

DISSERTATION

Factors Associated with Rural
Mexican American Gang Activity

Submitted by

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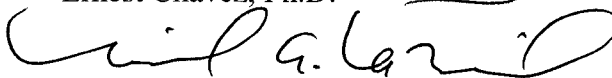
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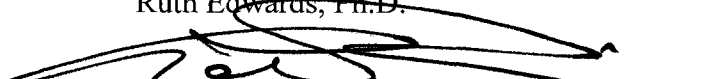
WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE DISSERTATION PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY SYLVIA J. ACOSTA ENTITLED FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH RURAL MEXICAN AMERICAN GANG MEMBERSHIP BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY.

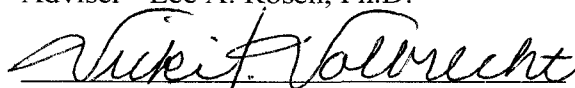
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION
FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH RURAL MEXICAN AMERICAN
GANG ACTIVITY

This study examines factors related to Mexican American gang involvement in rural communities. Data for this study were obtained from a larger, cross sectional study on adolescent drug use in rural areas. Survey data from a total of 746 males (373 gang members and 373 non-gang members) and 290 females (145 gang members and 145 non-gang members) were analyzed regarding factors of parental caring and family caring, parental permissiveness, religiosity, mental health factors, and alcohol and marijuana use. It was hypothesized that low levels of parental caring and low levels of religiosity would be associated with gang membership. Mental health factors such as low self-esteem and high anger and depression were also expected to be risk factors for gang membership. Logistic regression was used to identify key risk factors related to joining a gang for Mexican American males and females. For males, alcohol and marijuana use, having caring parents and family, parental permissiveness, and anger were significantly related to gang involvement in the analysis. For females, the same variables with the addition of age were significantly related to gang involvement. Religiosity, self-esteem, and depression were not associated with gang involvement in this study. Implications for gang prevention and intervention planning for rural communities are discussed.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Youth gang activity in the United States is a major societal problem that has been extensively studied (Huff, 2002; Jankowski, 1991; & Klein, 1995). For the past several years, the National Youth Gang Center (NYGC) has conducted an annual National Youth Gang Survey of gang activity by polling law enforcement agencies in the United States. Between 1996 and 2005, the average number of youth gang members per year was estimated to be 750,000 individuals (NYGC, 2007). In addition, the findings from the 2002 to 2005 sample indicate that 20% of all sized cities in the United States have reported youth gang problems. The prevalence of street gangs in the United States ranges from 5%-8% of all youth and the age of gang members generally ranges from 14-24 years (Flannery, Huff, & Manos, 1998). The National Gang Crime Research Center (NGCRC), in one of the largest studies of gang membership in the United States, found that almost 50% of gang members in correctional facilities were under the age of 18 (NGCRC, 1997).

The NYGC study indicated that gang problems are prevalent across the United States (NYGC, 2007). Ninety-nine percent of the law enforcement agencies of large cities reported gang problems in their cities (NYGC, 2007). In addition, approximately 27% of law enforcement agencies in smaller cities (population 2,500 to 49,999) reported at least 4-6 gangs in their cities. In rural counties (population <2,500), about 23.5% law

enforcement agencies reported between 4-6 current gangs in their areas (NYGC, 2007). Many small towns and rural areas are beginning to experience juvenile gang problems for the first time (Howell & Egley, 2005). Between 1996 and 2001, rural counties and small cities (population of 2,500 to 25,000) reporting gang activity indicated that up to 3 gangs with up to 50 members existed in their communities (Howell & Egley, 2005). These areas also report a higher percentage of female gang members as compared to large city gangs and 1 in every 3 rural counties reported that more than half of their gangs include female members (NYGC, 2007).

Urban gangs have been the primary focus of most of the research on youth gangs (Green, 2003; Howell, 1994; Huff, 2002; Jankowski, 1995; Klein, 1995; Valdez, 2003; & Weisheit & Wells, 2001). A growing majority of adults in small towns, however, believe that gangs present a serious problem in rural areas (Swetnam & Pope, 2001). Although past research has focused on gangs in urban areas, gangs in small cities and rural areas are increasing and empirical research on youth gangs in rural areas is limited yet needed (Dukes & Stein, 2003; Evans, Fitzgerald, Weigel, & Chvilicek, 1999; Green, 2003; & Swetnam & Pope, 2001). In addition, according to the NYGC approximately half of all gang members between 2001 and 2004 are Hispanic/Latino (NYGC, 2007). Moreover in rural counties, Hispanics make up slightly over 30% of gang members (NYGC, 2007). Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine Mexican American gang members in small cities and rural counties in order to shed light on the factors associated with Mexican American youth gang affiliation in rural America.

Previous research on gang members has focused on individual characteristics or risk factors associated with gang membership, differences between gang members and

non-gang members, and the antisocial activities (violence, delinquency, and drug use) of gang members (Howell, 1998b; Huff, 2002; Jankowski, 1991; & Thornberry, 1998).

Some researchers have identified several precursors of gang activity including individual, peer, family, and community factors (Dukes, Martinez, & Stein, 1997; Howell, 1998b; Thornberry, 1998).

Because family plays an important role in many Hispanic cultures and could play a vital role in the prediction of gang activity (Howell, 1998b; Thornberry 1998), family factors associated with gang affiliation will be explored in this study. Family discord and economic deprivation have also been found to be risk factors for gang activity among adolescents in Hispanic cultures (Vigil, 1988). These findings would suggest the role of family, and parents in particular, should be an important predictor of gang activity for Mexican American youth.

Additionally, religion is another factor that has been identified in the Hispanic culture. Religiosity is a topic that has not been widely explored for its relationship to gang activity, but will be included in this study.

Other psychosocial factors such as self-esteem, anger and depression, have generally been studied extensively; however, none have been explored as they relate in particular to gang activity among rural Mexican American youth.

Literature Review

Gangs in America have been studied extensively since the 1950's and 1960's (Klein, 1995). Historically, the definition of a gang has varied widely; however, five criteria are typically used to define a gang: a formal organizational structure; an identified leader; a specific territory associated with the gang; recurrent interaction among

members; and delinquent behavior by the members (Flannery, Hussey, Biebelhausen & Wester, 2003). A number of theories of delinquent behavior and gang activity among youth have attempted to explain gang formation and involvement (Barber, 1999; Klein, 1995). Sociological theories suggest that gangs have developed from poverty and social disorganization in communities, with poor economic conditions viewed as causing social disorganization, which leads to a lack of social control; however, others have discussed gangs associated with low-income neighborhoods (Jankowski, 1991). Strain Theory suggests that urban delinquency in lower class neighborhoods is a reaction to the strain of economic pressure to accommodate to the middle class norm (Klein, 1995). The Facilitation Model indicates that gangs are thought to facilitate greater involvement in delinquency and violence because of the group norms that occur in gangs (Thornberry, 1998). Labeling Theory explains that deviancy is a result of a group or society labeling one as deviant (Green, 2005).

Risk Factors. In general, factors identified as predictors of gang involvement are similar to predictors of delinquency, violence, and/or substance abuse (Hill, Howell, Hawkins, & Battin-Pearson, 1999). In a review of several correlational and longitudinal studies on risk factors for gang membership, Thornberry (1998) suggested that community, family, school, peer, and individual characteristics are five important risk factors that are all important in predicting involvement in gang activity. According to Thornberry, some community risk factors for delinquency are poverty, disorganized neighborhoods, and availability of drugs in the neighborhood. School risk factors include low commitment to school and academic failure. Individual and peer factors included favorable attitude toward delinquent behavior and association with those who engage in

delinquent behaviors. Finally, family risk factors include family history of delinquent behavior and family poverty (Thornberry, 1998). Others have also listed the individual, family, and community risk factors thought to be associated with youth gang activity (Flannery et al., 1998; Howell, 1998b). Howell's review in particular includes individual risk factors such as prior delinquency, aggression, social disabilities, early sexual activity, drug and alcohol use, drug trafficking, and previous sexual victimization. Family factors included family disorganization, troubled families, and family members also in a gang (Howell, 1998) Community risk factors included poverty, availability of drugs, lack of social and economic opportunities, and high rates of crime associated with youth gang membership (Howell, 1998b). Those factors most highly associated with youth gang activity include violence, delinquency, peer groups, school involvement, and drug and alcohol use (Thornberry, 1998).

Most of the attention on youth gangs has focused on gang violence and delinquency. There is no question that delinquency and violence are often attributed to gang membership (Dukes et al., 1997; Thornberry, 1998). There is a strong correlation between gang membership and delinquent activity and there are higher rates of delinquency in gang members as compared to non-gang members (Dukes et al., 1997; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Thornberry, 1998). Juvenile delinquency among gang members is highly prevalent. More specifically, gang members are more involved in serious delinquency and violence including felony offenses, and drug sales than non-gang members (Thornberry, 1998). In one study, the best predictors of gang membership among both White and Hispanic youth were aggressive and delinquent behaviors

(Watson, 1994). It is widely established that youth who participate in gangs are usually highly involved in delinquent and or violent behavior.

Peers have one of the largest impacts on gang membership for youth (Thornberry, 1998; Wang, 2000). The peer group provides a social network for an individual, and for many gang members the gang is the primary support system (Flannery et al., 1998). Youth who participate in delinquent behaviors are more likely to have friends who participate in delinquent behaviors, and youth who hang out with friends who are gang members are more likely to become gang members (Howell, 1998b; Thornberry, 1998). Gang members are more likely to have peers who were also gang members (NGCRC, 1997). For females, however, peer relationships have not been significantly related to gang membership (Thornberry, 1998). Two recent studies found that females who associate with delinquent peers are at no higher risk for gang membership than females who do not “hang out” with delinquent peers although the reasons for this are not clear (Thornberry, 1998).

Gang activity in schools has been problematic and thus school variables have also been examined in the gang literature (Thornberry, 1998). Poor school performance and attendance are common among gang members (Howell, 1998b). Gang members have a higher rate (34.1%) of referrals for Special Education Services than non-gang members (27.6%) and gang members are less likely to have completed a high school degree or equivalent (NGCRC, 1997). Low student commitment levels to school have also been associated with gang involvement (Thornberry, 1998). In a study of male adolescent gang members in a correctional facility, gang members had attended school less often and had more behavior problems in school than non-gang members (Cox, 1996). Both parent and

student expectations for success in school have been identified and low expectations for success increase the risk for gang membership (Thornberry, 1998). With females in particular, low student expectations for school success increases the likelihood of gang membership (Thornberry, 1998). Poor school outcomes can be viewed as key risk factors of gang membership in youth.

The connection between gang members and drugs is often misconstrued. Stereotypically, gangs are involved in the sale and distribution of drugs, but this has not been found to be a primary activity for most gangs (Flannery et al., 1998; Klein, 1995). The relationship between drugs and gang activity is becoming less interdependent and gangs are more likely to use drugs than to sell and distribute drugs (Klein, 1995; NYGC, 2007). Gang members, however, demonstrate higher rates of drug use than non-gang members (Howell & Decker, 1999). Gang members have reported significant higher rates of marijuana and other illegal drug use as compared to non-gang members, particularly during the time they were involved in the gang (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993).

Parent and Family Involvement and Gangs

Family factors have been identified as important influences on youth. Specifically, positive family interactions are protective factors for youth, whereas family dysfunction has been associated with negative outcomes. Family conflict has been shown to increase violence and aggressive behavior in youth, and violence and aggression are often cited as a result of family dysfunction (Flannery et al., 1998; Seydlitz & Jenkins, 1998). Youth who come from single-parent homes or “broken homes” are also at higher risk for delinquency and gang activity (Thornberry, 1998; Vigil, 1988). Stronger attachment to parents and good communication levels are associated with less risk for

delinquent behavior while poor or excessive discipline, family violence, family modeling of substance abuse and delinquency, are associated with more delinquent behavior (Howell, 1998b; Thornberry, 1998).

Low attachment to parents and low parental supervision are related to higher levels of gang participation (Thornberry, 1998). For girls, family factors that predict gang membership include low parental involvement, but other factors such as parenting, family violence, structure, and attachment are not highly correlated with gang involvement (Thornberry, 1998). Particularly with gang involvement, Swetnam and Pope (2001) found that perceptions of the formation and joining of gangs was related to poor parental guidance and poor parenting. Poor parental management was also associated with gang activity in youth (Flannery et al., 1998) -- 42.1% of gang members reported low levels of parental supervision compared to non-gang members (30.4%) (NGCRC, 1997). Youth with high gang affiliation had lower family relationships than those youth who had less gang affiliation (Florian-Lacy, Jefferson, & Fleming, 2002; Dukes et al., 1997; Thornberry, 1998;). In Watson's (1994) study, White and Hispanic youth who were either current or former gang members perceived their families negatively (i.e., less caring for them), and felt less caring toward their own family. Cox (1996) also found that gang members were less satisfied with their family life than non-gang members. Sixty percent of youth gang members in correctional facilities indicated that strong family support would have prevented them from being in a gang (NGCRC, 1997).

Among Mexican American youth, the influence of family on gang membership is puzzling. While family can serve as a source of a protective culture where strong family bonds can deter delinquent behavior, the relationship between family and gang affiliation

is different. For instance, when compared by ethnicity, Hispanic youth in general found their families to be more caring and supportive than their White counterparts, yet were more likely to be in a gang (Watson, 1994). But in another study on family characteristics of male Hispanic gang members, families with low levels of cohesion were emotionally detached and less loyal. These Hispanic gang members also experienced lower levels of family adaptability and experienced their families to be more authoritarian and “rigid” (autocratic discipline, strict consequences, limited negotiations and strict roles) than non-gang members (Rapposelli, 1997).

Religion and Gang Involvement

Religion is another area of research that has been shown to be related to gang activity. For example, about 21% of gang members in correctional facilities indicated that gang membership had affected their religious beliefs in some way (NGCRC, 1997). Religion often serves as a protective factor, which keeps youth from engaging in delinquent or negative behaviors, and can possibly be a predictor of gang activity. King and Boyatzis (2004), suggest that youth who are not involved in religion may turn towards antisocial activities such as gang membership. When comparing gang members to non-gang members, the NGCRC (1997) found that gang members were less likely to regularly attend church and to believe in God, as well as more likely to claim they were on “Satan’s side” when compared to non-gang members. In a study examining the influence of factors such as religion on violence and gang membership in Hispanic and White youth, Watson (1994) found that Hispanic youth were more religious than White youth and females were also more religious than males. Interestingly, in the Watson

study no differences among gang members versus non-gang members regarding religious beliefs were found. Thus, research on religion and gangs is not conclusive.

Mental Health and Gang Involvement

Few studies have identified the mental health aspects of youth gang involvement. In general, however, childhood mental health problems have been found to contribute to delinquency, violence, and other childhood problems. Self-esteem is commonly cited in the literature on gangs and most studies have found that low self-esteem is related to gang membership (Florian-Lacy et al., 2002; Dukes et al., 1997; Thornberry, 1998; Wang, 2000). Thornberry (1998) suggested that low school self-esteem puts youth at risk for gang membership and found that self-esteem in general is not consistently related to gang membership as it has been found to either increase gang membership or have no effect. Thornberry's review found that in the Rochester study, individuals with low self-esteem and depressive symptoms were more likely to be in gangs than individuals without these factors. Active gang members and gang "wannabes" were found to have lower self-esteem, poorer psychosocial health, and lower ethnic identity than non-gang involved youth (Dukes et al., 1997). Individual factors that have been associated with delinquency include Antisocial Personality Disorder, childhood aggressive behavior, Mood Disorder, Conduct Disorder, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), low verbal intelligence, and exposure to violence (Flannery et al., 1998).

Depression has also been linked to adolescent delinquency and gang membership (Howell, 1998). Rapposelli (1997) suggests that depression may be a factor in male Hispanic gang members, who turn to substance abuse and gangs to cope with economic, psychological, and cultural conflicts as well as environmental stressors. Thornberry

(1998) reviewed several studies, which suggested that youth with low-self esteem who suffer negative life events or stressors, and suffer from depression, are more likely to join gangs than those who do not.

In summary, a vast amount of literature focuses on precursors and correlates to gang activity among urban youth and it is unclear whether these relationships are similar to those Mexican American youth who are involved in gang activity in rural areas.

Rural and Urban Gangs

Youth gang activity increased in the 1990's, particularly in rural communities (Flannery et al., 2003). Between 1996 and 2001, gang problems were reported by 1,066 agencies in rural counties and smaller cities (Howell & Egley, 2005). Gangs have spread from large metropolitan areas and rural areas are beginning to be impacted by gang activity (Burnham & Arnold, 2000). Students, teachers, and police officers believe that metropolitan gangs have largely influenced and precipitated the development of rural gangs (Swetnam & Pope, 2001). Weisheit and Wells (2001) reviewed five theories about the emergence of gangs in rural areas. These theories hypothesize that: 1) rural gangs are a result of gang members moving to rural areas to avoid law enforcement, 2) gang members set up a "branch offices" to sell drugs in rural areas, 3) gang members are trying to expand their territory, 4) rural youth are learning about gangs in correctional facilities, and 5) urban families moving into rural areas bring their gang culture with them.

Interestingly, Weisheit and Wells (2001) found that law enforcement officials viewed social factors unrelated to gang activity as the largest reason for gangs moving into rural areas and most believed that urban gang members moved into rural areas with family

members for employment or other opportunities. Some did believe that urban gang members moved to rural areas to get away from urban gangs (Weisheit & Wells, 2001).

Most gang researchers agree that gang migration is a major factor in the spread of gangs from large cities to smaller cities and rural areas (Howell, 1994; Klein, 1995; Weisheit & Wells, 2001). Many urban gangs have spread out from the West Coast resulting in gang problems in smaller cities. Research has shown that this is a result of gang members' families' relocation and migration more than it is a factor of gang units per se relocating (Howell, 1994; Howell, 2006; Klein, 1995). Because of this, gang problems in rural areas and smaller cities are transitory and tend to be short-lived (Howell & Egley, 2005; Weisheit & Wells, 2001). In addition, gang problems in rural areas are specifically linked to juvenile gangs as opposed to adult gangs (NYGC, 2007). A critical review of modern gang trends suggested that compared to urban gangs, rural gangs are more ethnically mixed, tend to have a later onset (gangs developing in the 1990's or later), have a greater proportion of juveniles involved in gang activity, more females involved in gangs, and are less involved in drug trafficking and violent crimes (Howell, Egley, & Gleason, 2002). Howell et al. (2002) suggested that this may be because rural gangs are only beginning to develop, have not yet progressed to become involved in typical gang activities, and often have gang members that are different from the stereotypical urban gang members (Howell et al., 2002). This suggests that the characteristics of individual gang members in rural areas may vary from those of gang members in metropolitan areas.

Several studies have identified similarities and differences among rural and urban gang (Dukes & Stein, 2003; Evans et al., 1999; & Jones, 1999). The first study to

compare rural and urban gang members examined 7th through 12th graders in Nevada (Evans et al., 1999). Results illustrated that 22% (N=169) of the rural youth sample (versus 19.5% of the urban youth) were involved in a gang and 8.3% of those were female. No differences were found between urban and rural gang members in pressure to join a gang, carrying a weapon, fighting, and other factors such as emotional stability, life satisfaction, school support, and family communication. The differences that were found included the fact that urban gang members described having more friends in a gang and feeling more threatened by gang members in the community. Parents of male rural gang members tended to be biological and stepparents, while parents of male urban gang members were more often single parents. Several gender differences were found. For instance, rural female gang members were more mentally stable and reported higher school involvement than urban groups and rural males were involved more frequently in fights and had more friends in a gang than all other groups (Evans et al., 1999).

In another study comparing rural and urban gang members and non-gang members in Colorado, gang membership was higher in urban school districts than for rural school districts (Dukes & Stein, 2003). No differences were found between gang members in urban and rural areas in gang-like activities, delinquent behavior, or being physically injured as a result of a gang fight. Rural female gang members used common drugs (alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana) more than their urban counterparts. Rural female gang members (and non-members) reported more self-derogation than urban females in that they found themselves to feel as though they were “no good” and/or “useless.” Rural respondents in general used more common and hard drugs, possessed more weapons, and

were less bonded with school than their urban counterparts (Dukes & Stein, 2003). This suggests that there are important differences among rural and urban youth in gangs.

Jones (1999) compared Black and White rural and urban gang members and non-gang members in a qualitative study. Although there seemed to be a lack of familial involvement in both rural and urban gang members' lives, rural and urban gang members were said to be extremely different from each other. Urban gang members as compared to rural gang members reported more family dysfunction (an absence of family structure and parental involvement), a negative attitude toward school, less interest in academic success, more violence, and less remorse for violence (Jones, 1999). In another qualitative study of only Northwest rural youth, rural gang members engaged in many of the same behaviors as urban youth such as high levels of violence in and out of school, serious crimes in community, poor performance in school, and school suspensions and arrests (Barber, 1999). An interesting finding in one small study found that at-risk youth and gang members in rural towns felt a strong attachment to family and felt more supported and loved than their urban counterparts (Stum & Chu, 1999). In addition, rural youth crimes, such as theft, seemed to be more situational and more socially acceptable rather than an attempt to make money or attain gang "status" as in urban gangs (Stum & Chu, 1999).

Some of these findings are confusing. Urban gang members seem to participate in more criminal acts, drug use, and violent behaviors than rural gang members (Howell et al., 2002), yet studies have found few to no differences among rural and urban gang members' delinquent behavior (Dukes & Stein, 2003). In regards to female gang members, one study found that rural female gang members were more emotionally stable

than urban females (Evans et al., 1999), while another found that rural females were generally more self-derogating than urban females (Dukes & Stein, 2003). Conflicting results are also found regarding the relationship of gang members with their families (Stum & Chu, 1999).

While these studies have been helpful in identifying similarities and differences among rural and urban gang and non-gang members, there is little information regarding other factors involved in gang membership such as ethnicity, family, religion, and mental health factors. More research is needed to identify the factors that characterize gang members in rural areas and differences among ethnic minority gang members in urban and rural areas.

Mexican American Gangs

Ethnic minorities make up a large proportion of youth gangs today. According to the NYGC, approximately half (49%) of gang members between 2001 and 2004 were Hispanic/Latino gang members, which is a much greater percentage when compared to the gang involvement of other ethnic groups: approximately 35% African American, less than 10% White, and about 6% Asian gang members (NYGC, 2007). One study found ethnicity to be a predictor of gang membership and results indicated that among Latino, African American, and Native American participants, 13% of these youth were in a gang (Dukes et al., 1997).

While there is a wide range of diversity among existing Mexican American gangs, there are some common characteristics that have been found. Most Mexican American gangs are found in the American southwest, specifically in southern California and in Texas. The majority of Mexican American gangs seem to be territorial in nature: they are

based in specific neighborhoods and these areas are “protected” by the gang members (Valdez, 2003). Hispanic gangs strongly identify with their neighborhood and view the gang as more important than the individual (Burnham & Arnold, 2002). Several of these Mexican American gangs are involved in illegal activities including theft, drug dealing, vandalism, and some violence (Valdez, 2003). Although many studies have identified characteristics of gang members and a few have documented or studied ethnic differences among gangs, none have studied Mexican American rural gangs.

In traditional Hispanic cultures, connection to family is considered an important part of everyday life (Becerra, Karno, & Escobar, 1982). What becomes challenging is that gang members, particularly Mexican American gang members, have come from broken homes, lower economic status, poorer housing, and have exposure to more alcoholism and mental illness compared to non-gang members (Becerra et al., 1982). Hispanic gang members often cite older relatives as role models for gang membership (Vigil, 1988). It has been said that in some ways the gang becomes a substitute for the family (Becerra et al., 1982). Yet, the decision to join a gang does not always result from exposure to gang activity (Vigil, 1988). Economic factors and family discord are related to gang activity as well. Mexican American youth whose family's are at a socioeconomic disadvantage and are in discord have a higher risk for gang activity than those youth who perceive their families as stable (Vigil, 1998). Religion also plays an important role in Hispanic culture and Catholicism has one of the strongest influences among Mexican Americans (Becerra et al., 1982). Hispanic youth have been found to be more religious than non-Hispanic White youth and even though they tend to be more involved in gangs, there were no differences in religion among gang involved and non-involved youth

(Watson, 1994). In addition, other psychosocial factors such as self-esteem, anger, and depression are variables that relate to gang activity. In particular, low self-esteem has been found to contribute to gang membership (Thornberry, 1998), and was found to be a factor for gang involvement and delinquency in Hispanic gang members (Curry & Spergel, 1992), but this has not been explored extensively in Hispanic gangs. Parent and family factors in Hispanic populations play an important role in adolescent development, culture, and, in particular delinquency. Watson (1994) found that gang members (both Hispanic and White non-Hispanic) were more delinquent than non-gang members or wanna-be's, were more tolerant of delinquent behaviors, and had more friends in a gang than adolescents who were not in a gang. Her study (Watson, 1994) found that in general, youth gang members perceived that their family was less caring for them and they in turn were less caring for their families, however, Hispanic youth perceived their families as more caring for them than White youth. The study also found that regardless of ethnic group, a negative home life increases the chances that a youth would both participate in delinquent behavior and become involved in a gang (Watson, 1994).

Purpose of Study and Hypothesis

The purpose of the current study was to identify factors significantly associated with gang involvement for rural Mexican American youth. Specifically, the factors of drug and alcohol use, parental and family caring, parental permissiveness, religiosity, and mental health were studied in regards to the involvement of rural Mexican American youth in rural gangs in analyses. Drug and alcohol use were predicted to be strongly associated with Mexican American gang membership in rural communities. It was hypothesized that low levels of parental/family caring and high parental permissiveness

would be associated with gang involvement among rural Mexican American youth. Religiosity was also expected to be associated with gang membership for rural Mexican American youth with low religiosity expected to be associated with gang membership. Finally, mental health factors such as low self-esteem, and high rates of anger and depression were also expected to be associated with gang membership for Mexican American youth.

CHAPTER 2

Method

Sample

Data for this study were obtained from a larger research project on adolescent drug use in rural America conducted by researchers at the Tri-Ethnic Center at Colorado State University between 1997 and 2000¹. Approximately 250,000 students in 7th through 12th grade attending school in 272 ethnic minority rural communities, white rural communities, and comparison non-rural communities participated in the original study. Mexican American youth accounted for 13.4% of the total sample, which is approximately representative of the Hispanic/Latino population in the United States. About 150 of the communities that were surveyed were located in the south and almost all rural Mexican American communities selected to participate were located in the southwestern United States. Out of all students originally surveyed, some 19,289 participants self-identified as Mexican American and only a sample of these students were considered in the present study.

Instrument

The participants in the study completed the Community Drug and Alcohol Survey (CDAS), which is a 99-item survey that contains items derived from The American Drug

¹ Data for this study were obtained from the original project "Adolescent Drug Use in Rural America", Ruth W. Edwards, Principal Investigator, funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (R01 DA03371).

and Alcohol Survey™ and the Prevention Planning Survey². The CDAS questions students on their demographic information, drug and alcohol use, school adjustment, crime and violence, peer groups, religion, relationships with family, personal adjustment, gang activity, and other individual and community variables. The questions analyzed in the present study included those which ask about age, gender, grade level in school, gang involvement, alcohol and marijuana use, as well as subscales which included parental caring, parental permissiveness, family caring, religiosity, and personal adjustment (anger, self-esteem, and depression).

Students were asked to mark responses to the following demographic items: “What grade are you in?,” “How old are you?,” and “Sex: Male or Female.” To assess gang involvement the students were asked if they had ever been in a ‘street gang.’ Response choices for this question included “I will never join a gang,” “I used to be in a gang,” “I will join a gang,” “I hang out with gang members,” and “in a gang now.” For the purposes of this study, only participants who responded that they will “never join a gang” and those who were “currently in a gang” were selected for analysis. Scales based on individual items on the CDAS representing a variety of constructs have been empirically derived. The scale used for the construct “Parental Caring” included three items: “my parents listen to me,” “my parents spend time with me,” and “my parents are around when I need them.” The scale which measures parental permissiveness included four questions which ask my parents “allow me to go out as often as I want,” “let me go any place without asking,” “are less strict than most parents in letting me have fun with my friends,” and “let me stay out late.” Responses to each individual item for this

² The American Drug and Alcohol Survey and the Prevention Planning Survey published by RMBSI, Inc., (www.rmbsi.com) and were used in this study with permission granted under a memo of understanding between Colorado State University and RMBSI, Inc.

construct were based on a four point Likert scale, which ranged from “very true” to “not at all true.” A “Family Caring” scale included two items which asked “does your family care about you” and “does your family care what you do” where response choices ranged from “a lot” to “not at all.” Three items make up the “Religiosity” scale, with students being asked to respond on a four point Likert scale to “are you religious,” “do you participate in your religion,” and “how important is religion in your life.” The personal adjustment scales were used to measure mental health aspects of the constructs “Anger,” “Self-esteem” and “Depression.” Responses to each item included in these scales were also based on a four point Likert scale, which ranged from “very true” to “not at all true.” The Anger scale included items which ask students how much they agree to the statements “I am quick tempered,” “I get mad,” “I lose my temper,” “I am hotheaded,” and “I get angry.” The Self-esteem scale included the items “I am proud of myself,” “I am able to do things well,” “I feel sad,” and “I am smart.” The Depression scale included six items: “I feel low,” “I am unhappy,” “I am lonely,” “I feel bad,” “I am lonesome,” and “I am depressed.” Drug use was assessed with the following questions: “how often in the last month have you had alcohol to drink,” and “how often in the last month have you used marijuana.” Responses to each of these two items included “none,” “1-2 times,” “3-9 times,” “10-19,” “20 or more times,” and “several times every day.”

The Cronbach alpha reliabilities for the scales utilized in the analyses based on the sample analyzed are reported in Table 1. The Parental Caring scale displayed good internal consistency ($\alpha = .88$) as well as the Parental Permissiveness scale ($\alpha = .84$). The Family Caring scale displayed excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .90$). The Religiosity scale was found to have good internal consistency ($\alpha = .88$). The Anger scale also

displayed good internal consistency among the sample ($\alpha = .86$). The Depression scale demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .87$). The only scale which did not display adequate internal consistency in this sample was the Self-esteem scale ($\alpha = .30$).

Procedure

This study used archival data collected from an original study on drug and alcohol use between 1997 and 2002. In the original study, a representative sample of communities in the United States was obtained using stratified sampling based on level of rurality and region of the country. The populations of rural communities were classified as remote (fewer than 2,000), medium rural (between 2,000 and 20,000), and large rural (20,000-50,000) with additional criteria addressing proximity to metropolitan areas and accessibility of services. Students across the United States completed the CDAS in classrooms at school. Parents were informed that if they did not want their child to participate in the study, they could inform the school prior to the date the survey was administered. School personnel administered the CDAS to students and the identity of the students and their responses were kept confidential. Students were also informed at the time of the survey that their participation was voluntary and they would not be penalized for choosing not to answer questions. The original study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Colorado State University.

CHAPTER 3

Results

Sample

The data for this study were derived from a larger study on adolescent drug use in rural America. A total of 19,289 Mexican American students living in rural communities in the southwestern United States participated in the study. Of these youth, 47.8% were male and 52.2% were female. Table 2 shows the demographic information for the original sample of Mexican American rural youth. The average age of the participants in the sample was 15.2 years ($SD = 1.8$) and the mean grade of all participants was 9th grade ($SD = 1.6$). Approximately 7% of the Mexican American students lived in small rural to remote rural areas, 15.5% lived in medium rural to rural areas, and 46% lived in large rural areas. The rest of the sample of Mexican American students (31.6%) lived in a metro area. A majority of the youth surveyed (79%) indicated they would never join a gang. Almost 1% of the youth reported they “hung out” with gang members but were not in a gang. Approximately 7% used to be in a gang and less than one percent said they would join a gang in the future. Finally, 3.7% of these Mexican American students reported they were current gang members.

The aim of the analyses was to identify variables that would differentiate between rural Mexican American youth who are involved in gangs versus their counterparts who indicate they would never join a gang. A subset of the sample including two particular groups of youth were analyzed: those who state they will never join a gang and those who

are currently in a gang. These youth will be referred to as the “never join” and the “in a gang” groups and were compared to each other. In the original sample of Mexican American students, both groups had a similar mean age of 15.1 years of age (SD = 1.7 and 1.8 respectively) and the mean grade in school was 9th grade (SD = 1.6) for both groups. Of the “never join” a gang group, the sample were more equal 54.8% males and 45.2% females. However, of those that reported they were currently “in a gang”, about 73% were males and 27% were females. Table 3 provides demographic information based on each level of gang involvement for the total Mexican American sample.

Because of the sizeable difference between the number of youth who self-identified as current gang members and those who would never participate in gang activity in this sample, the analyses using the total sample were unlikely to accurately predict membership in these two groups and therefore random sampling of the data to equalize sample sizes in the groups to be compared was undertaken. There were many more males than females among the gang members in the sample and as gender was viewed as an important variable, the males and females were separated in order to run separate analyses for these two groups. In addition, because this researcher was particularly interested in rural gang activity, the focus was on those living in the remote to large rural areas, excluding youth living in metropolitan areas. Table 4 shows the breakdown of the sample by rurality classification. A random sample of males and females in the “never join” group and was then selected to match males in females in the “in a gang” sample based on level of rurality in order to make the samples similarly distributed across rurality and approximately equal in size for more accurate statistical comparisons. For example, there were 12 female gang members who lived in the small

rural area, 30 who lived in the medium rural area, and 103 who lived in the large rural area. A random selection of the females in the “never join” group were matched for the same numbers of females living in the respective rural area. The same was done for the male gang members. There were 44 male gang members who lived in the small rural area, 84 males who lived in the medium rural area, and 245 males who lived in the large rural area. A random selection of the “never join” males were matched for the exact same number of male gang members, again based on the respective rural areas of those identifying as gang members .

The final sample includes a total of 1036 participants, 518 of whom are gang members and 518 of whom are non-gang members. Table 5 provides demographic information for the “never join” and “in a gang” groups that were matched on level of rurality. Most of the participants (67%) lived in large rural areas, 22% lived in medium rural areas, and about 11% lived in small to remote rural areas for both groups. A total of 373 males (36%) and 145 females (14%) in the sample indicated they were currently “in a gang”, therefore these were matched for the similar numbers of those in the “never join” group. The average age of the participants in this sample was 14.9 years (SD = 1.7) for the never join group and 15.2 years (SD = 1.8) for the “in a gang” group. The average grade for both groups was grade nine (SD = 1.6) for both.

Analyses

Two separate forward stepwise logistic regression models were conducted where the dependent variable was gang activity (“never join” a gang, “in a gang” now) and the independent variables included the scales Parental Caring, Parental Permissiveness, Family Caring, Religiosity, Anger, Self-esteem, Depression, and the variables Age,

Alcohol use in the last month, and Marijuana use in the last month. Table 6 displays the results for the logistic regression model used to test the relationship among the factors and male gang involvement while Table 7 displays the results for the logistic regression model used for the females. Logistic regression estimates the odds of a certain event (i.e., being in a gang) occurring. The exponentiated logit coefficients ($\text{Exp}(\beta)$) provided in Tables 6 and 7 are the odds ratios, or the effect of a particular predictor variable. The logit coefficient can be interpreted as how likely the observed value of being “in a gang” may be predicted from the independent variables (Garson, 2008). The odds ratio for a one-unit change in the independent variable represents the likelihood of being involved in a gang.

For males, the variables of using Alcohol and Marijuana in the past month, Parental Caring, Parental Permissiveness, Family Caring, and Anger showed statistical significance in the analysis (see Table 6). Those variables that did not make a significant contribution to the model were Age, Religiosity, and Self-esteem. Lack of significance for the Self-esteem variable is inconclusive due to the low reliability of the scale in this sample. Consistent with the literature, use of drugs and alcohol were the strongest predictors of gang activity of the variables included. In this model, the strongest predictor of gang activity was whether the youth drank alcohol in the last month ($\beta = .111, p = .000$), with those males who drank more likely (1.118) to be in a gang than their counterparts who would never join a gang. Having smoked marijuana in the last month was also a strong predictor of gang activity for males. Males who had smoked marijuana in the last month were more likely (1.050) to be gang members than were those who had not smoked marijuana ($\beta = .048, p = .000$).

Parental permissiveness was a significant factor and the results indicated that males who were in a gang were more likely (1.712) to perceive that their parents were more permissive ($\beta = .538, p = .000$). Males who perceived that their parents cared about them were less likely (.736) to be in a gang than those males who perceived that their parents did not care about them ($\beta = -.307, p = .030$). Males who believed that their family cared about them were less likely (.525) to be in a gang than those males who perceived that their family did not care about them ($\beta = -.644, p = .001$). In addition, the results indicated that males who were angry were more likely (.532) to be in a gang than males who were not as angry ($\beta = -.631, p = .000$).

Religion, Depression, and Self-esteem were also analyzed for their contribution to accounting for the variance with respect to participation in gang activity. These variables were not found to be related to gang involvement in this analysis. Again, however, the lack of significance of Self-esteem is inconclusive due to low reliability of the scale in this sample.

The Nagelkerke R^2 for the final model was .44, which means 44% of the variance in gang membership was accounted for by the variables in the model including drinking Alcohol and smoking Marijuana in the last month, Parental Caring, Parental Permissiveness, Family Caring, and Anger.

For females, the variables of Age, drinking Alcohol and trying Marijuana in the last month, Parental Caring, Parental Permissiveness, Family Caring, and Anger showed statistical significance in the analysis (see Table 7). Those variables that did not make a significant contribution to the model were Religiosity, Depression, and Self-esteem. Similar to the males, the use of drugs and alcohol in the last month were strongly

associated with gang activity among females. In this model, the strongest predictor of gang activity was parental permissiveness ($\beta = 1.112, p = .000$), with those females whose parents were more permissive being three times more likely (3.041) to be in a gang than the females whose parents were less permissive. Parental Caring and Family caring were also both significant as predictors of gang involvement in this model. Females who perceived that their parents cared more about them were less likely (.500) to be in a gang than the group indicating they would never join a gang ($\beta = -.694, p = .007$). Females who perceived that their family cared about them were 47% less likely to be involved in a gang than those youth who perceived their family did not care ($\beta = -.747, p = .040$).

Females who had smoked marijuana in the last month were more likely (1.097) to be in a gang than their counterparts who had not smoked ($\beta = .093, p = .029$). In addition, females who drank alcohol in the last month were more likely (1.180) to be gang members than were those who had not had a drink ($\beta = .165, p = .049$). In addition, the results indicated that older females were less likely (.642) to be in a gang ($\beta = -.444, p = .003$). Anger was another significant scale and the results indicated that females who were in a gang were also more likely (.521) to be angry than females who were not in a gang ($\beta = -.653, p = .013$).

The scales Religion, Depression, and Self-esteem were not significant risk factors associated with female gang membership and were not included in the model.

The Nagelkerke R^2 for the final model was .60, which means 60% of the variance in gang membership was accounted for by the variables in the model including age, drinking and smoking in the last month, anger, family and parental caring, and parental

permissiveness.

CHAPTER 4

Discussion

This study adds to the understanding of rural youth Mexican American gang members. The results of this study suggest a few differences between male and female rural gang members. For Mexican American males, the use of alcohol and marijuana in the past month, parental caring, parental permissiveness, family caring, and anger were significantly associated (positively or negatively) with gang involvement. For Mexican American females, the significantly associated factors of gang involvement included those similar to males (drinking alcohol and using marijuana in the last month, parent and family caring, parental permissiveness, and anger) with the addition of age as a significant factor. The variables that did not achieve significance in predicting gang involvement for either Mexican American males or females in this study were religiosity, self-esteem, and depression. These results partially support the proposed hypotheses.

Parental and Family Involvement

In this study, parental involvement incorporated three scales: Parent Caring – how much the youth felt that their parents listened to them, spent time with them, and were around when they were needed; Family Caring – how much their family cares about them and how much they care about what they do; and Parental Permissiveness – whether parents allow youth to go out without asking for permission, when they want to go out, and as often as they want, as well as whether or not the youth perceived that their parents

were more or less strict than their peers. Parental and family involvement includes the idea that parental caring, family caring, and parental permissiveness would be related to gang involvement among Mexican American rural youth. The hypothesis was that parental involvement would predict gang involvement among rural Mexican American youth in that the lower parental and family caring and the more permissive parenting, the more likely youth would be involved in a gang. This hypothesis was fully supported as parental and family involvement were significantly associated with rural Mexican American gang involvement in both males and females. Parent Caring was significantly associated with gang involvement in that the males and females who believed that their parents cared about them were less likely to be involved in a gang. Family Caring was also significantly associated as those rural Mexican American youth who felt that their family cared about them were less likely to be in a gang than those who did not. Parental Permissiveness was also significant related to gang activity. Mexican American youth, particularly females, who perceived that their parents were less strict than those of their peers more likely to be in a gang.

These findings are consistent with other studies which have tried to examine family and parental involvement as risk factors associated with gang activity in Hispanic youth. The idea that the less a parent monitors or supervises their son or daughter and the less strict their rules are will result in a higher likelihood of gang membership has been supported in past literature (Adler, Ovando, & Hocevar, 1984; Thornberry, 1998). In a study on urban Hispanic female gang membership, a very similar finding occurred in which more intense parental supervision significantly deterred Hispanic females from joining gangs, but this finding was not true for the entire sample of youth (Sule, 2005).

Conversely, the more Hispanic females felt attached to their parents, the more likely they were to be in a gang, but this was also not significant for the larger sample. Sule (2005) suggested that this was because in Mexican American gangs, older relatives are sometimes involved in gangs and can serve as “role models” for youth to join gangs as well as having several family members involved in gangs (Sule, 2005). This may be particularly true for Mexican American youth. Perhaps the role that parents play in monitoring and supervising the activities and disciplining their youth is a more important variable associated with future gang involvement because this represents more time and effort expended in caring for their children. In general, parents who are involved and provide appropriate supervision of their children’s activities can play an important role in preventing them from joining a gang.

Religiosity

The hypothesis that low involvement in religion would predict gang membership for Mexican American rural youth was not supported in this study. More specifically, religiosity was not a significant predictor of gang activity for Mexican American rural youth in the analyses, which suggests that religion, participation in religion, and the importance of religion may not be directly associated with whether a youth is involved in a gang. There have been very few studies, which have investigated the importance of religion as a protective factor for adolescent gang activity. Nonetheless, in one study, religion was examined as a correlate of nonviolent behavior among youth and was found to be a significant factor in predicting nonviolent behavior, yet similar to this study, church attendance was not significant (Powell, 1997). Another study examined the role of spiritual support in the lives of at-risk inner city youth and found that spiritual support

was not related to gang activity, but was related to higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of aggression (Walker, 2000). It is possible that youth who have important religious beliefs and participate in their religion will have overall positive morals and values that can be a protective factor against being involved in risky or deviant behavior, but that variable is not as significant as other factors in their lives such as peer influences and community factors. Among Mexican American youth, active participation may be key in making the decision to join a gang. Religiosity remains an unclear factor in deterring youth from gang activity. Future research in this area is warranted given the potential positive influence that religiosity, spirituality, and participation in religion can have during adolescence.

Mental Health Factors

Mental health factors such as low self-esteem, anger, and depression were hypothesized to be associated with gang membership in rural Mexican American youth. Results of this study indicate that these hypotheses were partially supported. Mexican American gang members reported higher rates of anger compared to their non-gang peers regardless of their gender. Anger was a significant factor related to gang membership. Males and females both who reported they get mad, angry, are quick tempered, hotheaded and lose their temper more often were more likely to be in a gang than those who did not report feelings of anger. Although the relationship of anger to gang membership has not been specifically reported in the literature, it can be related to aggression and violence. One study found that anger can be an associated risk factor in increased aggression in rural middle school youth, and particularly, higher rates of anger were related to verbal harassment, threats, physical aggression, and fighting (Swaim,

Henry, & Kelly, 2006) all of which have also been associated with gang activity. Rural youth were found to engage in aggressive behaviors in a similar manner to urban youth, therefore suggesting that rural and urban youth may have fewer differences than some stereotypes might claim (Swaim et al., 2006). Yet, among Mexican American youth in particular, one study found that Hispanic gang members were not as aggressive as their White non-Hispanic peers (Watson, 1994) and another study found that Hispanic youth were not more verbally assaultive than their White counterparts (Deffenbacher & Swaim, 1999). Perhaps once in a gang, Mexican American rural youth may become angry. Given these results, the relationship among anger, ethnicity, and gang membership of youth will likely be important in further research.

The other mental health variables included in this study, self-esteem and depression, were not significant predictors of Mexican American rural gang membership. The findings of this study in regard to self-esteem are different than those in other studies, but this may be partly due to the low reliability of the Self-esteem scale in this sample. When used for this sample, the Self-esteem scale was not as reliable as when it was used with the larger sample for which the scale was developed. Further research addressing this construct specifically are warranted to clarify why this may be so. In a study of Hispanic high school students, gang membership was related to lower self-esteem scores, specifically low affect self-esteem, school self-esteem, and competence self-esteem (Florian-Lacy et al., 2002). Another study found that for Hispanics, low peer self-esteem and school self-esteem were estimators of gang involvement (Curry & Spergel, 1992). Additionally, some researchers have found that self-esteem and social isolation were more important factors for female gang members and not male gang

members (Esbensen, et al., 1999; Wang, 2000). They found that females generally were found to have lower self-esteem than males and female gang members reported lower levels of self-esteem and higher levels of social isolation than their male gang counterparts (Esbensen et al., 1999). This suggests that low self-esteem may be a predictor of gang activity for females rather than males; however, in this study the measure of self-esteem was not related to gang membership for males or females.

Depression and gang membership is another area which has not been widely explored; therefore, results of this study cannot be compared to previous research. Among the Mexican American youth in rural communities in this study, the measure of depression was not associated with gang involvement in males or females. Depression has been found to be a presenting concern among many youth in general and Mexican American youth are likely not an exception, however, some theories suggest that the majority of gang members are not “mentally disturbed” and the prevalence of mental health issues in gang members is equal to that of the general population (Becerra et al., 1982). It is more likely that depression plays the role of a mediating factor when correlated with youth gang membership. It is likely that other variables such as family discord, conflict, poverty, difficulties with relationships, and community or school risk factors that are associated with depression account for more of the variance than feelings of depression alone.

Other Factors

In urban gangs, other factors have been associated with gang membership such as age, sex, drug and alcohol use, and delinquency. In this study, gang membership was only significantly associated with age for females and not for males. It is possible that

girls enter gangs at an earlier age than males and some studies have suggested a similar finding (Esbensen et al. 1999). However, it should be noted that the youth who participated in this study were those who were in school and gang members who do not attend school may be a different age. The mean age of gang members in this study (15 years old) was similar to what has been reported in other studies (NGCRC, 1997). Females made up about 27.4% of the 717 gang members, which is comparable to a study of urban gangs in which females made up 38% of a sample of 623 gang members (Esbensen et al., 1999). The gender difference in the present study was much larger than one rural study (Evans et al., 1999), but similar to the percentages reported in more recent studies which found much higher percentages for gang activity in females in rural areas (Dukes & Stein, 2003). In past studies, females were not found to have such a large membership in gang activity, however, more current research is beginning to shed light on the idea that female gang members are more prevalent than ever before (Esbensen et al., 1999; Klein, 1995). NYGC (2007) found that the percentage of female gang members in the general population is higher in smaller cities and highest in rural areas compared to urban areas. In this study, Mexican American males were more likely to be in a gang than were females, but when analysis were run on males and females separately, age was significantly associated with female gang membership.

Gang members have also reported significantly higher rates of marijuana and other illegal drug use (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993). In other studies availability of marijuana was one of the highest risk factors for gang activity (Hill et al., 1999). In this study, if Mexican American rural youth had used marijuana in the past month or had alcohol to drink in the past month, then they were much more likely to be a gang member

than if they had not used marijuana or alcohol. Drug use has already been established as an activity in urban gang members and it continues to be a significant risk factor among Mexican American gang members in rural areas.

Limitations

There are several limitations in this study. The study is primarily an exploratory, beginning phase study of rural Mexican American gang members. Therefore, the results are restricted to description and correlation rather than attribution to causal factors. Data analyzed are cross-sectional, not longitudinal and interpretation is based on correlation of variables at one point in time for participants. The researchers oversampled for Mexican American students in communities with high concentrations of Mexican American populations, thus the data are mostly from the southwestern areas of the United States. In addition, data from this study are nested, or clustered within a community or school. The data are not derived from individual data points, but clustered demographically which results in less variability among individuals. Because the individuals in this study are more alike than they are different, this resulted in an underestimation of the standard error. In this case, the data is hierarchical in nature and has two levels: individual and community, and thus should be treated as so. In future studies, data should be analyzed using a method which considers nested data and adjusts for the standard error of clustered data such as multi level modeling.

Given the ambiguity in the literature about the definition of a street gang, it should be considered that some of the participants in this study might have had a different definition of gang “membership” than the researchers in the study anticipated. The sample of rural gang members is a small sample, yet consistent with the numbers

reported in some other studies (Evans et al., 1999). In addition, data were collected from youth currently attending high schools and middle schools. Hispanic youth are at greater risk of dropping out of high school (28%) compared to their peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). The gang members in this study may not be representative of gang members who are not attending school and their perceptions may be different. This is an important limitation that should be considered in interpreting findings because the sample does not include those youth who are currently in a gang, but not attending school.

Conclusions

Mexican American youth are involved in gangs in rural American as well as in urban areas and seem to have similar characteristics when compared to those identified in past studies of their urban counterparts. The results of this study are consistent with literature on risk factors associated with urban youth, particularly involving community, school, family, individual, and peer factors (Howell, 1998a). In regard to community risk factors, this study concluded that marijuana and alcohol use are positively associated in whether a Mexican American youth is involved in a gang. While gender has been a risk factor in past literature, there is evidence that females are becoming more involved in gangs, with younger females more likely to be involved in a gang than older females. This factor may be a result of bias in the sample due to only in-school youth being included in the analyses, however. Family risk factors include the youths' perception that their parents and family care about them and those with the perception that their parents were strict were less likely to be in a gang. Family factors seem to play a very important role and it can be concluded that protective factors such as having a caring family and parents who are "strict" may deter youth from entering a gang. Individual factors such as

religion and mental health were not found to be as important as other factors in this sample. However, the individual factor of anger was related to gang activity in both males and females. Mexican American rural youth who were less angry were less likely to be in a gang. While this study did not focus on school and peer factors, many gang members in this study reported having a high number of friends in a gang.

In conclusion, many of the same risk factors for rural youth as have been reported in the literature for urban youth were found in this study and in particular, found to be important for Mexican American youth. Thus, many of the same techniques employed to deter youth from drugs, alcohol, and violence in urban areas may also be effective with gang deterrence in rural areas since these negative activities among adolescents are highly correlated.

Implications

There are numerous implications to be drawn from this research. First, further work is certainly needed to understand more about the prevalence, organizational structures, and activities of rural gangs, factors not included in this study. Research should focus on learning what compels rural youth to join gangs and on prevention and intervention strategies for these youth. Researchers should not assume that interventions aimed specifically at urban areas will also be successful in rural areas, although there appear to be numerous similarities between rural and urban gang members. It is important to gain a better understanding of rural gangs and even the gangs in a particular community. Differences in rural and urban gang members do not appear to be great based on the findings of this study, yet there may be subtle differences that can be important when planning and implementing prevention and intervention strategies. In a review of

gang program evaluations, Howell (1998a) provided recommendations for effective gang programs. He reported that no single program has proven to be completely successful because gang problems are complex and diverse, therefore it is difficult to provide suitable prevention and intervention strategies. However, he reported that three types of interventions had been shown to be effective including: those that deal with gang problems directly such as the Gang Violence Reduction Program; those that target gang problems by dealing with serious, chronic, and violent juvenile delinquency; and those that focus on reducing homicides (Howell, 1998a). These programs have been evaluated for their effectiveness in urban communities, thus it is important that future research evaluate the effectiveness of these programs in rural communities and find those that are efficacious in preventing gang activity as well as intervention for already existing gang problems.

The results of the present study suggest that parents can play an important role in preventing youth, particularly Mexican American youth from joining gangs.

Interventions, whether they are at an individual or group level can focus on helping parents provide “strict” or appropriate strategies for monitoring their children. Teaching Mexican American parents about discipline strategies, setting limits for their children, and helping them be involved in their youth’s lives can be useful in preventing future problems with drugs, alcohol, delinquency, and gang involvement. Also, prevention techniques in rural areas might focus on providing youth with alternative activities to participate in prior to their involvement in gangs. For Mexican American youth, anger management at an early age may be helpful to give youth the tools to deal with their anger and help deter them from delinquent activities such as joining a gang. Prevention

and intervention strategies should focus on the risk factors associated with gang involvement.

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Table 1

Scale Reliability

Scale	Alpha Reliability
Parental Caring	.88
Parents listen to me	
Parents spend time with me	
Parents around when I need them	
Parental Permissiveness	.84
Parents allow me to go out often as I want	
Parents let me go any place without asking	
Parents less strict than most	
Parents let me stay out late	
Family Caring	.90
Does family care about you	
Does family care what you do	
Religiosity	.88
Are you religious	
Participate in your religion	
How important is religion in your life	
Anger	.86
Quick tempered	
I get mad	
I lose my temper	
I am hotheaded	
I get angry	
Self-Esteem	.30
Proud of myself	
Able to do things well	
I feel sad	
I am smart	
Depression	.87
I feel low	
I am unhappy	
I am lonely	
I feel bad	
I am lonesome	
I am depressed	

Table 2

Demographic information for original sample

Variable	N	Frequency (%)	Mean	Standard Deviation
Sex				
Male	9213	47.8		
Female	10070	52.2		
Age			15.2	1.8
Grade			9.40	1.6
Rurality Classification				
Small Rural - Remote		6.9		
Med Rural - Rural		15.5		
Large Rural - Urban		46.0		
Metro		31.6		
Gang Membership				
Will Never Join a Gang	15244	79.0		
Used to be in a Gang	1384	7.2		
Will Join a Gang	165	0.9		
Not Member: Hang out with Gang	1779	9.2		
In a Gang Now	717	3.7		

Table 3

Gang Activity Demographics

	Will Never Join a Gang	In a Gang Now
	(n=15244)	(n=717)
Mean Age	15.10	15.16
Percent Male	54.8	72.6
Percent Female	45.2	27.4
Mean Grade	9.43	9.14

Table 4

Level of Rurality

	Males		Females	
	Will Never Join a Gang (n=6896)	In a Gang Now (n=520)	Will Never Join a Gang (n=8345)	In a Gang Now (n=196)
Small Rural - Remote	483	44	528	12
Med Rural - Rural	1067	84	1321	30
Large Rural - Urban	3080	245	3851	103
Metro	2266	147	2645	51

Table 5

Variables Related to Gang Membership

	Will Never Join a Gang (n=518)	In a Gang Now (n=518)
Rurality (Percent)		
Small Rural	10.8	10.8
Med. Rural	22.2	22.0
Large Rural	67.2	67.2
Mean Age	14.9	15.2
Mean Grade	9.3	9.1
Percent Male	72	72
Percent Female	28	28
Gotten Drunk Last Month		
None	82.2	35.1
1-2 times	10.1	23.2
3-9 times	6.1	22.1
10-19 times	0.9	9.9
20+ times	0.7	9.7
Used Marijuana Last Month		
None	85.7	30.3
1-2 times	7.1	14.9
3-9 times	3.7	13.7
10-19 times	1.2	10.2
20+ times	.8	9.6
Several per day	0	21.3
Religious		
No	16.2	31.0
Not Much	18.4	18.0
Some	41.8	36.4
A lot	23.6	14.6
Participate in Religion		
No	16.0	32.6
Not Much	26.0	24.1
Some	39.3	31.8
A lot	18.8	11.5
Important Religion in Life		
No	9.4	19.6
Not Much	11.5	18.0
Some	31.6	29.9
A lot	47.5	32.5

Parents Listen to Me	9.4	18.8
Not at all True	14.0	21.9
Somewhat True	24.8	24.7
Mostly True	51.8	34.6
Very True		
Parents Spend Time		
Not at all True	8.7	22.4
Somewhat True	17.5	2.8
Mostly True	27.6	20.5
Very True	46.1	32.3
Parents Around		
Not at all True	6.3	19.2
Somewhat True	11.8	16.3
Mostly True	16.7	13.4
Very True	65.2	51.0
Parents Allow to go Out		
Not at all True	21.6	15.3
Somewhat True	37.7	22.5
Mostly True	25.1	30.7
Very True	15.5	31.5
Parents Let Me Go Places		
Without Asking		
Not at all True	70.6	40.1
Somewhat True	19.6	25.9
Mostly True	6.1	18.7
Very True	3.7	15.3
Parents Less Strict		
Not at all True	32.0	21.2
Somewhat True	31.0	21.0
Mostly True	18.4	23.7
Very True	18.6	34.0
Parents Let Me Stay Late		
Not at all True	62.5	32.9
Somewhat True	20.0	27.3
Mostly True	9.8	15.9
Very True	7.7	23.9
Does Family Care		
Not at All	2.8	10.1
Not Much	1.3	4.2
Some	4.3	14.0
A Lot	91.6	71.7
Does Family Care What		
You Do		
Not at All	2.8	11.5
Not Much	0.9	5.3
Some	9.5	20.4

A Lot	86.8	62.7
Feel Low		
A lot	4.7	12.6
Some	13.0	17.7
Not Much	20.1	21.6
Not at All	62.2	48.1
Unhappy		
A lot	5.5	13.1
Some	16.7	24.8
Not Much	29.1	23.4
Not at All	48.7	38.7
Lonely		
A lot	5.3	10.5
Some	10.3	13.4
Not Much	19.4	17.8
Not at All	65.0	58.4
Feel Bad		
A lot	3.9	9.3
Some	16.2	20.8
Not Much	26.9	25.2
Not at All	53.0	44.6
Lonesome		
A lot	5.4	7.6
Some	9.0	12.7
Not Much	24.0	22.9
Not at All	61.6	56.7
Depressed		
A lot	4.6	10.4
Some	9.2	15.1
Not Much	19.0	19.7
Not at All	67.3	54.8
Quick Tempered		
A lot	18.2	44.6
Some	34.2	28.1
Not Much	25.7	12.2
Not at All	21.9	15.1
Get Mad		
A lot	18.0	44.1
Some	36.8	29.0
Not Much	32.5	15.3
Not at All	12.7	11.6
Lose Temper		
A lot	13.4	35.7
Some	21.7	25.5
Not Much	32.1	20.6
Not at All	32.9	18.2

Hotheaded		
A lot	6.5	18.6
Some	11.2	21.8
Not Much	23.2	20.7
Not at All	59.1	39.1
Get Angry		
A lot	13.7	35.3
Some	26.2	26.3
Not Much	36.2	22.7
Not at All	23.9	15.7
Proud		
A lot	73.5	60.0
Some	19.3	21.4
Not Much	2.9	9.6
Not at All	4.3	9.0
Do Things Well		
A lot	57.5	54.2
Some	32.2	31.5
Not Much	3.9	8.0
Not at All	6.5	6.3
Feel Sad		
A lot	6.1	11.6
Some	18.4	20.4
Not Much	26.9	24.0
Not at All	48.6	44.1
Smart		
A lot	42.5	35.1
Some	43.8	42.4
Not Much	8.3	8.8
Not at All	5.4	13.7
Like Self		
A lot	69.9	66.3
Some	20.6	18.2
Not Much	4.3	7.2
Not at All	5.1	8.2
Friends in a Street Gang		
None	67.8	5.1
A Few	27.7	10.8
Most	3.7	36.7
All	0.8	47.5

Table 6

Stepwise Logistic Regression for Males

Variables in Equation	β	S.E.	Wald	Df	p	Exp(B)	95.0% C.I. for EXP B	
							Lower	Upper
Alcohol in Last Month	.111	.032	12.358	1	.000	1.118	1.051	1.189
Marijuana in Last Month	.048	.011	18.256	1	.000	1.050	1.027	1.073
Parental Caring	-.307	.141	4.704	1	.030	.736	.558	.971
Parental Permissivness	.538	.141	14.505	1	.000	1.712	1.298	2.258
Does Family Care About You	-.644	.187	11.873	1	.001	.525	.364	.758
Get Angry	-.631	.144	19.310	1	.000	.532	.402	.705
(Constant)	2.998	.842	12.664	1	.000	20.049		

Table 7

Stepwise Logistic Regression for Females

Variables in Equation	β	S.E.	Wald	Df	p	Exp(B)	95.0% C.I. for EXP B	
							Lower	Upper
Age	-.444	.151	8.582	1	.003	.642	.477	.863
Alcohol in Last Month	.165	.084	3.872	1	.049	1.180	1.001	1.391
Marijuana in Last Month	.093	.043	4.748	1	.029	1.097	1.009	1.193
Parental Caring	-.694	.259	7.173	1	.007	.500	.301	.830
Parental Permissivness	1.112	.309	12.949	1	.000	3.041	1.659	5.574
Family Care	-.747	.364	4.207	1	.040	.474	.232	.967
Get Angry	-.653	.263	6.172	1	.013	.521	.311	.871
(Constant)	9.948	3.139	10.045	1	.002	20916.238		