

Chapter 2

Putting the “Gang” in “Eurogang”: Characteristics of Delinquent Youth Groups by Different Definitional Approaches

Kristy N. Matsuda, Finn-Aage Esbensen, and Dena C. Carson*

2.1 Introduction

While there seems to be consensus that gangs are distinct from other groups, there is less agreement on the characteristics necessary or sufficient to define a gang. Despite decades of attention, policymakers, researchers, and law enforcement have not agreed on a universal definition of a “street gang” (Ball and Curry 1995; Esbensen et al. 2001; Klein 1969; Klein and Maxson 2006; Miller 1975). A recent review of state policies by Barrows and Huff (2009) revealed that only two states used the same definition of a “gang member.” Gang researchers have long lamented that the lack of a consensus definition leads to overestimations, underestimations, and depictions of gangs that may not be comparable (Klein and Maxson 2006). The implication of the definitional issue for law enforcement and policymakers is not trivial. It is not possible to identify and respond to gangs if one cannot identify gangs and gang members.

Social scientists have been putting forth gang definitions since the 1920s (Thrasher 1963), but the discourse around definitions remains timely (Curry and Decker 1998; Esbensen et al. 2010; Klein 1971). Scholars have assessed the degree to which changing definitional criteria affects the depiction of gang members (Esbensen et al.

*This research was made possible, in part, by the support and participation of seven school districts, including the School District of Philadelphia. This project was supported by Award No. 2006-JV-FX-0011 awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this manuscript are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice or of the seven participating school districts.

K.N. Matsuda • F.-A. Esbensen (✉) • D.C. Carson
Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Missouri-St. Louis,
St. Louis, MO, USA
e-mail: esbensen@umsl.edu

2001; Winfree et al. 1992). Research suggests that as the gang definition changes, the qualities of the gang and gang members also shift. One study (Winfree et al. 1992) showed that an inclusive question like “Do you belong to a gang?” captures individuals at all levels of gang membership (i.e., wannabes, active members, and former gang members). A more restrictive definition of gangs, one that requires details or characteristics about the gang, yields more fringe or “wannabe” members. In contrast, a study by Esbensen et al. (2001) applied increasingly restrictive definitions to a sample of youth. They began with a global measure of “have you ever been in a gang” and narrowed down to youth that reported being current, core members in more structured gangs. They found that as focus narrowed to more central gang members, the demographic characteristics of the group did not change, but the level of delinquency and risk factors increased significantly.

It is often not possible to collect in-depth detail about an individual’s gang history or extensive characteristics about their gangs. Acquiring a response to a simple question like “Are you a gang member?” may be an achievement. Alternatively, individuals may be willing to give extensive information on their peer group, but be reluctant to admit to being in a “gang.” The result of relying on one source of data as opposed to another has not been adequately examined despite the frequent use of variant methods of defining gang membership. The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the depiction of gang members that results from different definitions of gang membership. This research should help inform whether different methods of identifying gang members result in similar or dissimilar depictions of youth, and importantly, whether gangs can reliably be identified without the use of the term “gang.”

2.1.1 Different Definitional Approaches

American gang researchers often use the self-nomination approach to identify gang members (e.g., “Have you ever been a gang member?” or “Are you currently a gang member?”) (Esbensen et al. 2001; Thornberry et al. 2003). This method is both parsimonious and straightforward. It does, however, hinge on each respondent’s unique perception of what constitutes a “gang member.” The notion of a “gang member” may evoke stereotypical images of necessary characteristics that may or may not be grounded in reality. Respondents may be reluctant to admit to being or considering themselves like those depictions.

Alternatively, some researchers have asked respondents if their friends are gang members (Melde et al. 2009; Melde and Esbensen 2011). This approach removes the individual’s own personal investment (either stigma or posturing) and allows for a measure of a group dynamic. A gang is, after all, a group, and the dynamics associated with such a delinquent entity is generally of central interest. This method, however, still relies on a respondent’s own gang definition and assumes that youth who associate with gangs are gang-involved. While prior research has shown that peer groups typically consist of a mix of prosocial and antisocial youth, the studies do not specifically examine gang youth (Elliott and Menard 1996; Haynie 2002;

Warr 1993). The current study will provide a better understanding of whether youth who consider their group of friends to be a gang also report the same attitudes and behaviors as other gang youth.

Issues related to gang definitions further complicate the likelihood of cross-national gang research. The word “gang” appears to be a concept with a shared understanding across the United States and in other English-speaking countries (though geographical, national, and cultural differences may influence results). The term “gang,” however, may not translate well (or at all) in other languages, even if groups that share similar characteristics to American gangs are present in the culture. The Eurogang definition was created in response to this issue (for a history see Sect. 1 in this volume and Klein et al. 2001). The Eurogang definition defines and measures gang membership without using the term “gang.” Instead, the definition includes qualities believed to reflect the central gang characteristics (i.e., factors that are necessary definers of a gang).¹ Earlier work utilizing this approach found predictive and discriminant validity of the Eurogang approach (Esbensen et al. 2008a; Weerman and Esbensen 2005) in both European and American samples.

These three approaches to defining gang membership (i.e., self-nomination, friends are gang, and Eurogang) have produced similar depictions of youth involved in gangs, but, to date, the effect of employing these different definitional criteria has not been adequately explored. Regardless of gang definition used, some behavioral characteristics have been consistently shown to distinguish gang members from non-gang youth. For example, gang members are more delinquent than non-gang youth (Esbensen and Winfree 1998; Miller 2001; Thornberry 1998). Gang members are also more delinquent than non-gang youth with delinquent friends (e.g., Battin et al. 1998). Gang-involved youth are also more likely to experience increased victimization (Taylor et al. 2007). In addition, these three definitional approaches have identified gang members who score significantly higher than non-gang youth on a variety of risk factors that have been theoretically and empirically associated with gang membership and delinquent offending, including commitment to negative peers (Burgess and Akers 1966; Sutherland 1947), techniques of neutralization (Sykes and Matza 1957), and parental monitoring (Klein and Maxson 2006). To date, research has been restricted to studies utilizing one of these definitional approaches. In this chapter, we compare gang youth defined by the three approaches discussed above (1) the self-nomination approach (i.e., “Are you currently a gang member?”), (2) the friends are a gang method (i.e., “Do you consider your group of friends to be a gang?”), and (3) the Eurogang approach (i.e., the application of a set of criteria to determine whether the group is a gang). We explore similarities and differences associated with employing all three definitional standards to the same set of respondents. We will thereby be able to address the following questions:

1. Are gang members identified by different gang definitions similarly or dissimilarly situated along behavioral and attitudinal dimensions believed to be associated with gang membership?
2. Does each definition produce the same gang sample; that is, regardless of definition, do we identify the same youths as gang members?

To address the questions posed above, we will compare the demographic characteristics, risk factors associated with gang membership, and the behavioral responses of individuals in each of the three gang groups. We will also examine the extent to which these definitional approaches identify the same individuals and the extent to which there is overlap between and consistency across the three definitional approaches.

2.2 Methods

Data for this study originate from the national evaluation of the Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) program (Esbensen et al. 2011). The G.R.E.A.T. program is a national school-based gang prevention program taught by local law enforcement to (primarily) middle school classrooms. The evaluation is a longitudinal, panel design study that followed a cohort of students in seven diverse cities across the United States for 5 years.² The seven cities are Albuquerque, New Mexico; Chicago, Illinois; a Dallas–Fort Worth area, Texas; Greeley, Colorado; Nashville, Tennessee; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Portland, Oregon.

2.2.1 Sample Selection

School districts and police departments (that teach the G.R.E.A.T. program) in each of the seven cities agreed to be included in the evaluation. The process produced a final sample of 31 schools and 195 classrooms, and 4,905 students during the 2006–2007 school year. Sixth grade students were included from 26 schools; seventh grade students comprised the sample in the remaining five schools. Classrooms in the participating schools were randomly assigned to receive or not receive the G.R.E.A.T. program.

Active parental consent was required for student participation (for a more detailed description of the active consent process, consult Esbensen et al. 2008b). Overall, 89.1% of youths ($N=4,372$) returned a completed consent form, with 77.9% of parents/guardians ($N=3,820$) allowing their child's participation.³

2.2.2 Methods

Students in this research completed a confidential group-administered pretest questionnaire, a posttest survey after program administration, and annual follow-up surveys. The completion rate for the 1-year follow-up was 87% and for the 2-year follow-up was 83%. In the current study, we rely primarily on data from Wave 4 (or the 2-year follow-up) but also draw on cross-sectional results from Wave 1 and Wave 3 (pretest and 1-year follow-up) when illustrative.

2.2.3 *Sample Characteristics*

The first column in Table 2.1 presents the characteristics of the analysis sample ($n=3,162$) at Wave 4. The demographic profile of the Wave 4 sample did not differ substantively from the original Wave 1 sample ($N=3,820$). The sample was equally male and female. The sample was racially/ethnically diverse, with Hispanic (39.7%), white (26.2%), and black (16.7%) youths accounting for nearly 83% of the sample. The remaining youth in the sample identified as another race/ethnicity or bi/multiracial (“other”) at Wave 4. The average age of the sample was 13.5 years at this wave. It is important to keep in mind that age range is significantly truncated because 26 of the 31 schools delivered the G.R.E.A.T. program in sixth grade and the remaining schools in seventh grade. Over 44% of the sample reported living with both their mother and their father (i.e., “nuclear family structure”). A majority of the sample reported other living arrangements (e.g., single parent, step-parents present, with other relatives).

2.2.4 *Measures*

This study explores the relationship between demographic, attitudinal, and behavioral measures across different definitions of gang membership. The means for all measures are reported for the full sample in the first column of Table 2.1. A description of each measure is detailed in this section.

Demographics. Survey respondents were asked to indicate their sex, ethnicity/race (white, black, Hispanic/Latino, or other), and age. Youth who indicated that they lived with both their mother and father were coded as “nuclear family structure.” All other living structures were classified as “non-nuclear.”

Behavior. Respondents’ survey indicated the frequency of their involvement in 14 different types of delinquency in the previous 6 months.⁴ The frequency of their involvement in these delinquent offenses was used to create a measure of “delinquency.” Respondents’ volumes (i.e., zero times, one to two times, about once a month, about once a week, or everyday in the previous 6 months) of their use of tobacco, alcohol, illegal drugs (marijuana or other illegal substances), and inhalants (i.e., paint, glue, or other things inhaled to get high) were used to create a measure of “substance use.” Youth also indicated the frequency of their “victimization” in the previous 6 months.⁵ Youth were asked whether they spent time with their friends where no adults were present (yes or no) as a measure of time “unsupervised” with peers. Finally, they were asked if they spent time with their friends where drugs and alcohol are available (yes or no) as a measure of “drugs and alcohol present.”

Attitudes. The survey included attitudinal scales strongly linked to both gang membership and general delinquency. Each scale was created from items measured on a five-point scale. Lower scores on each variable indicate less of the given measure (e.g., a lower score on the “anger” scale indicates less anger). “Parental monitoring”

Table 2.1 Characteristics of full sample, gang sample, and by definition at Wave 4

| | Full sample | Not in gang | Any gang | Self-nominate | Eurogang | Friends gang |
|---------------------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| <i>N</i> (% of sample) | 3,162 | 2,775 (87.8) | 379 (12.2) | 151 (4.8) | 215 (6.8) | 175 (5.5) |
| | M(SD)/% | M(SD)/% | M(SD)/% | M(SD)/% | M(SD)/% | M(SD)/% |
| Male | 49.3 | 48.7 | 50.9 | 60.0 | 46.0 | 55.8 |
| <i>Race/ethnicity</i> | | | | | | |
| White | 26.2 | 27.5 | 16.9 | 11.7 | 20.7 | 9.3 |
| Black | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.4 | 20.0 | 10.8 | 21.5 |
| Hispanic | 39.7 | 38.2 | 50.3 | 51.0 | 55.4 | 52.3 |
| Multiracial/other | 17.4 | 17.5 | 16.4 | 17.2 | 13.1 | 16.9 |
| Age (Wave 4) | 13.51 (.72) | 13.48 (.70) | 13.73 (.80) | 13.76 (.85) | 13.78 (.78) | 13.72 (.83) |
| Nuclear family | 44.2 | 54.4 | 46.4 | 37.1 | 49.3 | 41.1 |
| Delinquency | 7.95 (17.76) | 4.80 (10.41) | 30.68 (34.95) | 41.02 (42.26) | 33.10 (33.22) | 32.49 (37.81) |
| Substance use | 0.91 (2.18) | 0.53 (1.45) | 3.64 (3.93) | 3.95 (4.34) | 4.60 (3.94) | 3.33 (4.12) |
| Victimization | 9.05 (14.76) | 7.85 (12.52) | 17.77 (24.03) | 21.23 (28.92) | 19.28 (22.78) | 17.20 (25.46) |
| Parental monitoring | 4.02 (.80) | 4.10 (.75) | 3.46 (.92) | 3.27 (.96) | 3.43 (.92) | 3.45 (.95) |
| Negative peer commitment | 2.04 (1.04) | 1.91 (.94) | 2.99 (1.22) | 3.04 (1.27) | 3.26 (1.21) | 2.97 (1.22) |
| Hitting neutralizations | 3.45 (1.19) | 3.34 (1.18) | 4.23 (.93) | 4.28 (.98) | 4.34 (.81) | 4.27 (.97) |
| School commitment | 3.64 (.73) | 3.71 (.69) | 3.14 (.77) | 3.11 (.84) | 3.02 (.75) | 3.12 (.80) |
| Guilt | 2.40 (.62) | 2.48 (.58) | 1.83 (.55) | 1.76 (.58) | 1.72 (.50) | 1.83 (.59) |
| Anger | 3.01 (1.02) | 2.94 (1.00) | 3.57 (.95) | 3.68 (.95) | 3.63 (.98) | 3.59 (.98) |
| Unsupervised | 51.5 | 58.7 | 89.2 | 86.4 | 94.0 | 82.2 |
| Drugs and alcohol present | 12.5 | 9.2 | 59.9 | 54.8 | 76.3 | 52.7 |

was a 4-item scale measuring the extent of parental awareness of youth’s activities and location (Wave 4 $\alpha = .81$). “Negative peer commitment” was created from three items measuring the likelihood the respondent would continue to hang out with their friends even if they were getting the respondent into trouble ($\alpha = .86$). “Hitting neutralizations” was a 3-item scale that captured a respondent’s belief that physical violence is acceptable under certain circumstances ($\alpha = .88$). Seven items captured the respondent’s “school commitment” (i.e., attitudes specific to aspects of the educational experience and general feelings about education) ($\alpha = .81$). The level of respondent’s “guilt” for engaging in seven different delinquent offenses was measured on a 3-point response scale ($\alpha = .91$). The final attitudinal scale captured the respondent’s level and control over “anger” (4 items, $\alpha = .83$).

Gang membership. Gang membership was measured in three ways. First, respondents could “self-nominate” as a gang member by answering “yes” to the question “Are you now in a gang?” Second, the Eurogang approach captured youth that had a group of friends that fit the following criteria (1) had 3 or more people, (2) with people mostly between the ages of 12 and 25, (3) that spends a lot of time in public places, (4) been in existence for more than 3 months, and (5) accepted and actually participated in illegal activity. Third, respondents were asked “Do you consider your group of friends to be a gang?” Respondents that answered affirmatively were classified as having “friends in gang.”

2.3 Results

2.3.1 *Non-gang Members Versus Gang Members*

Youth that fit at least one of the three gang definitions were compared with youth that were not classified as gang involved using any of the three definitions. At Wave 4, 12.2% of the entire sample was classified as gang involved according to at least one of the three gang definitions. There was a general increase in the proportion of gang members over time (Wave 1 = 9.5%, Wave 3 = 11.2%).

Demographic, behavioral, and attitudinal differences between the two groups of youth (i.e., any gang and not in gang) were compared using bivariate tests of association. For ease of presentation, the results from Wave 4 are presented in Table 2.1, but similarities and differences across waves are discussed in the text. In general, the results across waves were similar. There were no significant differences in sex or family structure between gang and non-gang youth at Wave 4. Sex differences were found at Waves 1 and 3 with males more likely than females to be gang involved in the earlier waves. At Wave 4, however, a near equal proportion of males were gang involved as females. Bivariate analysis also failed to show any significant difference in the proportion of youth from two-parent households (i.e., “nuclear”) that were gang involved at Wave 4. The same pattern holds at Wave 3. At Wave 1, however, youth classified as gang involved were significantly less likely to report living with both their mother and father.

There were significant differences in the age and race/ethnicity of gang members and non-gang members at each wave. As stated above, data used in this analysis are from a longitudinal, panel design study in which youth were recruited during the early years of middle school. Therefore, the age range of the sample at each wave is restricted. Regardless, at each of the three waves, gang members were significantly older than non-gang members (at Wave 4, gang = 13.73, non-gang = 13.48). With respect to the racial/ethnic composition of the gang and non-gang groups, there was considerable variation across waves. At Wave 1, there were no differences between the gang and non-gang youth for Hispanics (36.3% non-gang, 38.3% gang) or other youth (19.1% non-gang, 18.7% gang). More black youth were gang involved (16.8% non-gang, 28.4% gang group), while fewer white youth were gang members (27.8% non-gang, 14.4% of gang group). By Wave 3, the difference between the black gang and non-gang youth had diminished (16% non-gang, 21.1% gang), and by Wave 4, there was no difference among the black youth with regard to gang membership. For Hispanic youth, the proportion of gang members increased so that by Wave 4 approximately 50% of the gang youth were classified as Hispanic compared with 38% of the non-gang youth. Across all waves of data, white youth were consistently less likely to be gang members, and youth of other race/ethnicities were equally represented in the gang and non-gang groups.

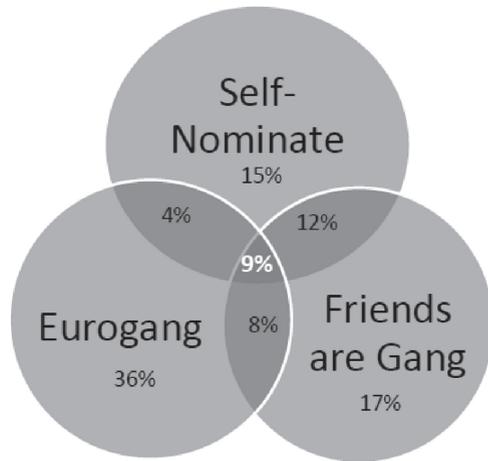
Gang and non-gang groups were compared across three dimensions of behavior. Consistent with prior research, gang members reported significantly more delinquency, substance use, and victimizations at every wave than did the non-gang youth. Gang members at Wave 4 reported an average of 30.68 delinquent offenses as compared to 4.80 for non-gang members (see Table 2.1). The rate of substance use was seven times higher for gang members (7.49) than non-gang members (1.03). Gang members were also victimized more frequently (17.77) than non-gang members (7.86) in the previous 6 months.

We also compared gang and non-gang youth across a variety of attitudinal and other behavioral dimensions. Gang membership was significantly related to a number of risk factors. Gang members reported lower levels of parental monitoring, school commitment, and guilt than their non-gang counterparts and higher levels of commitment to negative peers, neutralizations toward hitting, self-reported anger, and time spent unsupervised with peers and where alcohol and drugs were present (see Table 2.1 for specifics). For example, 9% of non-gang youth reported spending time where alcohol and drugs were present as compared to 60% of gang-involved youth. Taken as a whole, these cross-sectional, bivariate results suggest that gang membership, as defined by any or all of the three definitions, is correlated with attitudinal and behavioral differences.

2.3.2 Similarities and Differences by Gang Member Definition

We now turn to our main concern in this chapter, examination of whether the three different definitions of gang membership identify the same group of respondents and

Fig. 2.1 Overlap between gang member definition at Wave 4



the extent to which they exhibit similar risk factors and behaviors associated with gang membership. In the following sections, we compare the characteristics of youth, their attitudes, and their behaviors by definition to explore the validity of the three gang measures. As stated previously, 12.3% ($n=384$) of the Wave 4 sample was gang involved using at least one of the three definitions. Some of these youth were captured under two or all of the definitions. The final three columns of Table 2.1 present the prevalence of gang membership by definition at Wave 4. Examining each unique definition reveals that the Eurogang definition produced the most gang members (6.8% of sample, $n=215$). Almost 5% of youth self-reported being a gang member (4.8%, $n=151$), and 5.5% ($n=175$) of youth reported their friends were in a gang. While the percent of gang members produced by each definition was consistently under 10%, the distribution of gang members varied by definition and wave. The proportion of youth that self-report gang membership was consistently around 5% at each wave (Wave 1=4.5%, Wave 3=5.2%, Wave 4=4.8%), although the same youth did not necessarily report gang membership from one wave to the next. The Eurogang definition produced more gang members with each subsequent wave (Wave 1=2.3%, Wave 3=5.1%, Wave 4=6.8%). The percent of youth that reported their friends were in a gang decreased at each wave (Wave 1=7.2%, Wave 3=6.7%, Wave 4=5.5%). From a policy perspective, these varying prevalence rates suggest that definition is important. The magnitude of the “gang problem” varies substantially by definition.

From a methodological standpoint, it is important to assess the degree to which these various operationalizations of gang members converge. Figure 2.1 illustrates the degree of concordance between the samples captured by the different definitions of gang membership. In total, 33% of youth identified as gang by any definition are defined as gang members by more than one definition. Only 9% of youth in this sample fit all three gang definitions. At Wave 4, the largest proportion of youth was defined solely by the Eurogang definition. The same general pattern of definitional overlap exists for the previous two waves, but at Wave 1, the largest proportion of youth was defined solely because their friends were gang members (40%). At Wave

3, the proportion of youth with no overlap in gang membership was more evenly distributed (only self-nominate=16.0%, only Eurogang=23.0%, and only friends are gang=24.0%). Despite the fact that individuals defined as gang by any definition were significantly different than non-gang members, Figure 2.1 shows that each definition captures different youth in the sample.

The remainder of this chapter explores whether the different subsets of youth defined by the three definitions are *substantively* different from each other. This will inform the validity of using any and all of the three approaches. As stated previously, there are a number of reasons that certain definitions may be advantageous under specific conditions. For example, cultural differences may make the use of the word “gang” problematic. Alternatively, individuals may believe that a significant segment of their friends are gang members, but may be reluctant to consider themselves “like them” despite shared activities or attitudes. Regardless of the differences in reasons to use one method of gang identification over the other, there is no a priori reason to believe that the gang members that are revealed should differ by definition. The following paragraphs examine demographics, attitudes, and behaviors by gang definition. Because youth could be included in multiple definitional categories, tests of differences were not conducted. This section includes a descriptive overview of the proportion of youth in each category (see Table 2.1).

Approximately half the sample (50.9%) classified as gang involved using any of the three definitions was male. Analysis by definition shows that the self-nomination approach (i.e., “I am a gang member”) yielded more males than either of the other two approaches, and the Eurogang definition produced more females. Across racial/ethnic dimensions, the self-nomination approach and the friends are gang approach produced a similar racial/ethnic distribution. The Eurogang definition produced twice as many white gang members as the other two definitions. About 12% of youth that self-nominated as a gang member were white compared with 9.3% of those that said their friends were gang members, and 20.7% of those identified as gang members using the Eurogang definition. In contrast, the proportion of Eurogang youth that were black was about half that of the other two gang groups.

Across definitions, the average age of gang members across the three groups was similar. Youth defined as gang involved by the Eurogang definition were more likely to be from two-parent households than the other two groups. Almost half of the Eurogang youth were from nuclear families (49.3%) compared to those whose friends were in a gang (41.1%) and those who self-nominated as a gang member (37.1%).

But these observed differences may be heavily influenced by age of the participants and/or data collection wave. For example, the sex of gang members so classified using the Eurogang definition varies across waves. At Wave 1, 67.1% of Eurogang gang members were male, but at Wave 4, there were more female gang members using this definition. In contrast, the proportion of male gang members produced by the other two definitions remained relatively stable over time. For race/ethnicity, the Eurogang definition always produced a smaller proportion of black gang members, but across all definitions, the proportion of black gang members decreased by wave. Conversely, the proportion of white gang members increased significantly over time using the Eurogang definition.

2.3.3 *Behavior and Attitudes by Definition*

Taken as a whole, youth that were classified as gang-involved by any of the three definitional approaches were significantly more delinquent (general delinquency and substance use) and more likely to be victimized than youth that were not gang involved. Recall that the average frequency of events in the past 6 months for non-gang-involved youth was 4.80 delinquent offenses, 1.03 illegal substance use, and 7.85 victimizations. Looking across each definition (see Table 2.1), gang members, however defined, are more delinquent and more likely to be victimized than non-gang members. Youth who self-admit gang membership at Wave 4 reported a mean of 41 delinquent offenses in a 6-month period, and Eurogang and youth whose friends were in gangs had over 30 delinquent offenses during the same period (33.1 and 32.5, respectively). Self-nominated gang members also reported the most victimization, while Eurogang youth reported the highest mean of substance use.

By restricting this analysis to Wave 4 data, it appears that the self-nomination method produces the most highly delinquent type of “gang member.” Examining earlier waves, however, uncovers more complicated dynamics. At the earliest wave, the Eurogang definition produced the most delinquent group of gang-involved youth. Eurogang youth report an average of 34.4 delinquent acts as compared with the self-nomination youth who report 25.1 delinquent acts. The same pattern holds for substance use and victimization. At Wave 3, the Eurogang and self-nominated gang members report nearly identical rates of delinquency, substance use, and victimization. It is important to keep in mind that these similarities in offending were found in spite of the modest overlap of youth that fall within these two categories. Youth whose friends were in gangs reported less troublesome behaviors than the other two gang groups. The differences were modest, and those with gang friends still engaged in significantly more problem behaviors than the non-gang group.

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they spent peer time unsupervised and, if so, whether alcohol and drugs were present. A large proportion of gang youth spent peer time unsupervised (self-nominate = 86.4%, Eurogang = 94.0%, friends are gang = 82.2%). The proportion of youth that indicated they spent unsupervised time with alcohol and drugs present increased dramatically across all groups from Wave 1 to Wave 4. By Wave 4, over three quarters of Eurogang youth (76.3%) indicated they hung out unsupervised around alcohol and drugs. This is in contrast to 54.8% of self-admitted gang members and 52.7% of youth whose friends were in gangs.

A comparison of attitudinal risk factors associated with delinquency and/or gang membership is also presented in Table 2.1. In general, the mean score for each gang group is roughly equivalent. With the exception of commitment to negative peers, the mean of every attitudinal measure differed minimally across each gang definition. Eurogang youth had stronger commitment to negative peers than the other two gang groups (gang = 3.0, Eurogang = 3.3, friends are gang = 3.0). This pattern was consistent across waves.

2.3.4 *Multivariate Logistic Regression Models*

We used a series of multivariate logistic regressions to test which demographic, attitudinal, and behavioral measures significantly distinguished gang members from non-gang members according to each definition. Because of the dependence of the subsamples, patterns of significance across the three models, as opposed to direct comparisons, will be discussed. Odds ratios will be discussed when noteworthy for each model separately but are not appropriate or intended to be compared across models (Menard 2010). Table 2.2 presents the results of multivariate logistic regressions for each of the gang definitions (i.e., gang, Eurogang, friends are gang) and for youth that were defined as gang by any of the three definitions (i.e., any gang).

There were a number of consistent findings across each type of gang membership. For each definition, negative peer commitment, neutralizations for hitting, guilt, and unsupervised peer time spent where drugs and alcohol are available significantly distinguished gang from non-gang members. The effects are in the expected direction. Youth who had a stronger commitment to negative peers, used more neutralizations about violence, felt less guilty, and were more likely to spend time unsupervised where drugs and alcohol are present were more likely to be classified as a gang member, by any definition. For example, youth who spent peer time unsupervised where drugs and alcohol are present increased their odds of being classified as Eurogang by 763%. It is also noteworthy that these general trends were found at Wave 1 and Wave 3 for every definition of gang membership (not shown in table).

There were also definitional specific trends. Higher level of parental monitoring decreased the likelihood of self-nomination as a gang member, but not Eurogang membership or gang friends (see Table 2.2). This trend was consistent for the self-nomination group across multiple waves of data. Increased level of anger was also correlated with self-nominated gang membership. Every unit of increase in the anger scale increased the odds of self-nominated gang membership by 30%.

Consistent with bivariate results, being female increased the likelihood of being a Eurogang member. The odds of Eurogang membership were 91% higher for females than males at Wave 4. Older youth were also more likely to be classified as Eurogang. Youth who were less committed to school and who spent time unsupervised were also significantly more likely to be classified as Eurogang. These results were not replicated in any of the other groups. This general pattern of results was not consistent for the Eurogang samples at Wave 1 and Wave 3 as previously suggested by the bivariate analysis.

Black and Hispanic youth (as compared to white youth) were more likely to report their friends were in a gang. The odds of youth reporting their friends were in a gang increased 149% for black youth and 99% for Hispanic youth as compared to white youth (see Table 2.2). The greater likelihood of black youth reporting their friends as gang was consistent across all three waves of data. Significant ethnic differences between Hispanic and white youth were present only at Waves 3 and 4. Finally, while higher levels of anger distinguished both the self-nomination and friends as gangs groups, it did not significantly distinguish the Eurogang group.

Table 2.2 Logistic regression results for correlates of gang membership by definition at Wave 4

| | Any gang | | | Self-nominate | | | Eurogang | | | Friends as gang | | |
|--------------------|---------------------------------|------|--------|---------------------------------|------|--------|---------------------------------|------|--------|---------------------------------|------|--------|
| | B | SE | Odds |
| Sex | .23 | .15 | 1.26 | -.29 | .23 | .75 | .64 | .21 | 1.91** | -.10 | .20 | .90 |
| Black | .20 | .24 | 1.22 | .54 | .38 | 1.72 | -.35 | .34 | .71 | .91 | .35 | 2.49** |
| Hispanic | .09 | .19 | 1.09 | .52 | .32 | 1.69 | -.21 | .25 | .82 | .69 | .30 | 1.99* |
| Other | .13 | .23 | 1.14 | .51 | .38 | 1.67 | -.51 | .32 | .60 | .66 | .35 | 1.94 |
| Age | .14 | .10 | 1.15 | .11 | .14 | 1.11 | .26 | .13 | 1.30* | .07 | .13 | 1.08 |
| Nuclear family | -.00 | .15 | 1.00 | -.41 | .22 | .66 | .16 | .20 | 1.18 | -.22 | .20 | .80 |
| Parent monitoring | -.20 | .10 | .82* | -.44 | .14 | .65** | .04 | .13 | 1.04 | -.21 | .12 | .81 |
| Neg. peer commit. | .30 | .07 | 1.35** | .36 | .10 | 1.43** | .37 | .09 | 1.44** | .38 | .09 | 1.46** |
| Hit neutralization | .35 | .08 | 1.43** | .39 | .13 | 1.48** | .45 | .12 | 1.57** | .28 | .11 | 1.33** |
| School commit. | -.17 | .11 | .85 | -.07 | .166 | .93 | -.40 | .15 | .67** | -.26 | .14 | .77 |
| Guilt | -.75 | .13 | .47** | -.86 | .18 | .42** | -.99 | .18 | .37** | -.66 | .16 | .52** |
| Anger | .20 | .08 | 1.22* | .26 | .12 | 1.30* | .12 | .11 | 1.13 | .21 | .10 | 1.23* |
| Unsupervised | .73 | .20 | 2.07** | .532 | .29 | 1.70 | 1.02 | .33 | 2.77** | .16 | .23 | 1.17 |
| Drugs and alcohol | 1.49 | .16 | 4.45** | .98 | .24 | 2.67** | 2.16 | .21 | 8.63** | 1.21 | .21 | 3.34** |
| Constant | -4.87 | 1.47 | | -4.79 | 2.18 | | -7.78 | 1.99 | | -4.18 | 1.92 | |
| | X ² (14) = 677.58** | | | X ² (14) = 314.13** | | | X ² (14) = 638.78** | | | X ² (14) = 308.43** | | |
| | -2LL = 1,414.14 | | | -2LL = 691.831 | | | -2LL = 793.69 | | | -2LL = 868.36 | | |
| | Nagelkerke R ² = .41 | | | Nagelkerke R ² = .35 | | | Nagelkerke R ² = .51 | | | Nagelkerke R ² = .31 | | |
| | n = 2,851 | | | n = 2,634 | | | n = 2,710 | | | n = 2,663 | | |

*p < .05, **p < .01

2.4 Discussion

The purpose of this chapter was to explore the validity of different definitional approaches to identify gang members. We applied three definitions to the same diverse sample of youth in the United States. The use of any or all of the three definitions reveals a subsample of youth that are behaviorally and attitudinally distinct from non-gang youth. Youth defined as gang by any method have more risk factors previously shown to be correlated with gang membership and/or delinquency. They also report significantly higher levels of problem behaviors. Gang members report mean levels of delinquency, for example, five to six times the average of non-gang members.

The extent of definitional overlap, however, is far from perfect. In fact, less than 10% of the sample of gang youth at Wave 4 was classified as gang members by all three definitions. In other words, each definition captured a unique group of individuals. The majority of youth were only considered gang members by one definition. This result was stable across multiple waves of data. Further investigation showed that while different youth were captured by each definition, the attitudes and behaviors of all groups were relatively similar. Most of the strongest correlates associated with gang membership were common to all three definitions. Importantly, each definition of gang membership produced a subsample that was distinct from non-gang youth.

In short, each definition identifies youth who express attitudes and report behaviors that are consistent with our understanding of and expectations for gang members. Each definition, however, categorizes a different group of youth. The Eurogang definition at Wave 4, for example, captured a larger proportion of youth that are often underrepresented by other methods (at the same wave) and not stereotypically perceived to be gang members. More females, white youth, and individuals from nuclear family structures were classified as Eurogang than the other two definitions.

We conclude that there is utility and validity in each gang definition. Ideally, all three could be applied to the same sample to provide the fullest and most nuanced interpretation of gang youth. Each definition adds legitimacy to a claim that someone is a gang member. Self-admission is important and parsimonious, but some may be reluctant to admit such a stigmatizing status. Identification with gang peers and a confirmation of involvement in a group that exhibits gang-like features is a useful way to triangulate reality and increase confidence in a determination of “gang involvement.” This research shows, however, that far fewer gang members will be defined by using this most restrictive definition.

Future research should further explore the qualities and conditions that lead youth to fall in different definitional categories. For example, do members from gangs with specific structures self-report as gang members, while members from other structures fall under Eurogang? From a policy and law enforcement perspective, it is important to ask what impact the willingness to self-nominate as a gang member has on the effectiveness of intervention. The Eurogang definition in the

United States does not require youth to adopt the gang identity and/or stigma. Are Eurogang-defined youth better targets for intervention? They exhibit similar problem behaviors and attitudes as self-nominated gang members, *but* there may be important differences in group identity and/or cohesion that affect their likelihood to self-nominate. Also, the Eurogang definition was created for use in contexts in which the word “gang” is unavailable or inappropriate. Therefore, the generalizability of these findings to a broader international context should not be made without further replication. Differences in prevalence or the picture of gangs in the countries that use only the Eurogang definition may look distinct from the American research that only uses the self-nomination. Additional research in English-speaking European countries would be an important contribution to the discussion of measurement error and validity (Sharp et al. 2006).

These findings implicate an important policy issue. States have increasingly designated sentencing enhancements for crimes committed by individuals identified as “gang members.” The method by which states have defined their gang members has varied (Barrows and Huff 2009). Self-nomination is often used to legally label someone a gang member, but affiliation with gang members (i.e., friends are gang) and involvement in a group that fit a specified criterion (i.e., Eurogang like definition) are also commonly used (Barrows and Huff 2009). In light of the reality of gang policies, these findings can lead to two opposing, yet logical, recommendations. One could read these findings as support for the notion that any of the three approaches are appropriate and valid methods to identify gang members (and apply gang enhancements). This is consistent with current policy and implicates a broad definition of gang membership. Alternatively, the demonstrated consensus across the three definitions may lead some to advocate for a more restrictive criterion for membership to diminish the possibility of widening the net of gang-involved youth and the serious consequences that follow. Given these findings, we offer a policy recommendation. For prevention strategies, intended for a wide audience with minimal consequences for a type II error, we recommend that a broad definition of gang membership be used (i.e., any of the three definitions). For intervention and suppression strategies, specifically targeted to gang members, we recommend a focus on youth that fit multiple definitions because of the serious consequences associated with making a type II error.

Notes

1. The Eurogang approach defines a street gang as “any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity” (Weerman et al. 2009).
2. Sites were selected based on three criteria (1) existence of an established G.R.E.A.T. program, (2) geographic and demographic diversity, and (3) evidence of gang activity. Other considerations included length of time the program had been in operation, number of G.R.E.A.T. trained officers, number of schools in which the program was offered, and the components of the program implemented.

3. It should be noted that while Esbensen et al. (2008) reported a 79% consent rate, the addition of two schools to the evaluation after the publication of that article resulted in the 78% overall consent rate reported here.
4. Respondents were asked about their involvement in the following delinquent activities: skipped classes without an excuse, lied about age to get into some place or buy something, avoided paying for things, purposely damaged or destroyed others' property, carried a hidden weapon for protection, illegally spray painted a structure, attempted or stole something worth less than \$50, attempted or stole something worth more than \$50, attempted or gone into a building to steal something, hit someone, attacked someone with a weapon, used a weapon or force to get something from someone, been involved in gang fights, and sold marijuana or other illegal drugs.
5. Youth were asked if and how often they were attacked or threatened on their way to or from school, had their things stolen at school, been attacked or threatened at school, had mean rumors or lies spread about them at school, had sexual comments or gestures made at school, been made fun of at school, been bullied at school, been hit, had a weapon or force used to get their money or property, been seriously attacked or with a weapon, and had things stolen.

References

- Ball RA, Curry GD (1995) The logic of definition in criminology: purposes and methods for defining gangs. *Criminology* 33:225–45
- Barrows J, Huff CR (2009) Gang and public policy: constructing and deconstructing gang databases. *Criminol Public Policy* 8:675–703
- Battin SR, Hill KG, Abbott RD, Catalano RF, Hawkins JD (1998) The contribution of gang membership to delinquency beyond delinquent friends. *Criminology* 36:93–115
- Burgess RL, Akers RL (1966) A differential association reinforcement theory of criminal behavior. *Soc Probl* 14:128–147
- Curry GD, Decker SH (1998) *Confronting gangs: crime and community*. Roxbury, Los Angeles
- Elliott DS, Menard S (1996) Delinquent friends and delinquent behavior: temporal and developmental patterns. In: David Hawkins J (ed) *Delinquency and crime: current theories*. Cambridge University Press, New York
- Esbensen FA, Winfree LT Jr (1998) Race and gender differences between gang and non-gang youth: results from a multi-site survey. *Justice Quart* 15:505–526
- Esbensen FA, Winfree LT, He N, Taylor TJ (2001) Youth gangs and definitional issues: when is a gang a gang, and why does it matter? *Crime Delinq* 47:105–130
- Esbensen FA, Brick B, Melde C, Tusinski K, Taylor TJ (2008a) The role of race and ethnicity in gang membership. In: van Gemert F, Peterson D, Lien IL (eds) *Street gangs, migration, and ethnicity*. Willan, Uffculme, Devon, UK
- Esbensen FA, Melde C, Taylor TJ, Peterson D (2008b) Active consent in school-based research: how much is enough and how do we get it? *Eval Rev* 32:335–362
- Esbensen FA, Peterson D, Taylor TJ, Freng A (2010) *Youth violence: sex and race differences in offending, victimization, and gang membership*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia
- Esbensen F-A, Peterson D, Taylor TJ, Freng A, Osgood DW, Carson D, Matsuda KN (2011) Evaluation and evolution of the Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) Program. *J Sch Violence* 10:53–70
- Haynie DL (2002) Friendship networks and delinquency: the relative nature of peer delinquency. *J Quant Criminol* 18:99–134
- Klein MW (1969) Violence in American juvenile gangs. In: Mulvihill DJ, Tumins MM, Curtis LA (eds) *Crime of violence, volume 13, a staff report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of violence*. GPO, Washington, DC
- Klein MW (1971) *Street gangs and street workers*. Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs

- Klein MW, Maxson CL (2006) *Street gang patterns and policies*. Oxford University Press, New York
- Klein MW, Kerner H-J, Maxson CL, Weitekamp EM (eds) (2001) *The Eurogang paradox: street gangs and youth groups in the U.S. and Europe*. Kluwer, Dordrecht, the Netherlands
- Melde C, Esbensen FA (2011) Gang membership as a turning point in the life course. *Criminology* 49:513–552
- Melde C, Taylor TJ, Esbensen FA (2009) I got your back’: an examination of the protective function of gang membership in adolescence. *Criminology* 47:565–594
- Menard S (2010) *Logistic regression: from introductory to advanced concepts and applications*. Sage, Thousand Oaks
- Miller WB (1975) *Violence by youth gangs and youth groups as crime problem in major American cities*. U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC
- Miller J (2001) *One of the guys: girls, gangs, and gender*. Oxford University Press, New York
- Sharp C, Aldridge J, Medina J (2006) *Delinquent youth groups and offending behavior: findings from the 2004 offending, crime and justice survey*. Research Development and Statistics Directorate, Home Office, London
- Sutherland EH (1947) *Principles of criminology*, 4th edn. J.B. Lippincott, Philadelphia
- Sykes G, Matza D (1957) Techniques of neutralization: a theory of delinquency. *Am J Sociol* 22:664–670
- Taylor TJ, Peterson D, Esbensen FA, Freng A (2007) Gang membership as a risk factor for adolescent violent victimization. *J Res Crime Delinq* 44:351–80
- Thornberry TP (1998) Membership in youth gangs and involvement in serious and violent offending. In: Loeber R, Farrington DP (eds) *Serious and violent juvenile offenders: risk factors and successful interventions*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, pp 147–66
- Thornberry TP, Krohn MD, Lizotte AJ, Smith CA, Tobin K (2003) *Gangs and delinquency in developmental perspective*. Cambridge University Press, New York
- Thrasher FM (1963) *The gang: a study of one thousand three hundred thirteen gangs in Chicago*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago
- Warr M (1993) Age, peers, and delinquency. *Criminology* 31:17–40
- Weerman FM, Esbensen FA (2005) A cross-national comparison of gangs: The Netherlands and the United States. In: Decker SH, Weerman FM (eds) *European street gangs and troublesome youth groups*. Altamira Press, Walnut Creek
- Weerman FM, Maxson CL, Esbensen FA, Aldridge J, Medina J, van Gemert F (2009) *Eurogang program manual: Background, development, and use of the Eurogang instruments in multi-site, multi-method comparative research*. Available at <http://www.umsl.edu/~ccj/eurogang/euroganghome.htm>
- Winfree LT, Fuller K, Vigil T, Mays GL (1992) The definition and measurement of gang status: policy implications for juvenile justice. *Juv Family Court J* 43:29–37



<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4614-1658-6>

Youth Gangs in International Perspective
Results from the Eurogang Program of Research
Esbensen, F.-A.; Maxson, C.L. (Eds.)
2012, X, 322 p., Hardcover
ISBN: 978-1-4614-1658-6