that should differentiate someone who joins a gang from someone who avoids a gang. These variables are what we call risk factors. We avoid integrated theories because (1) their risk factors are generally inseparable from the big four theories, and (2) there has been very limited testing of these theories. Accordingly, we classify variables according to the following criteria:

- Criminal propensity theory:
 - Emphasis on static or time-stable characteristics of people. These characteristics are expected to not change over time, or change only incrementally, and include:
 - Low self-control; impulsivity; risk-seeking; self-centeredness or lack of empathy; neuropsychological deficits; psychopathic tendencies, including hyperactivity, fearlessness, or antisociality; conduct disorders; and delinquency or violence involvement;
 - Such characteristics are expected to elevate individual involvement in crime and delinquency. In turn, pro-social peer groups will shun such

Table 2.1 Evidence on Theories of Gang Membership

STUDY	CRIMINAL PROPENSITY				SOCIAL BOND		GENERAL STRAIN		SOCIAL LEARNING		TOTAL VARIABLES
	PROSPECTIVE										
Delisi et al. (2009)	3/3		0/2		2/2		1/1		1/1		13
Dup��� et al. (2007) ^a	1/1				2/3		1/1				9
Lacourse et al. (2006)	3/7				0/1						8
Lahey et al. (1999)	3/3		0/1		0/3						7
Melde and Esbensen (2011) ^c	1/7		1/6		1/7		1/4		1/4		34
Melde and Esbensen (2012) ^c	2/7		2/6		2/7		2/4		2/4		34
Pyrooz (2012) ^c	3/6		0/3		6/15		2/5		2/5		45
Total Support	16/34		3/18		13/38		7/15				
CROSS-SECTIONAL											
Alleyne and Wood (2011)	0/1		0/2				1/1				5
Beaver et al. (2010)	1/1										4
Beaver et al. (2010)	0/1										4
Bell (2009)			3/4		1/9		1/1		1/1		23
Bjerregaard and Smith (1993)	2/2		0/2		1/5		1/1		1/1		14
Dup��� et al. (2007) ^a					1/2						9
Eitle et al. (2004)	1/1		0/1		1/6		1/1		1/1		13
Esbensen et al. (2001)	0/2		0/1		2/2		4/6		4/6		16
Esbensen et al. (2009)	0/2		1/6		1/4		4/5		4/5		25
Kisser and Pyrooz (2009)	1/1				0/1		1/1		1/1		7
Maxson et al. (1998) ^b	0/1		3/11		3/4		6/6		6/6		46
Seals (2009)					6/6						11
Thorberry et al. (2003)	2/2		1/2		2/4		1/2		1/2		12
Weerman (2012) males	1/1		0/3				1/2		1/2		6
Weerman (2012) females	1/1		1/3				2/6		2/6		10
Winfree et al. (1994)							3/7				7
Winfree et al. (2001)											
Total Support	9/16		9/35		19/44		27/40				
Prosp	47%		17%		34%		47%				
CS	56%		26%		43%		68%				4
Total	50%		23%		39%		62%				

^aContained cross-sectional and longitudinal components.

^bThe results were obtained through analysis in several blocks of variables, rather than one multivariate analysis. Additional prospective studies are not included either because the covariates and datasets are identical or because the results were not reported in text and correspondence with the authors did not result in a review of their supplementary files (Barnes et al. 2010; Ozer and Engel 2011; Gibson et al. 2009; Hawland et al. 2005; 2007, 2008).

^cThe objective of the study was not to assess the theoretical correlates of gang membership; rather, this was a study using propensity score matching where the correlates of gang membership were used to balance pre-gang stable and dynamic characteristics of individuals to compare levels of delinquency after joining. Nevertheless, this study provides useful information for the current investigation.

youth, which increases the likelihood that they will end up in the company of a delinquent peer groups, such as a gang.

- Social bond theory:
 - Emphasis on indicators of attachment, commitment, involvement, and beliefs in conventional institutions. Characteristics of social bonds include:
 - Parental attachment; family support; parental monitoring; unstructured socializing; school commitment and performance; attachment to teachers; involvement in community, school, or religious activities.
 - The absence of such relationships reflects weakened bonds to society, which allow youth to deviate from conventional standards of behaviors. As these bonds weaken, the likelihood of gang joining increases.
- General strain theory:
 - Emphasis on indicators of stress or strains that one is experiencing or has experienced in the past. Characteristics that could lead to gang joining include:
 - Low self-esteem or self-concept; social isolation; adverse life events; broken home; negative school environment; limited or blocked opportunities; victimization; residential instability; family substance use; family poverty; and neighborhood social disorganization.
 - The emotions or anger resulting from strains create pressure for internal correction that force individuals to seek devices for coping. Depending on the type of strain and access for conventional coping resources, gang membership could be one avenue to deal with strains.
- Social learning theory:
 - Emphasis on indicators of antisocial interactions and communications that occur in significant social fields, such as peers, family, and neighborhoods. Influences that could result in gang favorable definitions include:
 - Familial gang involvement; associations with delinquent peers, gang involved peers, or pro-social peers; commitment to peers; neighborhood gangs; positive and negative behavioral reinforcements; legal cynicism; low guilt or low morality; and neutralization of deviant behavior.
 - Such relationships are expected to influence individual perceptions of gangs. If gangs are not defined negatively, then gang membership could result as gang behaviors are reinforced, modeled, or supported by gang associations.

There are five important facts to point out about risk factor research:

First, the studies included are derived from a diverse sample of cities, although most of the studies are based in the United States. The US studies are drawn from as many as 20 cities and two nationally representative samples. In addition, studies from Montreal, Canada, The Netherlands, and the United Kingdom are included. As such, our review spans a wide range of sites and includes a wide range of gang members.

Second, we only include studies that have conducted multivariate analyses. We do not live in a bivariate world; more than one factor influences our decisions, especially outcomes as complicated as gang membership. Studies that include multiple variables can at least rule out one or more alternative explanations for gang membership. For this reason we exclude a number of well-intentioned bivariate studies.

Third, we differentiate studies that have data measured at multiple time points (prospective) from those that only have one time point of data (cross-sectional). Prospective studies provide the most convincing evidence on factors leading to gang membership because they measure these factors *before* someone joins a gang. Cross-sectional studies, alternatively, are challenged because it is well-known that gang membership influences a range of attitudes and behaviors. For example, someone could have been victimized in a gang fight when they were a gang member. A cross-sectional study would conclude that the strains associated with victimization could result in coping strategies that lead to gang membership. This conclusion would be incorrect because gang membership led to victimization. Prospective studies reduce these issues, thus we place a premium on their findings.

Fourth, we only include research published in outlets that include some level of review to ensure the quality of research. While most of the research is derived from blinded peer-review, there are also book chapters included.

Fifth, studies that include more variables in their analysis are less likely to observe that risk factors have effects that are distinguishable from zero. In other words, as more variables soak up the differences between people (i.e., the variance) in explaining gang membership, the interrelatedness or overlap between some variables overshadows one another. There is no specific cut-point that we use, but we include a tally of the total variables in the study.

We now turn to the results of the research to determine the extent to which different theories of gang membership are supported or refuted by the evidence.

Major Findings

First, theories of gang membership are not supported equally. The most support is found for social learning theory, and the least support is found for social bond theory. These findings support an argument that small-group interactions are the factors most closely linked to the onset of gang membership. Thus, efforts to reduce the likelihood of gang joining should focus less on strengthening social bonds, and focus more on lessening the appeal of gang membership. These efforts should be targeted in places where gang definitions are created: in small-group interactions. However, this conclusion is based on an inclusive read of the studies regardless of the quality of the research design for assessing the validity of the findings. As we pointed out above, there are important differences across the designs of the study.

Second, all theories find greater support when tested at one point in time rather than prospectively (predicting future gang membership). The reasoning

for this observation is that cause is indistinguishable from effect. We observe the greatest reduction in support for social learning theories. If someone is already in a gang, they will likely have definitions favorable to gang membership, siblings or cousins in a gang, delinquent reinforcements, and, of course, associate with their fellow gang members. As a result, the findings supporting the theory may be artificially inflated. This applies to all of the theories that emphasize dynamic risk factors—or characteristics of people and their contexts that change over time. Because of this, the findings from cross-sectional studies are much less convincing than the findings from prospective studies, which ensure that an individual was not in a gang when someone's risk for gang membership was measured. When we focus only on prospective studies, some very important changes are observed.

Third, prospective studies reveal that criminal propensity and social learning theories are both supported. In other words, the research support for criminal propensity theory is comparable to that of social learning theory. These two theories are at opposite ends of the spectrum—criminal propensity theorists do not advocate for the study of gangs, while social learning theorists developed theories specifically with gangs in mind—yet they find equal levels of support in the most rigorous studies. For example, Matt Delisi et al. (2009) used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a representative sample of American youths. Risk factors were measured in 1994 or 1995, and gang membership was measured one year later. They found support for both criminal propensity and social learning theory. Youth who engaged in delinquency had lower self-control, lower verbal skills, and associated with delinquent peers were more likely to end up in gangs. In other words, these factors predicted future gang membership. As a result, these findings change our conclusions, as policies to reduce gang membership should also target the mechanisms described by criminal propensity as well as social learning theory.

Fourth, while some theories received greater support than others, all theories received at least some support. That is, while support for different perspectives on gang membership varied, not one theory was the overwhelming “winner” in this exercise. The implication from this for readers is that the sources of gang membership span a wide range of domains and theories. For this reason, some researchers, especially integrated theorists, emphasize *cumulative risk* across known risk factors for gang membership. Thornberry and colleagues (2003), using information gathered from youth in Rochester, NY, found support for the cumulative approach. Male youth with less than 10 risk factors had a 1 percent chance of gang membership, whereas male youth with over 21 risk factors had a 44 percent chance of gang membership. While these findings are illuminating with regard to risk, they also show that even among youths experiencing risk across a wide range of factors (school, family, peers, neighborhood, individual), the majority of the “riskiest” adolescents do not end up in a gang.

SUMMARY

This chapter addressed a range of issues relating to the presence of gangs in communities and the involvement in gangs among individuals. Readers should be aware that both of these processes do not evolve “over night” and are not random; there are clear warning signs prior to the emergence of gang in a community and the entrance into a gang among youth. Identifying these warning signs is of the utmost important to stakeholders involved in responding to the problems of gangs.