**Psychological and Behavioral Characteristics Differentiating Gang and Non-gang Girls in the UK**

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**Abstract**

Purpose: Research has demonstrated that girls are involved in gangs as members and affiliates. However, the psychological processes related to female gang membership has, to date, not been examined using a rigorous comparative design. The main purpose of this study was to assess whether female gang members exhibit distinct psychological and behavioral features when compared to female non-gang youth.

Design/methodology/approach: 117 female students were recruited from all-girls’ secondary schools in London, United Kingdom. Gang members (*n* = 22; identified using the Eurogang definition) were compared to non-gang youth (*n* = 95) on self-report measures of criminal activity, sexual activity, self esteem, anti-authority attitudes, their perceived importance of social status, and hypermasculinity, using a series of MANCOVAs.

Findings: The results found that gang members reported significantly more criminal activity, sexual activity, unwanted sexual contact and held more anti-authority attitudes when compared to their non-gang counterparts.

Practical implications: These findings support Pyrooz et al.’s (2014) findings that gang membership contributes to the theoretical conceptualization of the victim-offender overlap. Practitioners need to take this into consideration when working with female gang members.

Originality/value: There is very little research that explicitly examines the characteristics of female gang members with suitable comparison groups. This study adds to the growing literature on female involvement in gangs and highlights the distinct psychological and behavioral characteristics of this group. In summary, these findings support the notion that female gang members are both at risk of being sexually exploited and engaging in criminal activities.

**Psychological and Behavioral Characteristics Differentiating Gang and Non-gang Girls in the UK**

The gang culture in the United Kingdom has an undeniable and detrimental impact on many urban communities (e.g., London, Birmingham [Shropshire & McFarquhar, 2002], Edinburgh [Bradshaw, 2005], Glasgow [Everard, 2006], Manchester [Mares, 2001], to name a few). This impact can be characterized by the overwhelming proportion of violent crime that is attributed to street gang behavior (Home Office, 2008). But most importantly, the rule of thumb was that street gang members predominantly comprised of males, and it was often claimed that female gang members were rare, if not non-existent (Campbell, 1995; Medina, Ralphs, & Aldridge, 2012). However, a plethora of work would confirm that this is not the case. Female gang membership has been well-documented in the US literature (e.g., Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; De La Rue & Espelage, 2014; Miller, 2001). Yet, academic interest still appears to be predominantly focused on male gang members. This could be attributed to the asymmetrical sex composition of the gang found in some studies (Peterson & Carson, 2012; Rizzo, 2003). However, we cannot be certain that the findings from research conducted on predominantly male gang members are applicable to females involved in gangs. But what we can be certain of, from the wider female offender literature, is that female offenders typically have gender-specific needs that need to be targeted in rehabilitation/intervention programmes (Blanchette & Brown, 2006).

Past research has found difficulty in explicating the exact levels of female gang membership due to the uncertainty over the nature of their involvement (Bennett & Holloway, 2004; Spergel, 1995). Short and Strodtbeck (1965) noted this asymmetry in their work in terms of gender ratio, role differentiation, male-female interactions, and gang status. In earlier works, Thrasher (1927) attributed the low number of female gang members to two factors: **(1)** the traditional role of females in society, i.e., characterized as nurturing femininity; and **(2)** as a result of this preconceived role, girls are naturally protected and closely supervised, allowing little opportunity for girls to engage in gang activities. Researchers have discussed the perceptions of the female role as subservient (Densley, 2013; Medina et al., 2012) and the recruitment of female gang members as partly (if not wholly) for their income potential as sex workers (Chettleburgh, 2007; Moore & Hagedorn, 2001). This supports why police data may include a smaller representation of females since their crimes, i.e., prostitution, may not be categorized as gang-related (Medina et al., 2012).

Peterson and Carson (2012) also found evidence of this gender-based asymmetry when the proportion of female gang members varied. They found that within sex-balanced gangs (i.e., females’ numbers approaching equal to males’ numbers) the male gang members exhibited dominance and suppression of female activities; whereas within majority-male gangs, female gang members had more freedom to engage in all gang-related behaviors because their significantly fewer numbers posed little to no threat to the status of the male members (Peterson & Carson, 2012). Therefore, it is evident that women and young girls do not necessarily lack agency in their involvement in gangs (Medina et al., 2012; Miller, 2001), however, it still remains that their involvement increases their risk of sexual and violent victimization perpetrated by male gang members (Moore & Hagedorn, 2001).

In addition to the gaps in our knowledge about female gang membership, the majority of UK gang research on either gender has also been predominantly sociological and criminological (Bennett & Holloway, 2004; Wood & Alleyne, 2010), neglecting psychological factors which may be involved. On this basis, this study compared female gang and non-gang youth to gain knowledge of the psychological factors most related to female gang membership specifically. The study also examined the nature of their involvement with gangs, in terms of criminal and sexual behavior.

**What are the Potential Factors Related to Female Gang Membership?**

There are various theories that suggest that the social environment plays a large part in why young people join gangs (e.g., social disorganization theory, Thrasher, 1927; social learning theory, Akers, 1997). For example, gang members have been found to be more likely to live in neighborhoods where adolescent delinquency is common (Hill, Lui, & Hawkins, 2001). Also, having delinquent peers or family members that are involved with gangs increase the likelihood of becoming a gang member (Spergel, 1995; Thornberry et al., 2003). However, these theories do not explain why young people from the same social environments do not get involved with gangs (Fagan, 1990). This would suggest that social factors cannot explain gang membership alone. This has lead gang theorists and researchers to consider psychological factors that distinguish gang members from non-gang youth but, to date, this research has focussed on male gang youth.

So given that much of the literature has focused on social and environmental factors related to gang membership, there is scope to draw from the group processes and individual differences literature when examining gang involvement broadly, and female gang membership specifically. We need to learn whether the importance of factors highlighted in the existing literature remains when focussing on females. Self-esteem has often been linked to characteristics related to gang membership, for example delinquency (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005). In particular, a young person’s level of self-esteem has been found to play a dynamic role in why they may choose to join a gang, remain in the group, and potentially leave the gang (Dukes, Martinez, & Stein, 1997). However, given there are gender differences in reported self-esteem (Gentile et al., 2009) and research findings that young girls join gangs to boost their self-esteem (Firmin, 2011), it remains to be seen whether self-esteem distinguishes female gang members from their female counterparts. Based on the literature described, we would hypothesize that female gang members would have lower self-esteem than female nongang youth.

It has been argued that gangs exercise the power to give status to their members and that this may attract youth who seek status to join a gang (Knox, 1994). The belief that being a member of a gang would increase one’s status may be reinforced by media which glamorizes gang culture and depicts scenes of gang members reaping rewards for their illegal behavior (Przemieniecki, 2005). Indeed, Alleyne and Wood (2010) found that gang youth were more likely to place value on social status than non-gang youth. Again, most research has focused on male gang members, but discussions held with gang members suggest that girls similarly may join a gang because of the reputation gained from doing so (Firmin, 2011). This could also be linked to their desire to increase their personal self-esteem. So we would expect that female gang members in our study, similar to existing literature, would also place more importance upon social status than those not in gangs.

Past research has established that gang members hold more anti-authority attitudes than non-gang youth (Alleyne & Wood, 2010, 2013; Kakar, 2005; Lurigio, Flexon, & Greenleaf, 2008). It has also been argued that some strategies employed by institutions of authority, such as stop and search powers exercised by the police, may mean that young people in gangs experience more negative contact with authority figures, which could serve to increase anti-authority sentiments (Wilson & Rees, 2004). This may mean that the problem is exacerbated in a cyclical manner (Ralphs, Medina, & Aldridge, 2009). We do not know, however, if these relationships differ by gender. It is therefore viable, theoretically speaking, to expect that female gang members would hold more anti-authority attitudes than those girls who are not involved with gangs.

 Hypermasculinity is another psychological factor which has been linked to gang membership. For example, Lopez & Emmer (2002) argue that hypermasculine values are linked to gang violence because gang rules and values are often an exaggeration of traditional male gender roles in an anti-social context. Mentions of gender inequality within gangs are rife in the literature (e.g., Medina et al., 2012; Miller, 2001). Although studies show that girls involved with gangs may often be victimized and may take on a more submissive sexualized role (e.g., Firmin, 2011), distinctions have also been made between these girls and those involved with the criminality of the gang (O’Hara, 2007). Some have argued that these delinquent girls are copying, arguably the worst traits of, young men (Geoghegan, 2008) as a by-product of seeking equality (and potentially raising self-esteem) with the males in the gang (Irwin & Chesney-Lind, 2008). In conjunction with Peterson and Carson’s (2012) research, it can be argued that girls who are involved in gangs in a criminal sense would hold more hypermasculine values because they are taking on ‘macho’ characteristics to compete with the males in the group.

**The Current Study: Female Gang Membership in the UK**

The factors discussed above are by no means the only factors that are important to female gang membership. Rather, they are an initial snapshot given the existing literature on female gang members and form the basis of this current study. Street gangs in the UK are of growing concern because of their significant impact on urban communities. In the city of London there are 224 known gangs consisting of approximately 3,500 identified members who are predominantly male (London Crime Reduction Board, 2014). But it is only recently that female involvement has been examined explicitly (e.g., the Female Voice in Violence Project – Firmin, 2010, 2011). The identification of female gang members has its inherent problems due to varied levels of involvement (Densley, 2013) but we do know from research conducted in the UK that female gang members are equally involved in criminal activity as they are victims of crime (Firmin, 2010; Pearce & Pitts, 2011).

Qualitative accounts of women and girls affected by gang violence highlight female gang member roles as typically subservient to their male counterparts with their involvement including weapons/drugs possession and trafficking (Firmin, 2010). But most importantly, these young women experience high levels of sexual violence which go unreported in large part because they are either fearful or they do not realise that their experiences constitute sexual abuse (Densley, Davis, & Mason, 2013; Firmin, 2010; Pearce & Pitts, 2011). So we recruited a non-representative sample of female secondary school students to examine whether female gang members exhibited unique characteristics when compared to their female non-gang counterparts. Specifically, we compare the two groups on measures of self-esteem, perceived importance of social status, attitudes toward authority, and hypermasculinity, to see whether similar factors identified in the literature on male gang members differentiate female gang members from non-gang members. Given that much of the literature on female gang membership has argued that female gang members are at increased risk of sexual exploitation (and given Pyrooz et al.’s [2014] recent work on the victim-offender overlap), we also compared the two groups on measures of delinquency and sexual behavior. The main aim is to identify factors that distinguish female gang members from female nongang youth to not only inform theory, but also contribute to the formulation of effective intervention and prevention strategies. It is a well-established principle to account for gender in intervention (e.g., Belknap & Holsinger, 2006; Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993), but it is not fully clear what aspects of gang involvement are gender-specific.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were recruited from three all-girl schools based in London, UK, using opportunity sampling. The sample consisted of 117 girls, with a mean age of 16.28 years (*SD* = 0.97, *range* = 12-18). The nationality of the sample was predominantly British. The criteria for inclusion were that participants were female and were 12-18 years of age as previous research has suggested that this age group is most at-risk for gang membership (Spergel, 1995; Rizzo, 2003). We used the Eurogang definition – i.e., “a gang, or troublesome youth group, is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity” (Weerman et al., 2009, p. 20) – to identify gang members within our sample (see below for specific items) and found that 22 (19%) fit the criteria. See Table 1 for demographic characteristics.

Insert Table 1 about here

**Measures**

**The Youth Survey: Eurogang Program of Research (Weerman et al., 2009).** This is a comprehensive tool with items that measure a wide range of demographic factors. We used the scale to assess age and nationality of participants. Nationality was measured as ‘UK’ if both parents were born in the UK and ‘other’ if one parent was born in the UK and the other elsewhere, or if both parents were born outside of the UK.

***Gang membership.*** The survey included items assessing whether participants met the Eurogang definition for gang membership. In accordance with this definition, four criteria were assessed: youthfulness – i.e. whether all members of the group were under the age of 25; durability – i.e. whether the group had been together for more than three months; street-orientation – assessed by the item “Does this group spend a lot of time together in public places like the park, the street, shopping centres or the neighborhood?”; and criminality of the group – assessed by the item “Is doing illegal things accepted by or okay for your group?”

***Delinquency.*** The survey also included a measure of participants’ delinquency levels with 16 items including: “Have you purposely damaged or destroyed property that did not belong to you”. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale with the response options “Never”, “Once or twice”, “3-5 times”, “6-10 times” and “More than 10 times”. The delinquency measure also included three sub-scales, as per Esbensen and Weerman’s (2005) previous work. The sub-scales were ‘minor offending’, ‘property offending’ and ‘crimes against person’. There were items on illegal drug use used by Esbensen and Weerman (2005), but these were omitted on request of one of the schools. Overall delinquency demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (α = .73).

**Social Status Scale (South & Wood, 2006).** This scale measured participants’ perceptions of the importance of social status. Participants responded to 18 items – for example, “At school people who are hard or tough get respect” – on a 5 point Likert-type scale, with options ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. This scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency (α = .90).

**Attitude to Formal Authority Scale (Reicher & Emler, 1985).** This scale assessed young people’s attitudes toward figures of authority. The scale consisted of 17 items including “You should always do what a police officer tells you”. Responses were given on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’. The scale also demonstrated high internal consistency (α = .81).

**Self-Esteem Scale (SES; Rosenberg, 1965).**Rosenberg’s SES assessed personal self-esteem. Participants responded to 10 items (e.g., “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself”) on a 4-point Likert-type scale, ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. The SES is one of the most widely used measures of self-esteem and there is research supporting the reliability and validity of its use with adolescents (e.g., Bagley, Bolitho, & Bertrand, 1997), and different ethnic groups (Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001). We found that the SES also demonstrated high internal consistency (α = .88).

**Adapted Short Hypermasculinity Values Questionnaire (Short HVQ; Archer, 2010).** The Short HVQ is a measure which assessed hypermasculine values. Respondents were presented with a 16 item scale and were required to give an answer on a 5-point Likert-type scale, with options ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. The orginal scale had not been tested with females or adolescents, nor was it intended to be used with such samples. Therefore, we adapted the Short HVQ to be more appropriate for use with this population, in terms of the language used and scenarios proposed. Given the adaptations we made to this scale, the internal consistency was still acceptable (α = .70).

**Modified Sexual Experiences Survey (M-SES; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1985)***.* Sexual experiences were measured using a modified version of Koss et al.’s (1982) survey. We modified the scale by incorporating Messman-Moore and Brown’s (2004) adaptation of the survey. The modified version included “yes”/“no” questions about specific sexual activities that participants had experienced, ranging from kissing to sexual intercourse. Messman-Moore and Brown (2004) also included questions to capture whether participants experienced any unwanted or coercive sexual contact.

**Procedure**

Before schools were approached, the study was subject to approval by the University’s Ethics Committee. Once ethical approval was gained we approached the target schools for access to their students who fit our inclusion criteria. The Head Teachers for the schools varied in their preferences regarding gaining consent for participants under 16 years of age. So for these participants we either got adult consent (1) ‘in loco parentis’ from the school’s Head Teacher, or (2) from the parents/caregivers. We also asked the students themselves for consent to participate in our study. Participants over 16 years gave their own consent. Questionnaires were administered in a classroom setting after verbal and written information was provided about the aims of the research. Participants were told that the study was generally about female friendships to minimize the likelihood of response bias. Since some of the items assessed sensitive issues, the briefing sheet also explained that some questions were about topics such as antisocial and sexual behavior. We also provided details of the relevant organizations they could contact if they wished. We abided by the ethical practices outlined by the British Psychological Society (BPS) regarding voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality and withdrawal procedures. Each participant created a unique code which was linked to their questionnaire so they could withdraw their data at a later date if they wished to do so.

Questionnaires took approximately 30 minutes to complete. Once all questionnaires had been completed, participants were provided with a written debrief. This debrief sheet consisted of the aims of the study, details on how to withdraw their data if they wished to do so, and the researchers’ contact details in the case of any further questions. A total of 148 questionnaires were returned, of which 117 (79%)were used. Questionnaires were excluded due to incorrect or incomplete questionnaire completion. This high participation rate is consistent with past research (e.g., Esbensen, Melde, Taylor, and Peterson [2008] support a threshold of 70% as appropriate for these types of school-based studies). The data from the completed questionnaires were entered into IBM SPSS Statistics Version 21 and analyses were conducted using p < 0.05 as the level of significance.

**Results**

**Membership**

Of the 117 participants, 22 (19%) were identified as gang members and 95 (81%) were identified as non-gang youth, according to the Eurogang definition (Weerman et al., 2009).

**Demographic characteristics**

We conducted independent samples t-tests to see whether age and nationality differed between gang and nongang groups. We found significant agedifferences between groups (*t*(114) = 2.47, *p* = .015, *r* = .23, 95% CI [.11,1.00]). Means showed that gang members (*M* = 16.73 years, *SD* = 0.55) were older than non-gang youth (*M* = 16.17, *SD* = 1.02). We also found a significant difference in nationality (*t*(113) = -3.83, *p* < .001, *r* = .34, 95% CI [-.61,-.19]). A larger proportion of the gang members indicated that both parents were British, whereas a larger proportion of the nongang youth indicated that either one or both parents were born elsewhere (see Table 1).

Insert Table 2 about here

**Criminal Activity.**

Table 2 shows the prevalence of gang members and non-gang youth committing each type of delinquency. Individual scores were summed to provide totals for minor offending (*range* = 2-9), property offending (*range* = 4-10), crimes against the person (*range* = 3-10), and overall delinquency (*range* = 15-37). A MANCOVA was conducted to test whether the different levels offending measures varied as a function of gang involvement, after adjusting for age and ethnicity. Preliminary analyses showed that the assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes was violated, and there were unequal cell sizes. Still, even if a smaller confidence interval than .05 was employed, all multivariate tests indicated a significant main effect of group. Significant univariate main effects for group were obtained for minor offending (*F*(1,104) = 17.83, *p* < .001, partial η2 = 0.15), property offending (*F*(1,104) = 14.27, *p* < .001, partial η2 = 0.12), crimes against the person (*F*(1,104) = 4.24, *p* = .042, partial η2 = 0.04), and overall delinquency (*F*(1,104) = 34.29, *p* < .001, partial η2 = 0.25). Means show that gang members had committed more offences than non-gang youth (Table 3).

Insert Table 3 about here

**Psychological characteristics**

Another MANCOVA was conducted to see whether the psychological measures differed as a function of gang involvement after controlling for age and ethnicity. Preliminary analyses showed that the assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes was not violated. All multivariate tests indicated a significant main effect of group on psychological characteristics. Significant univariate main effects for group were obtained for attitudes toward authority (*F*(1,90) = 11.02, *p* = .001, partial η2 = 0.11). Means show that gang members held more anti-authority attitudes than non-gang youth. However, univariate tests of main effects for group on self-esteem (*F*(1,90) = 0.21, *p* = .652, partial η2 = 0.002), hypermasculinity (*F*(1,90) = 0.11, *p* = .740, partial η2 = 0.001), and attitudes toward social status (*F*(1,90) = 2.21, *p* = .140, partial η2 = 0.02), were not significant (see Table 4 for adjusted means and standard deviations).

Insert Table 4 about here

**Sexual Behavior and Coercive Sexual Contact**

Independent t-tests were carried out to determine whether gang members and non-gang youth differed in terms of their sexual behavior and experiences of coercive sexual contact. There were significant differences in the amount of sexual activity between groups (*t*(13) = 4.42, *p* = .001, *r* = .77, 95% CI [1.23,3.57]) and amount of coercive sexual contact (*t*(12) = 2.84, *p* = .015, *r* = .63, 95% CI [.25,1.93]). Means show that gang members were more sexually active (*M* = 4.60, *SD* = 0.55) than non-gang youth (*M* = 2.20, *SD* = 1.14), and that gang members had experienced more coercive sexual contact (*M =* 1.20, *SD =* 2.00) than non-gang youth (*M =* 0.11, *SD* = 0.33).

**Discussion**

 The aim of this study was to identify and highlight some of the psychological and behavioral characteristics that differentiate female gang members from female non-gang youth in the UK. Gang members were found to be older than the non-gang youth and have parents who were both British-born. In contrast to existing UK research (e.g., Alleyne & Wood, 2010; Bullock & Tilley, 2002), the non-gang youth appeared more likely to come from immigrant families than the gang youth, although this may simply reflect the area of London in which one of the schools was based. It was found that gang-involved females had committed more offences than non-gang youth. In line with previous work which has suggested that females involved with gangs are often sexually exploited (e.g., Firmin, 2011), it was also found that female gang members were both more sexually active and had experienced more coercive sexual contact than non-gang youth. In terms of psychological characteristics of female gang members, we found that they held more anti-authority attitudes than non-gang youth, but did not differ on the remaining variables (i.e., perceived importance of social status, self esteem, and hypermasculinity).

The prevalence of gang members (19%) was very high in a UK context, out of range of previous studies (e.g., 6% - Sharp, Aldridge, & Medina, 2006; 4% - current members, 11% - past members, Bennett & Holloway, 2004). However, we would argue two possible explanations for the difference. First, the current study employed the Eurogang definition with the four criteria of youthfulness, durability, street-orientation and group criminality (Weerman et al., 2009); whereas, Sharp, Aldridge and Medina (2006) utilized stricter criteria – for example, the group had to have at least one structural feature. This may explain why they found a lower prevalence rate. The long-standing and continuing debate regarding definitions and various methodologies of identifying gang members is outside the scope of this paper (for review, see Esbensen, Winfree, He, & Taylor, 2001); however, we used the well-established Eurogang items because the literature supports that this method is a suitable indicator of gang membership (see Matsuda, Esbensen, & Carson, 2012). The second explanation could be our small sample size. We acknowledge that our sample is not representative so our sampling strategy could explain the higher proportion of gang members. These two explanations are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Still, the current study would not only suggest that gang membership is more of a problem than previously indicated, but also that it is certainly not a male-specific problem.

We expected the difference between groups on anti-authority attitudes given the existing literature on these types of attitudes (however, not focussed on females; e.g., Alleyne & Wood, 2010; Ralphs et al., 2009). Although this is a cross-sectional study, we would argue the possibility that these females held more anti-authority attitudes before joining a gang which could explain why they joined in the first place. However, it could also be that as gang members they have had more contact with authority figures, like the police. If this contact was perceived negatively, then this may have exacerbated these young people’s negative attitudes toward authority creating a never-ending and escalating cycle (Ralphs et al., 2009). In conjunction with the finding that the female gang members experienced more unwanted sexual contact, there are some serious implications to be considered. The female gang members who are victims of abuse will not be likely to report the abuse if they hold negative attitudes towards authority figures. This likely feeds into a perpetuating cycle of victimization and criminality without appropriate intervention.

We were surprised not to find differences between the groups on self-esteem, perceived importance of social status, or hypermasculinity. Despite this, there are some possible reasons why this may have been so. For example, it has previously been argued that young people may join gangs because they have low self-esteem, and their subsequent success within the gang increases their self-esteem (Dukes, Martinez, & Stein, 1997). Most importantly, this relationship is dynamic, therefore difficult to capture with a cross-sectional design. So, it could be that these females had lower self-esteem prior to becoming involved with a gang, but at the time of data collection, given their current membership to the gang, their esteem might have increased to “average” levels because of their gang’s high group esteem. We also considered that the perceived importance of social status might not have been relevant in the context where we recruited participants (i.e., all-girls secondary schools). Perhaps, within an all-girl sample, respect (as assessed in the measure we used) is not a distinguishable feature. Similarly, we would argue that our measure for *female machismo* (in the form of the revised scale for hypermasculinity) was also not suitable. Indeed, the scale was originally intended for use with adult males. The scale had good internal consistency with this sample, but perhaps it was measuring something other than hypermasculinity here – perhaps something else such as feminist values which would not distinguish gang members from nongang youth. This is something which needs further study because we would still argue that attitudes and beliefs supportive of what is considered to be “macho” would be linked to hostility and aggression (a finding well-established in the male literature; e.g., Archer, 2010; Hannan & Burkhart, 1993) and since our female gang members were more antisocial across all subscales than their counterparts, we need to revisit how we assess these constructs.

 There are some limitations to this study, some of which have already been discussed in terms of the suitability of the scales used. Another limitation in relation to the scales is that those measuring delinquency had what would generally be considered an unacceptable level of internal consistency (e.g., Nunnaly, 1978). But these items had small numbers of items and there is an ongoing debate about using Cronbach’s alpha to assess internal consistency for scales with very few items (e.g., see Cortina, 1993; Dunn, Baguley, & Brunsden, 2013). This debate is outside the scope of this paper. Instead, readers must take these findings with a note of caution.

The standard limitation when using self-report questionnaires is the potential for bias due to common method variance. We were limited given our research questions and the contexts for data collection, so self-report methodology was considered the most appropriate to glean information on sensitive issues (see Chan, 2009). Furthermore, sampling from secondary schools meant that the sample does not include those pupils who were perhaps unwell or truant. This could result in an under-representation of the gang member population because prior research has suggested that gang involved youth are likely to truant (Young, Fitzgerald, Hallsworth, & Joseph, 2007). Still, despite this potential limitation, the prevalence of gang members was still high.

We also acknowledge that the quantitative methodology employed limits the findings of our study. The scales we administered give us some insight into the characteristics of female gang members but we are unable to make substantiated claims on underlying motivations and offence processes. This is a clear avenue for future research in order to deduce the clinical implications of our findings.

Finally, in terms of limitations, psychological and behavioral characteristics of gang and non-gang youth were only measured at one point in time, so causality cannot be inferred. Further research assessing the psychological processes underpinning female gang membership is clearly needed before conclusions can be made about the motivation for females to join a gang. The inclusion of measures assessing additional factors of importance (e.g., trauma as a result of unwanted sexual experiences) would also deepen our understanding of female gang membership. A longitudinal design would be the most useful way to inform our understanding of the developmental processes moving in and out of gang membership. Furthermore, based on the findings of this research, tools need to be developed to better assess psychological characteristics of female gang members.

This research, which examined the psychological processes and behavior distinguishing females involved in gangs from non-gang youth was a step beyond the typically male-oriented gang research carried out previously. We know from the wider literature on female offending that gender-specific programming to reduce (re)offending is the most effective approach (e.g., Blanchette & Brown, 2006). However, there is much more to learn about the needs of female gang members before we can formulate theory and effective intervention strategies appropriately. These findings make it clear that females are very much part of gang culture, and they exemplify Pyrooz et al.’s victim-offender overlap.

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Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics of the Total Sample, Gang Members and Non-Gang Youth*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Demographic characteristics | Total | Gang | Non-gang |
| Sample size (%) | 117 | 22 (19) | 95 (81) |
| Mean age | 16.28 | 16.73 | 16.17 |
| Nationality (%) |  |  |  |
| British | 36 (31) | 14 (64) | 22 (24) |
| Other | 79 (69) | 8 (36) | 71 (76) |

Table 2

*Prevalence of Gang Members and Non-Gang Youth who Committed Offences At Least Once in the Last 6 Months*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Type of delinquency | Non-gang(*N* = 95) | Gang(*N* = 22) |
| *n* | % | *n* | % |
| **Minor offending** | 46 | 48 | 21 | 95 |
| Avoid paying for merchandise | 38 | 40 | 18 | 82 |
| Damaged or destroyed property | 18 | 19 | 12 | 55 |
| **Property offending** | 19 | 20 | 11 | 50 |
| Stolen items less than £50 | 19 | 20 | 11 | 50 |
| Stolen items more than £50 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 5 |
| Break and enter to steal | 2 | 2 | 1 | 5 |
| Stolen a motor vehicle | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Crimes against a person** | 43 | 45 | 15 | 68 |
| Hit someone | 42 | 44 | 15 | 68 |
| Attacked with a weapon | 3 | 3 | 3 | 14 |
| Used a weapon to get money | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| **Other** | 52 | 55 | 20 | 91 |
| Truancy | 30 | 32 | 14 | 67 |
| Lie about age | 44 | 46 | 12 | 55 |
| Carry a weapon | 0 | 0 | 1 | 5 |
| Graffiti | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| Gang fights | 2 | 2 | 1 | 5 |
| Sell drugs | 1 | 1 | 2 | 9 |

Table 3

*Adjusted Means and Standard Errors for Minor Offending, Property Offending, Crimes against People, and Overall Delinquency*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Offending type |  | *M* | *SE* |
| Minor \*\* | Gang (*N* = 22) | 4.63 | 0.34 |
| Non-gang (*N* = 89) | 2.99 | 0.17 |
| Property \*\* | Gang (*N* = 22) | 5.13 | 0.20 |
| Non-gang (*N* = 89) | 4.26 | 0.10 |
| Crimes against people \* | Gang (*N* = 22) | 4.83 | 0.37 |
| Non-gang (*N* = 89) | 3.96 | 0.18 |
| Overall delinquency \*\* | Gang (*N* = 22) | 25.27 | 1.00 |
| Non-gang (*N* = 89) | 18.59 | 0.49 |

*Note.* Means adjusted for age and ethnicity.

\* *p* < .05. \*\* *p* < .001.

Table 4

*Adjusted Means and Standard Errors for Self-esteem, Anti-Authority Attitudes, Perceived Importance of Social Status and Hypermasculinity*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Psychological variable |  | *M* | *SE* |
| Self-esteem | Gang (*N =* 20) | 22.04 | 1.32 |
| Non-gang (*N* = 95) | 22.73 | 0.63 |
| Anti-authority attitudes \* | Gang (*N =* 20) | 47.63 | 2.03 |
| Non-gang (*N* = 95) | 39.83 | 0.96 |
| Importance of social status | Gang (*N =* 20) | 59.93 | 2.81 |
| Non-gang (*N* = 95) | 55.09 | 1.34 |
| Hypermasculinity | Gang (*N =* 20) | 3.72 | 0.12 |
| Non-gang (*N* = 95) | 3.77 | 0.06 |

*Note.* Means adjusted for age and ethnicity.

\* *p* < .05.