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The stigma of mental ill-health among gang-affiliated youth: A systematic review

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What is a Gang?

A gang is defined as “any durable, street-orientated youth group whose involvement in illegal activity forms part of its group identity.” (Weerman et al., 2009, p.20).

Rationale for Systematic Review

- Gang members are exposed to a range of adverse experiences throughout their membership.
- However, the causative links between gang membership and mental-ill health have not yet been established.
- Findings show that, compared to general offenders, youth gang members are more likely to enter the Criminal Justice System (CJS) with behavioural difficulties (13% vs. 40%) and have high levels of risk for self-harming (Public Health England, 2015).
- Yet, empirical research is only just beginning to cast focus on the relationship between gang membership and mental-ill health (Coid et al., 2013; Petering, 2016; Wood, Kallis, & Coid., in press).
- Despite this growing focus, gang members are stigmatized by criminal justice systems who adopt harsh and punitive approaches rather than focus on mental health interventions.
- Gang members are also stigmatized by members of their own group whereby expressing mental health difficulties is synonymous with weakness.

Research Questions

This review sought to address the following research questions:

- (1). How does gang membership relate to the mental health and emotions of gang members?
- (2). Do gang members suffer from heightened levels of mental-ill health (e.g. anti-social personality disorder, anxiety, depression, paranoia, perpetration-induced trauma, and posttraumatic stress disorder) compared to non-gang members and affiliates of gang members?
- (3). How does duration and level of gang membership impact on processes of moral disengagement and on emotions such as anger, guilt proneness, rumination and shame proneness?

Methodology

Search Terms

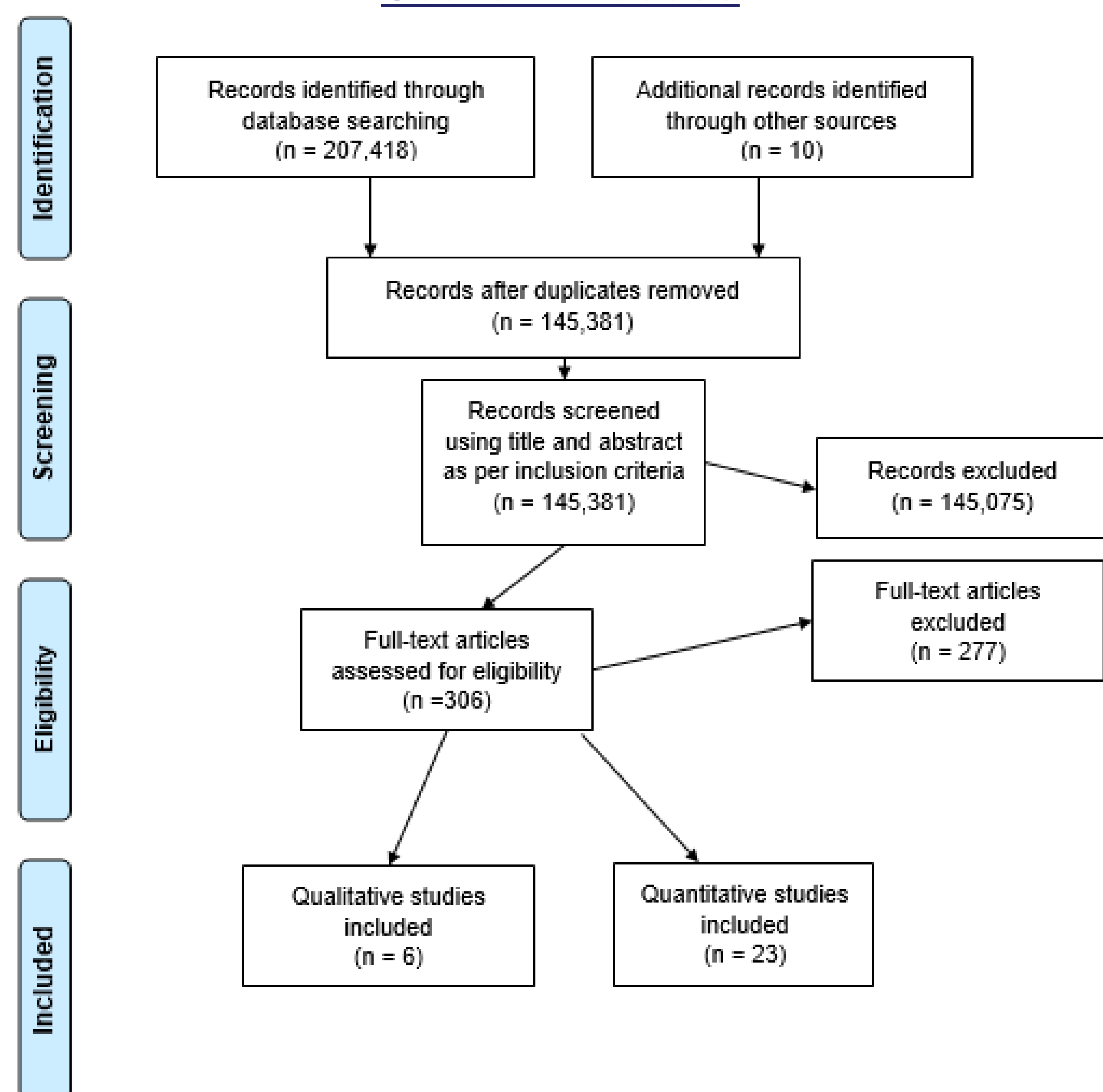
Anger
Anxiety
Depression
Desistence
Emotions
Gangs
Guilt
Juvenile Delinquency
Mental Health

Moral Disengagement
Paranoia
Perpetration
Personality Disorder
Posttraumatic Stress
Rumination
Shame
Trauma
Violence

Searched Databases

Academic Search Complete PsychINFO
Cochrane Database PubMed
Criminal Justice Abstracts Scopus
National Institute for Clinical Excellence Web of Science
PsychARTICLES System for Information on Grey Literature

Search Process



Review Conclusions

- Methodological issues clouded the literature and so no conclusions regarding causal mechanisms between variables could be formulated.
- Studies were largely cross-sectional and of those that relied on longitudinal data; retrospective data, lack of comparable groups, and inconsistencies with measuring gang membership, provided no means of forming conclusions of the higher psychological processes involved with prolonged gang involvement and/or levels of gang involvement (e.g. core vs. affiliate gang membership).
- Nonetheless, a narrative synthesis revealed gang members may be at increased risk of suffering a range of mental health illnesses, but also that individuals with pre-existing difficulties may be increasingly likely to join a gang.
- The diagnosis of mental-ill health amongst the literature demonstrated inconsistencies in the measurement of relevant outcomes, such as anxiety and depression.
- The clinical implications of inaccurate or inconsistent diagnosis become particularly significant as misdiagnosis may result in unresponsive treatment interventions.
- Within the study of gangs, the experience of self-conscious emotions, such as guilt and shame are yet to be explored.
- There are significant research implications pertaining to measurement and study designs that must be addressed if gang research is to influence policy and clinical settings to treat gang membership effects in individuals and address the stigmatization of gang members, who are considered as perpetrators rather than victims of crime and circumstance.

References

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