

# Crime Victimization and Gang Membership

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### *...from the Director*

The literature on gang issues has mostly focused on seeking a connection between gang membership and violent behavior. A different focus, however, has emerged recently regarding gang members and their risk of victimization. The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which gang membership is linked to a higher or lower risk of violent victimization. The goal of this study was to produce a model that accounts for the differential risk factors of victimization between gang members and non-gang members. It is our hope that this report will help to inform the public about the risks associated with gang membership and the steps that could be taken to prevent it.



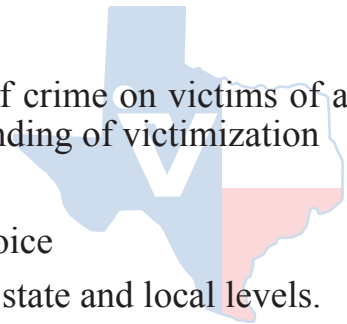
**Glen Kercher, Director**  
**Crime Victims' Institute**



#### **Mission Statement**

The mission of the Crime Victims' Institute is to

- conduct research to examine the impact of crime on victims of all ages in order to promote a better understanding of victimization
- improve services to victims
- assist victims of crime by giving them a voice
- inform victim-related policymaking at the state and local levels.



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## Executive Summary

Interest in gangs as a major social problem has begun to reemerge in light of recent attention from politicians, law enforcement, and researchers. Law enforcement officers report that the gang problem has significantly increased since 2001. Law enforcement and researchers have well-established the relationship between gang membership and offending. Compared to the amount of work devoted to understanding the relationship between gang membership and offending, much less is known about the ways in which gang members experience crime victimization. Therefore, this study builds upon recent work that examines the gang-victimization link, and examines the effects of social disorganization among a sample of gang and non-gang prison inmates.

A sample of gang and non-gang members incarcerated in prison were interviewed and responded to a series of questions regarding involvement in crime, experiences with victimization, and perceptions of neighborhood disorganization.

The current study aimed to examine the following questions.

1. Are gang members more likely to be victimized compared to non-gang members?  
The findings indicate that gang members were significantly more likely to be victimized compared to non-gang members.
2. Are perceptions of social disorganization associated with victimization?  
The results of this study show that perceptions of social disorganization explained the likelihood of victimization among gang members only.
3. Does accounting for inmates' offending mediate the relationship between social disorganization and victimization?

Results indicate that Crime perpetration was an influential factor for affecting the relationship between perceptions of social disorganization and victimization among gang members.

These findings are discussed in terms of gang prevention programs. The results reported in this report challenge some of the assumptions young people have about the value of joining a gang, and this information could help inform prevention programs.

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# Crime Victimization and Gang Membership

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Interest in gangs as a major social problem has begun to re-emerge in light of recent attention from politicians, law enforcement, and researchers.<sup>1</sup> For example, the Gang Abatement and Prevention Act of 2007 was supported by the Senate but not the House, and this federal bill proposed spending over a billion dollars on anti-gang programs that integrated suppression, intervention, and prevention. Law enforcement officers report that the gang problem has significantly increased since 2001 and has nearly reached the extent observed in the mid-1990s.<sup>2</sup>

Gangs have been and continue to be a major concern given that gang crime has serious consequences to members and the community.<sup>3</sup> Law enforcement and researchers have well-established the relationship between gang membership and offending. For example, gang members are significantly more likely than non-gang members to engage in a variety of crimes, including theft, robbery, assault, and drug sales and drug use.<sup>4</sup> Gang members are also more likely to commit offenses that are termed “gang-related,” such as drive-by-shootings, carjacking, and homicide.<sup>5, 6</sup> This finding is consistent across data collected qualitatively<sup>7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14</sup> and quantitatively.<sup>15, 16</sup> The gang-crime link has also been established with cross-sectional data<sup>17, 18</sup> as well as longitudinal designs.<sup>19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24</sup>

Compared to the vast amount of work devoted to understanding the relationship between gang memberships and offending, much less is known about the ways in which gang members experience crime victimization. Therefore, the current study builds upon recent work that examines the gang-victimization link, and examines the effects of social disorganization among a sample of gang and non-gang prison inmates. The following provides an overview of the recent gang-victimization literature.

Given the link between offending and victimization in general<sup>25, 26</sup> and that gang members commit crime more often than non-gang members<sup>27, 28</sup> it is likely that gang members are also victimized by crime at higher rates than the general population for several reasons. For example, gang members may have been victims before joining a gang and, therefore, victimization may be a precursor to gang membership. Some gang members report joining a gang for protection from victimization.<sup>29</sup> Studies have found that gang membership protects the member from general violent victimization (e.g. simple assault), but it increases their likelihood of being a victim of serious violence (e.g. aggravated assault or robbery).<sup>30</sup> However, some research suggests that gangs foster perceptions of safety and security for members, despite the fact that gang members report being victimized more often than non-gang members.<sup>31</sup> This decreased fear of victimization may result in the gang member engaging in more serious crimes that increase his or her chances of being victimized.

Furthermore, gang members are victimized by rival gangs and by their own gang. Studies show that gang members are involved in drive-by shootings more often than at-risk youth with no gang affiliation.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, neighborhoods considered to have gang problems are likely to experience drive-by-shootings more often than areas with fewer gang problems.<sup>33</sup> Drive-by-shootings may be motivated by disputes over territory, demonstrations of loyalty to the gang, or rivalries with other gangs.<sup>34</sup> Initiation rituals typi-

cally result in violent victimization by individuals from one's own gang.<sup>35, 36, 37</sup> To become a full member, prospective gang members may be required to be "jumped in," which involves enduring physical assaults by other members.<sup>38, 39</sup> It is believed that if the prospective member can handle the initiation, then he will be suitable to protect the gang and its members when the need arises.

Additionally, gang members are at an increased risk of victimization due to their involvement with risky lifestyles associated with being in a gang. Taylor and colleagues, found that increased involvement in delinquent activities was associated with serious violent victimization.<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, self-reported delinquency mediated the relationship between gang membership and crime victimization. The results of the study indicated that when delinquency and other risk factors were taken into account, the increased odds of being a victim of serious violence due to gang membership dropped from 161% to 60%. Therefore, being involved in a risky lifestyle such as drug dealing and committing gang motivated crimes increases the member's chance of being victimized.

Qualitative research provided the foundation for exploring the relationship between gang membership and victimization. Moore's interviews with male and female gang members revealed that many witnessed intimate partner violence during their childhood.<sup>41</sup> Among adult male and female gang members, 20% from the "earlier cliques" (e.g., those who joined the gang during the late 1940s and early 1950s) reported violence in the home of origin.<sup>42</sup> Among "recent cliques" (e.g., active gang members in the 1960s and 1970s), one third of the men and 40% of the women witnessed abuse during childhood. Interviews with active gang members by Decker and Van Winkle indicate that gang members are victimized by members of their own gang in terms of initiation rituals and by rival gangs.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, interviews with juvenile gang members reveal that many experienced physical and sexual abuse during childhood.<sup>44</sup> Miller and Decker report that while male gang members were victimized more often, female gang members witnessed and experienced crime victimization at high levels.<sup>45</sup> For example, nearly all of the female gang members had witnessed an attack (89%), seen gun shots (96%), and seen someone get shot (89%). In terms of personal victimization, many of the female gang members had been physically attacked (48%), sexually assaulted (44%), and stabbed (41%). Collectively, the evidence presented by qualitative work suggests that gang members experience victimization substantially more than non-gang members.

Recently, a handful of quantitative work has empirically examined the gang-victimization link using cross-sectional data and longitudinal data.<sup>46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54</sup> The majority of these studies indicate that gang members are significantly more likely to be victimized compared to non-gang members and compared to former gang members.<sup>55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60</sup> Much of the limited research examining the gang-victimization link have studied school-based samples. Curry et al. surveyed a sample of middle school students and compared the victimization experiences of non-gang members to those of gang members and gang-involved youth.<sup>61</sup> The findings revealed that gang members were more likely to be threatened with a gun, shot at, and injured by gunshot compared to gang-involved youth. In turn, youth who were gang involved were more likely to be victimized by the three types of crime than the non-gang members.<sup>62</sup> Peterson et al. examined the gang-victimization link using the Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) evaluation data, which is comprised of nearly 6,000 youth attending public schools.<sup>63</sup> Gang members were significantly more likely than non-gang members to be victimized before, during, and after gang membership.<sup>64</sup> Gover et al. examined a school-based sample of high school

students and found that both male and female gang members were significantly more likely to be crime victims compared to non-gang students.<sup>65</sup>

Similar to research examining school-based samples, studies that utilize incarcerated samples also find support for the gang-victimization link. Among juveniles recently arrested in Arizona, Decker, Katz, and Webb compare the victimization experiences of current to former gang members.<sup>66</sup> With the exception of being robbed, their findings indicate that current gang members are more likely than former gang members to be victimized by all other crime types (e.g., threatened with a gun, shot at, shot, threatened with another weapon, injured with another weapon, and jumped/beaten up). Fox et al. surveyed incarcerated jail inmates throughout Florida and found that gang members were more likely than non-gang inmates to be victimized by property (e.g., theft, vandalism) and personal crimes (e.g., threatened with a weapon, attacked without a weapon, attacked with a weapon, stabbed, robbed, carjacked, shot at, shot, or experienced witness intimidation, home invasion, or drive-by-shooting).<sup>67</sup>

While the majority of the literature supports the gang-victimization link, some research casts doubt upon the robustness of this relationship once other factors are taken into account. A significant bi-variate relationship exists between gang membership and victimization.<sup>68, 69</sup> After accounting for risk and protective factors, the authors suggest that while gang membership is associated with serious violent victimization (e.g., aggravated assault and robbery), the effects are no longer significant for general violent victimization (e.g., simple assault, aggravated assault, robbery). Drawing from a routine activities perspective, Spano et al. examined a sample of Black youth living in high-poverty neighborhoods and found support for the relationship between gang membership and victimization (e.g., threatened with a weapon, shot at, cut serious enough to visit a doctor).<sup>70</sup> However, accounting for lifestyle factors (e.g., deviance, demographics, family structure) mediated the gang-victimization relationship.

Given these conflicting findings, more research is needed to disentangle the relationship between gang membership and victimization. While some of these studies have been grounded in theory, very few studies incorporate a theoretical framework from which to examine the gang-victimization link.<sup>71, 72, 73</sup> The following section provides a theoretical context using social disorganization theory to explain the gang-victimization link.

## **Theoretical Framework: Social Disorganization**

Although some research has recently begun to examine the gang-victimization relationship, very few of these studies have incorporated or tested a theoretical framework. Taylor et al. were among the first to conduct a theory test of the gang-victimization link by examining the effects of lifestyles and routine activities theories.<sup>74</sup> They found that gang members were significantly more likely to be victims of violent crime compared to non-gang members. However, the authors also found that lifestyles and routine activities mediated the gang-victimization link. Melde et al. and Fox et al. were among the first to examine the effects of perceptions of neighborhood disorganization on the gang-victimization relationship.<sup>75, 76</sup> More specifically, Melde et al. utilized a nine-item index of perceived disorder, which generally represented physical neighborhood disorder (e.g., run-down buildings, graffiti, vandalism).<sup>77</sup> Fox et al. employed a six-item index for physical disorder (e.g., garbage, graffiti, vandalism), a five-item index for social disorder (e.g., loitering, public intoxication, drug sales), and a three-item index for collective efficacy (e.g., neighbors willingness to

control juveniles, neighborliness, trust of neighbors).<sup>78</sup> Both Melde et al. and Fox et al. find support for the effects of perceptions of social disorganization to explain the relationship between gang membership and social disorganization.<sup>79, 80</sup>

According to the social disorganization theory, neighborhood characteristics, rather than personal characteristics, are responsible for crime and delinquency. In addition to the factors outlined by Shaw and McKay, including economic disadvantage, racial heterogeneity, and residential mobility, researchers have identified other characteristics indicative of social disorganization.<sup>81</sup> For example, measures of social disorganization now often incorporate physical disorder, social disorder, and collective efficacy.<sup>82, 83, 84</sup> Although social disorganization is a theory that has successfully explained crime, it may also be useful for explaining victimization, especially among gang members.<sup>85</sup> For example, Kornhauser argued that subcultural groups (i.e., gangs) tend to form in disorganized neighborhoods.<sup>86, 87</sup> By nature, gangs attract and commit crime within their neighborhoods, which facilitates crime victimization due to internal group conflict (e.g., initiation), rivalries with other gangs (e.g., drive-by-shootings), and drug involvement.<sup>88</sup> Therefore, the current study extends the theoretical framework of social disorganization theory to examine the relationship between gang membership and victimization.

## **Purpose of the Present Study**

The current study aims to examine whether (1) gang members were more likely to be victimized compared to non-gang members, (2) perceptions of social disorganization were associated with victimization, and (3) accounting for inmates' offending mediated the relationship between social disorganization and victimization. The present study builds upon prior research and contributes to the gang, victimization, and theoretical literatures in several ways. Given that some research indicates that gang members are largely adults, it is important to examine these relationships among a sample of adults.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, very little is known about the gang-victimization link among incarcerated inmates, which examines juvenile arrestees).<sup>90</sup> With the exception of one study that focuses on adult jail inmates, research examining the gang-victimization link has focused almost exclusively on juvenile samples.<sup>91, 92, 93, 94, 95</sup> The current study builds upon the recent research and is the first to examine the gang-victimization relationship among a sample of prison inmates.<sup>96, 97</sup>

Additionally, the current study is among the first to theoretically examine the relationship between gang membership and victimization. Notably, Taylor et al. examined the effects of lifestyles and routine activities theories and Fox et al. and Melde et al. analyzed the impacts of perceptions of social disorganization on the gang-victimization link.<sup>98, 99, 100</sup> The current study builds upon these foundational studies by examining the effects of social disorganization separately for gang versus non-gang members and by accounting for offending.<sup>101, 102</sup> Melde et al. reported that a single measure of perceived disorder was significantly related to victimization, and Fox et al. found that an index of social disorder predicted victimization among gang members.<sup>103, 104</sup> Therefore, the current study aims to disentangle these effects by examining perceptions of neighborhood disorganization individually, rather than collectively. The following section details the methodology of the current study.

## Data and Method

To conduct this study, structured interviews with male prison inmates in Texas were conducted. The specific facility was chosen due to its role as the intake unit for a large part of the state. As such, inmates were generally incarcerated for less than two years. This was important because our interview focused on victimization occurring within the last two years the inmate was outside of prison.<sup>105</sup> Therefore, it was important that this time period was recent to improve accuracy in reporting. Additionally, we were interested in gang activity outside of prison, so inmates affiliated with prison gangs were only included in the sample if they also admitted having gang associations while outside of prison as well.

Participants for the current study were selected in one of two ways. Confirmed members of well-known organized gangs (i.e., Bloods, Crips, Aryan Brotherhood, Texas Syndicate, Mexican Mafia) are confined to administrative segregation within the prison. These individuals were handpicked and offered participation in the study (non-random selection). While a majority of the selected gang members participated, all members of the Mexican Mafia declined participation.<sup>106</sup>

In an effort to compare gang members versus non-gang members, inmates with no gang affiliation were randomly selected. In the privacy of the interview rooms, participants were informed of the purpose of the study: to identify reasons for joining a gang, to identify characteristics of gang membership which increase the likelihood of being a victim of a crime, and to identify the situations in which victimization of gang members is most likely to occur. They were then given the opportunity to ask questions, and active consent was obtained, during which participants signed consent forms which were retained by the research team. Approximately 80% of the offers to participate were accepted, which was much higher than anticipated given the population and subject of this project.

After initial demographic and social disorganization information was discussed, participants were asked whether or not they were members of a gang. This was done in order to build rapport with the participants before asking them to disclose their gang affiliation.<sup>107</sup> The participants were then asked victimization and perpetration questions, and those identifying as gang members were asked questions pertaining to gang membership (i.e., initiation, rules, codes of conduct, expectations).

## Measures

***Crime victimization.*** Crime victimization was measured based on five questions that were modified from previously validated scales.<sup>108, 109</sup> Non-gang members were asked:

- “Have you had something taken from you directly by force or by threatening to hurt you in the last two years you were outside of prison?”
- “Has someone attacked you, injured you, or beaten you up without the use of a weapon in the last two years you were outside of prison?”
- “Has someone attacked you with a weapon such as a gun, knife, bottle, or chair in the last two years you were outside of prison?”
- “Have you been the intended target of a drive by shooting in the last two years you were outside of prison?”
- “Has anyone forced you to do sexual things even though you did not want to do those things in the last two years you were outside of prison?”

Gang members were asked the same questions, except it was specified that the question pertained to the last two years they were in a gang, outside of prison.<sup>110</sup> No participants endorsed the item pertaining to sexual assault. Therefore, it was removed from further analyses. A dichotomous victimization index was calculated for the purpose of analyses. Participants that endorsed no victimization variables were coded as zero. If the participant endorsed any of the victimization variables, they were coded as having been the victim of a crime (= 1).

***Crime perpetration.*** Crime perpetration was measured similarly to victimization, except inmates were asked if they had perpetrated any of the five index crimes within the previous two years (i.e. “Have you taken something from someone directly by force or by threatening to hurt them in the last two years you were outside of prison?”). Similar to the victimization questions, gang members were asked the same questions, except it was specified that the question pertained to the last two years they were in a gang, outside of prison. Again, no participants endorsed the sexual assault item, and as such, it was removed from further analyses. A dichotomous perpetration index was then calculated to parallel the victimization index such that inmates were classified as committing none of the crimes (= 0) or at least one crime (= 1).

***Perceptions of social disorganization.*** Social disorganization was measured with a series of five items that tapped into dimensions of physical disorder, social disorder, and collective efficacy.<sup>111, 112, 113</sup> Using a five-point likert scale, respondents were asked to rate the quality of their neighborhood (ranging from very good to very bad), the dangerousness of their neighborhood in relation to other parts of the city (ranging from much more dangerous to much less dangerous), whether they felt their neighbors looked out for each other (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree), and whether graffiti and drugs were a problem in their neighborhood (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree). Finally, respondents were asked if they considered their neighborhood a home, or just a place they lived.

***Demographic characteristics.*** Demographic variables were included in the models as controls, including age (continuous variable), ethnicity (White, Hispanic, Black, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian/Pacific Islander, mixed race, and other race), grades from respondents’ last two years of school (failing, barely passing, average, and excellent) and approximate family income during childhood (less than \$25,000; \$25,000 to \$49,000; \$50,000 to \$99,000; and \$100,000 or more).

# Results

## Descriptive Results

Figures 1-5 present the descriptive information for the full sample ( $N = 217$ ), the subsample of gang members ( $N = 84$ ), and the subsample of non-gang members ( $N = 133$ ). The sample was all male, and approximately evenly distributed between Whites (35%) and Blacks (38%), followed by Hispanics (23%). The mean age of the full sample was 31.6 and a majority completed some high school (35.9%). When comparing the gang members to non-gang members, gang members were significantly younger than non-gang members, and non-gang members completed higher levels of education. There was not a significant difference in ethnicity between the two groups.

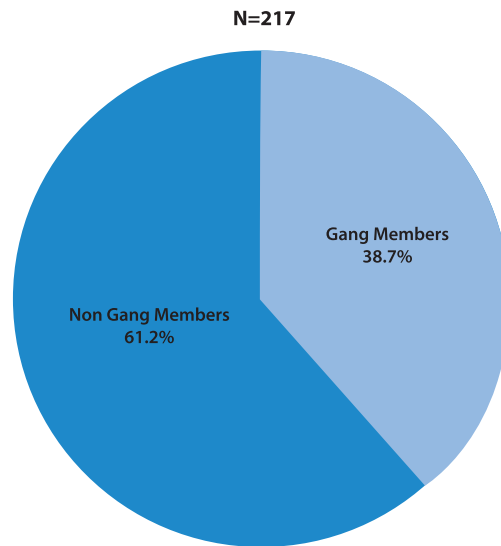


Figure 1. Percentage of gang and non-gang members

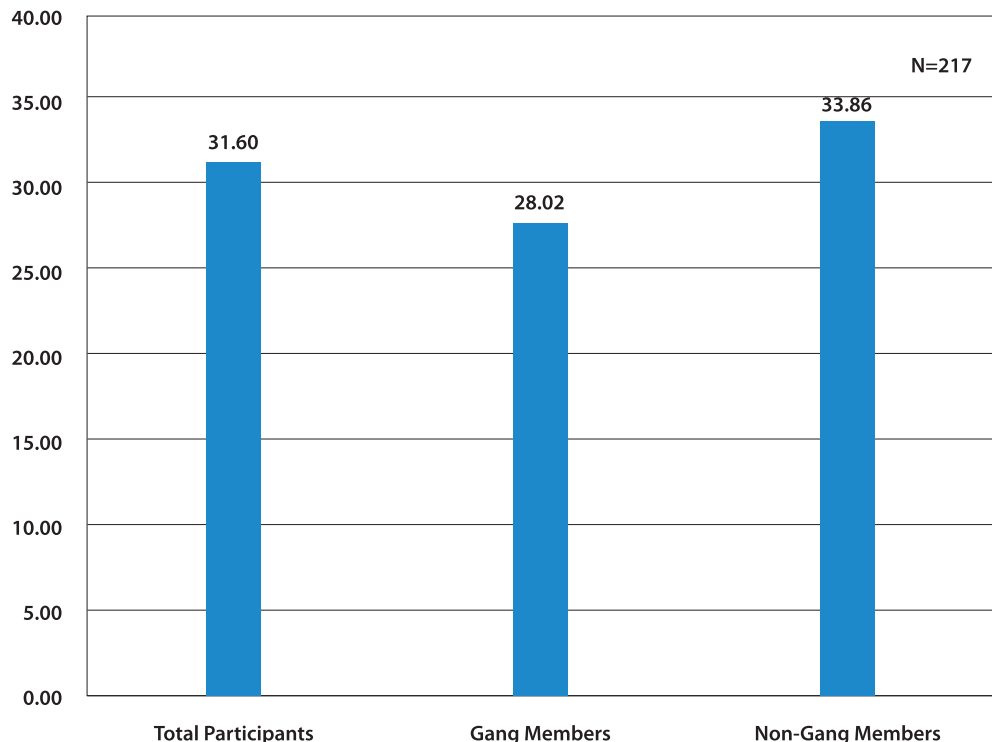
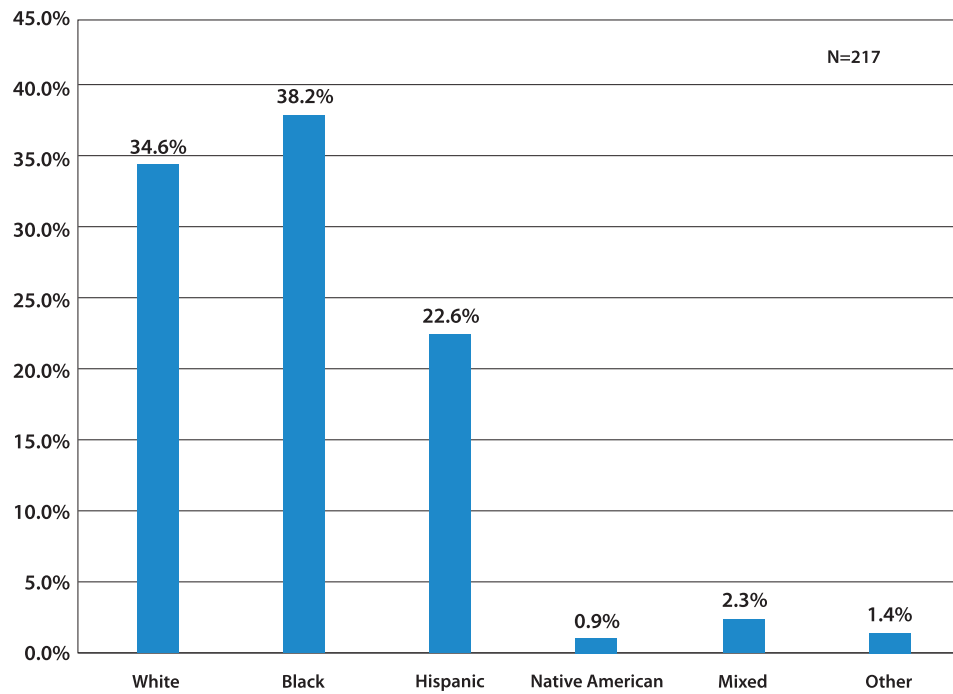
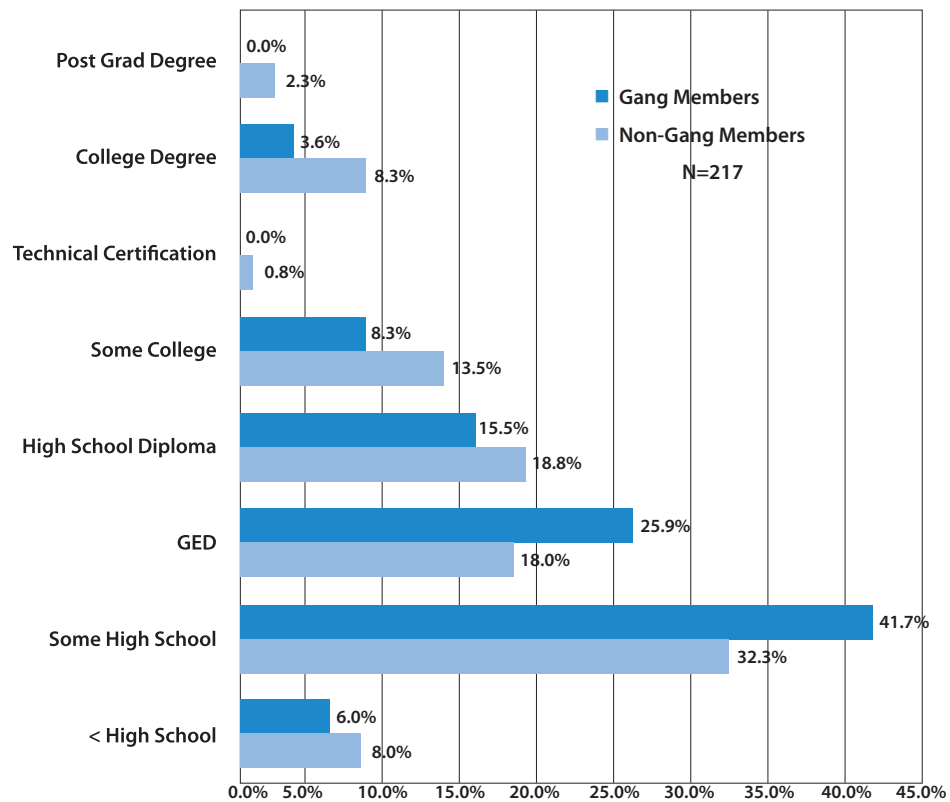


Figure 2. Age of Sample

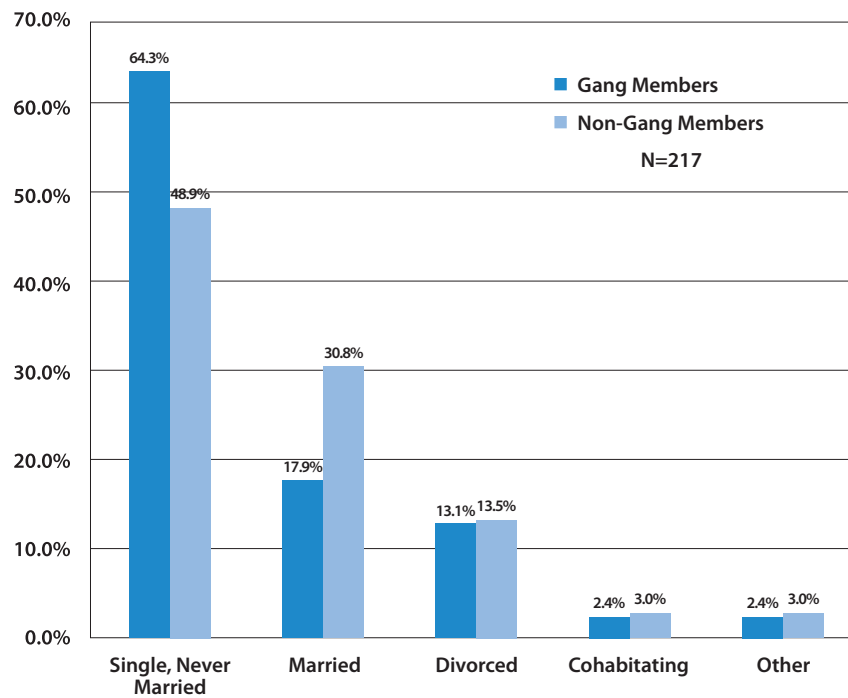
$p < .001$



**Figure 3. Race / Ethnicity of Participants**



**Figure 4. Race / Educational Status of Participants**  $p < .001$



**Figure 5. Marital Status of Participants**

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics for gang and non-gang subsamples**

	<b>Gang Members (N = 84) N [%]</b>	<b>Non-Gang Members (N = 133) N [%]</b>
<b>Juvenile Arrest***</b>	63 [75.0%]	55 [41.4%]
<b>Number of Times in Prison</b>		
Mean	2.04	2.02
(SD)	0.96	1.41
<b>Employed before Prison***</b>	48 [57.1%]	110 [82.7%]
<b>Drug or Alcohol Abuse before Arrest</b>	57 [67.9%]	82 [61.7%]
<b>Witness IPV***</b>	47 [56.0%]	45 [33.8%]
<b>Age at Joining Gang</b>		
Mean	15.56	
(SD)	5.04	
* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001 Asterisks indicate a significant difference between gang and non-gang members.		

Table 2 provides frequencies and percentages for the social disorganization variables. Results for gang and non-gang member subsamples are displayed. Comparisons of means indicated that there was a significant difference between the groups indicated that gang members were significantly more likely to report more neighborhood dangerousness, less neighborhood quality, and a greater problem with drugs within their neighborhoods.

**Table 2. Perceptions of Social Disorganization**

	<b>Gang Members (N = 84) N [%]</b>	<b>Non- Gang (N = 133) N [%]</b>
<b>Neighborhood Quality***</b>		
Very Good	13 [15.5%]	36 [27.1%]
Good	22 [26.2%]	51 [38.3%]
In Between	21 [25.0%]	30 [22.6%]
Very Bad	30 [22.6%]	6 [4.5%]
<b>Neighborhood Dangerousness***</b>		
Much More Dangerous	14 [16.7%]	9 [6.8%]
More Dangerous	21 [25.0%]	13 [9.8%]
Equally Dangerous	11 [13.1%]	19 [14.3%]
Less Dangerous	22 [26.2%]	40 [30.1%]
Much Less Dangerous	16 [19.0%]	50 [37.6%]
<b>Neighbors Look Out</b>		
Strongly Agree	30 [35.7%]	61 [45.9%]
Agree	35 [41.7%]	50 [37.6%]
Neither	3 [3.6%]	2 [1.5%]
Disagree	7 [8.3%]	12 [9.0%]
Strongly Disagree	7 [8.3%]	6 [4.5%]
<b>Neighborhood Graffiti</b>		
Strongly Agree	11 [13.1%]	10 [7.5%]
Agree	9 [10.7%]	12 [9.0%]
Neither	4 [4.8%]	2 [1.5%]
Disagree	29 [34.5%]	44 [33.1%]
Strongly Disagree	31 [36.9%]	63 [47.4%]
<b>Neighborhood Drugs***</b>		
Strongly Agree	46 [54.8%]	37 [27.8%]
Agree	19 [22.6%]	31 [23.3%]
Neither	5 [6.0%]	4 [3.0%]
Disagree	7 [8.3%]	28 [21.1%]
Strongly Disagree	7 [8.3%]	32 [24.1%]
<b>Home v. Place to Live</b>		
Home	52 [61.9%]	87 [65.4%]
Place to Live	31 [36.9%]	46 [34.6%]
* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001 Asterisks indicate a significant difference between gang and non-gang members.		

Table 3 provides the frequencies of victimization and perpetration for the full sample, as well as for both the gang and non-gang subsamples. The results of chi-square analyses revealed that gang members were significantly more likely to report perpetrating all crime types compared to non-gang members. For example, gang members were more likely to commit robbery, simple assault, aggravated assault, and participate in a drive-by-shooting. Similarly, gang members reported being victimized significantly more than non-gang members by all crime types with the exception of robbery. Gang members were significantly more likely to be victims of simple assault, aggravated assault, and drive-by-shootings.

**Table 3. Frequencies of victimization for the full sample and gang and non-gang subsamples**

	Full Sample (N = 217) N [%]	Gang Members (N = 84) N [%]	Non- Gang (N = 133) N [%]
<b>Victimization</b>			
Something Taken	31 [14.3%]	16 [19.0%]	15 [11.3%]
Attacked w/o Weapon***	50 [23.0%]	32 [31.1%]	18 [12.8%]
Attacked with Weapon***	70 [32.3%]	44 [52.4%]	26 [29.5%]
Target of Drive-By***	40 [18.4%]	34 [40.5%]	6 [4.5%]
Victimization Index***	102 [47.0%]	60 [71.4%]	2 [31.6%]
<b>Perpetration</b>			
Taken Something***	66 [30.4%]	42 [50.0%]	24 [18.0%]
Attacked w/o Weapon***	96 [44.2%]	53 [63.1%]	43 [32.3%]
Attacked with Weapon***	59 [27.2%]	41 [48.8%]	18 [13.5%]
Participated in Drive-By***	15 [6.9%]	14 [16.7%]	1 [0.8%]
Perpetration Index***	121 [55.8%]	65 [77.4%]	56 [42.1%]
<p>* p &lt; .05, ** p &lt; .01, *** p &lt; .001 Asterisks indicate a significant difference between gang and non-gang members.</p>			

## Multivariate Results

Binary logistic regressions were used to predict crime victimization, given that the dependent variables were dichotomous. Table 4 shows analyses predicting crime victimization for both gang members (Model 1) and non-gang members (Model 2) using the social disorganization and control variables. Among gang members, victimization is associated with perceptions of higher levels of neighborhood dangerousness, which is consistent with theoretically-based expectations. Contrary to expectations, victimization among gang members is related to perceptions of higher neighborhood quality, higher income levels, and higher grades in school. Possible explanations for these relationships will be further explored in the discussion section. Among non-gang members, victimization was associated with younger individuals and those with increased income (Model 2). However, the victimization of non-gang members was not influenced by perceptions of social disorganization. Overall, this finding suggests that social disorganization impacts victimization among gang members, but does not have a similar effect on non-gang members.

Given the importance of controlling for offending, and the possibility for offending behavior to mediate the relationship between victimization and social disorganization, the models were subsequently examined to consider this possibility. Table 5 shows analyses predicting crime victimization for both gang members (Model 3) and non-gang members (Model 4) using the same social disorganization and control variables, but also including

**Table 4. Significant correlates of victimization among gang and non-gang members**

Gang Members	Non-Gang Members
Higher grades Higher income Better neighborhood quality More neighborhood dangerousness	Younger age Higher income

perpetration as a predictor. Among gang members, victimization remains associated with perceptions of higher levels of neighborhood dangerousness and higher school grades. The quality of one's neighborhood and income level no longer reach significance, while crime perpetration is significantly associated with victimization among gang members. Among non-gang members, the significant predictors of victimization (age and income) remain as important predictors with the addition of crime perpetration. Unlike gang members, the victimization of non-gang members was not influenced by the perception of social disorganization. Overall, results indicate that gang members were significantly more likely to be victimized compared to non-gang members and perceptions of social disorganization explained the likelihood of victimization among gang members only. Finally, crime perpetration partially mediated the relationship between perceptions of social disorganization and victimization for gang members.

**Table 5. Significant correlates of victimization among gang and non-gang members while controlling for offending behavior**

Gang Members	Non-Gang Members
Higher grades More neighborhood dangerousness Criminal Offending	Younger age Higher income

## Discussion

This study first examined whether gang members were more likely to be victimized than non-gang members, and the findings overwhelmingly indicate that gang members were significantly more likely to be crime victims. This finding is consistent with the majority of the handful of studies that have begun to examine the gang-victimization link.<sup>114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120</sup>

Next, the current study aimed to determine whether perceptions of social disorganization were associated with crime victimization. While perceptions of social disorganization did not impact victimization among non-gang members, the findings show that gang members were more likely to report their neighborhoods to be more dangerous, of lower quality, and a greater problem with drugs compared to non-gang members. Regression analyses indicate that perceptions of social disorganization matter in terms of gang members' victimization. Consistent with theoretical expectations, more dangerous neighborhoods were associated with crime victimization; however, *higher* neighborhood quality was also predictive of victimization. While these two findings may initially appear to be incompatible with each other, considering gang members' lifestyle may explain these results. For example, other theories, in addition to social disorganization, may also be important for explaining the gang-victimization link. Drawing from a routine activities perspective, living in neighborhoods with good conditions and having more money may have led gang members to be more

attractive targets for crime victimization, which in turn may have lead to them joining a gang for protection. Given that the current study is unable to test this possible explanation, future research may be able to shed light on this issue.

Finally, the current study examined whether accounting for inmates' offending mediated the relationship between social disorganization and victimization. The findings reveal that offending is significantly associated with victimization among gang members only, and the inclusion of this variable partially mediates the relationship between social disorganization and crime victimization. While neighborhood dangerousness remains an important factor for victimization, neighborhood quality and income are no longer significant predictors. To some degree, gang members' experience with victimization is a function of their involvement in crime rather than the social conditions of their neighborhoods.

In addition to its theoretical contribution, the findings from the current study may also suggest practical implications. Information obtained through this study could prove useful for the purposes of gang prevention, especially in communities that are perceived as being dangerous, have drug problems, or are of generally low quality. In addition, other risk factors (e.g., individual characteristics, family circumstances, school performance, peer groups, etc) should also be addressed in prevention programs. Research has shown that some of the risk factors for joining a gang are often seen in children as young as seven years of age. Therefore, prevention programs should begin in elementary school, particularly targeting children with behavior problems and low academic performance in spite of being intellectually capable. Similar programs should continue through middle school and high school. School programs should consider tutoring and counseling for these young people. After school programs that encourage prosocial activities and mentoring have been found to be helpful. Where feasible, attempts should be made to involve families to build support and a better sense of community.

It is commonly believed that gang membership offers protection. However, the findings from the current study suggest that gang membership enhances victimization instead of decreasing it.<sup>121</sup> Additionally, the information provided in this study may be useful in assisting gang educators to pinpoint specific neighborhoods and characteristics of gang members who are more likely to be victimized. Ultimately, those efforts may help to reduce the rates of victimization among gang members.

Some limitations of the current study warrant further consideration. First, participants were randomly selected by correctional officers. Although officers were not aware of the full purpose of our study, it is possible that participants felt they were chosen because of their membership in a gang. This could have been a concern for the participants, particularly since confirmed gang members of specific gangs are administratively segregated. By admitting gang membership, participants could have believed they were risking their general population status if they were not convinced of our assurance of confidentiality and non-affiliation with the prison. Unfortunately, given the prison setting, the research team was not permitted to randomly select participants. Additionally, given that the current study was cross-sectional, the data do not permit inferences regarding temporal ordering of the variables of interest (e.g., victimization, gang membership, neighborhood disorganization). For example, the current study is unable to determine whether gang members were victimized before joining a gang or after gang membership. Furthermore, the age range of participants excludes youth at greatest risk for joining gangs. However, this sample of adult prison in-

mates offers a unique opportunity to examine an under-researched population with regard to gangs. Finally, it is important that the population is considered. Gang members often have codes of conduct which include not disclosing the details of their gang. While many participants were forthcoming with their answers, it is possible that others were not. The potential for respondents to provide inaccurate or untruthful information is an unavoidable limitation inherent in this population; however, prior research suggests that self-reported data from offenders is generally reliable, even regarding sensitive topics, including offending, victimization, and gang membership.<sup>122, 123, 124</sup>

In spite of these limitations, this study offers an important contribution to the gang, victimization, and theoretical literatures. For example, given that the majority of prior research on the gang-victimization link examines juveniles, the current study is among the first to study a sample of adults. Additionally, this study is the first to examine a sample of prison inmates, which builds upon recent research that examines incarcerated samples, including juvenile arrestees and jail inmates.<sup>125, 126</sup> Furthermore, the current study is unique in its theoretical test of the gang-victimization link. To date, very little research attention has focused on theoretical explanations for the victimization of gang members. This study draws from the recent work of Melde et al. and Fox et al. by examining perceptions of social disorganization.<sup>127, 128</sup> In the end, this research reveals several important differences between gang and non-gang members, especially in terms of victimization and the importance of neighborhood effects. Knowing this, policies and programs designed to improve the quality and safety of the neighborhoods where gang members reside may be an effective anti-gang prevention effort.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>104</sup> Supra note 49
- <sup>105</sup> This reference period was selected in an effort to reduce potential issues of inaccurate recall and temporal ordering.
- <sup>106</sup> Members of the Mexican Mafia expressed concern for their safety, as they endorse strict rules regarding the discussion of their gang and gang activities. Additionally, on one day of interviewing, members of the Aryan Circle were instructed not to participate in the study by a leader in the gang; however, members participated on other days of interviewing.
- <sup>107</sup> For the majority of participants, their self-reported gang membership was taken at face value. However, there were a few participants who denied ever belonging to a gang, yet displayed the name of a gang tattoo visibly and prominently. Such participants with overwhelming evidence of gang membership were coded as gang members, although this affected very few respondents ( $N=8$ )
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- <sup>109</sup> Supra note 49
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