

Are Gang Members Failed Members of Society? An Economic Perspective

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Abstract

This paper challenges the stereotype that gang members are failed members of society by exploring the economic factors and challenges that influence gang involvement. Through an examination of the literature, research on youth gangs and societal perceptions suggests that gang members are products of a failed society rather than inherently flawed individuals themselves. A deep understanding of nuanced motivations like belonging, protection, and economic factors is discovered through interviews and observations of gang members. The paper attempts to bridge the gap between theory and policy and advocates for strategies that address root causes rather than only bandaging the situation and perpetuating stereotypes.

I. Introduction

Within the realm of economics and crime, gang membership is a pivotal subject for investigation. This paper discusses research on the relationship between economic factors and the societal categorization of those involved in gangs and aims to challenge the notion that gang members are inherently failed members of society. The central question that will guide this paper is: Are gang members truly failed members of society? This is an important question from not only a theoretical perspective but also for its potential to inform and change policy decisions related to gangs, violent crime prevention, and rehabilitation. Cultivating a deeper understanding of the economic perspective behind criminal gang behavior is important for the goal of dismantling the stereotypes surrounding gang membership. The research discussed in this paper will critically examine existing literature and shed light on the complex dynamics found between economics, crime, and societal perceptions. Through dissection of the economic factors leading to gang involvement, this paper challenges the narrative that deems gang members as failed members of society who endanger themselves and those around them.

Existing perceptions often paint a one-dimensional picture and overlook the many complex variables that play a part in an individual's choice, or not much of a choice, to ultimately participate in a gang. Variables and factors often overlooked include but are not limited to economic, social, and environmental factors at the individual level. The research examined in this paper accounts for these complex variables and gives readers a deeper and more nuanced understanding of gang membership that goes beyond the surface level.

Again, this topic is not only important from a theoretical perspective but also from a policy standpoint. The implications of deepening understanding and attempting to change

societal categorizations of gang members can be profound when dealing with real people, especially youth. The conventional view of gang members as failed members of society can and has led to policy decisions that are misguided and inhumane. Policies surrounding gang involvement often have unintended consequences that aggravate rather than alleviate the issue. This paper attempts to bridge the gap between theory and policy by exploring research that creates a complete understanding and considers all sides of the issue.

II. Literature review

In “Youth Gangs as Pseudo-Governments: Implications for Violent Crime.” Sobel and Osaba investigate the complex relations between youth gangs and violent crime. Their central research question is: “Does the causal relationship between youth violence and gang activity flow in the opposite direction of what is commonly accepted?” They also attempt to answer “Do gangs, as protective agencies, stem from government failure to protect individuals?” They emphasize the scarcity of empirical evidence in existing literature and show that this scarcity leads to assumptions and stereotypes surrounding youth gangs. The theoretical foundation for breaking stereotypes associated with gangs and anarchy is robust but there is little empirical testing to support these lesser-known theories. Sobel and Osaba tell readers that cross-sectional survey data often fails to establish causal relationships but is so commonly used to examine gang prevalence across cities. Sobel and Osaba use the Granger causality test instead which has historically been used in other diverse fields. They use the Granger test to account for omitted variables that are not seen in other studies surrounding gang involvement. The primary dataset they use contains nine years of monthly gang membership data from the Los Angeles police department, which they mention is considered one of the only valid extensive time series available for the causality testing they want to employ. They also supplement this data with violent crime data so they can examine the causality between gang membership and criminal activities.

Sobel and Osaba’s research relates to this paper’s research question in many ways. Their research suggests that youth gangs when acting as pseudo-governments, can influence and moderate violent crime within their territories. Also in contradiction to the traditional view of gangs, they suggest that problems with youth gangs stem from a lack of social opportunities,

social organization, institutional racism, and failures of social policy. They show that street gangs often provide control and employment opportunities that are not always offered by legal institutions. They argue that an increase in violent crime leads to an increase in gang membership, not the other way around. Youths form gangs as a response to inadequate protection from their governments. Because governments don't always protect youth from other youths committing violent crimes, youths and other individuals seek protection from illegal organizations that can offer safety and protection. Sobel and Osaba show that the creation of youth gangs leads to balance and stability among youths affected by violent crimes. They argue that there are many negative unintended consequences of breaking up gangs because of the balance and stability the gangs cultivate.

Some of the shortcomings of this article can be found in the data aggregation. Because the data is aggregated at the city level and there is homogeneity among the gangs chosen for the study, there are generalization challenges. That is to say, most of the findings and conclusions from their study may only apply to the gangs they studied since they are quite similar at the operational level. However, this paper leads to very strong conclusions because of the empirical strategy used on the given dataset. Sobel and Osaba focus on addressing the issue of causation without relying solely on correlation. They also propose relevant policy implications that will be discussed further in the extensions of the literature section of this paper. This paper was convincing in presenting a novel perspective on an issue that greatly affects the lives of real individuals in society.

In "A Phenomenological Study with Youth Gang Members: Results and Implications for School Counselors." Omizo explores the experiences of youth gang members and like Sobel and Osaba, he aims to uncover a deeper understanding behind their motivations and perspectives. His

research question is “What are the experiences, motivations, and perceptions of youth gang members, and what implications do these findings have for school counselors?” He uses a phased approach to his research that includes epoche and recording, clustering, and synthesizing categories. He studies eight male adolescent gang members from a Hawaiian high school. He utilized counseling skills to establish rapport with each male, and open-ended questions in the counseling sessions were designed to explore and uncover their experiences. In his study he identified three main themes for motivation behind joining a gang: a sense of belonging, self-esteem, and protection. He found there were positive aspects of gang membership, like feeling important, helping their peers, and a sense of belonging. These aspects were difficult to access for these eight males outside the confines of a gang.

The paper has merits and shortcomings. Omizo offers a very in-depth exploration of the positive side of gang membership, giving the reader a nuanced understanding of a relatively gated topic. He also proposes implications for school counselors and how they can support gang-affiliated youth. Similarly to Sobel and Osaba’s research, it is difficult to make confident generalizations about Omizo’s study because of his small sample size. He also may have included bias in his research when working with “counseling skills” as these can vary among all counselors. Despite the shortcomings, this article provides valuable insights into the motivations, needs, and perceptions of young males in gangs. A more extensive and diverse sample could have improved the paper by addressing bias in the data collection methods. However, the paper continues to be convincing by presenting a positive narrative from the perspective of real gang members. Omizo’s research question also aligns with the research question for this paper by exploring the reasons behind gang membership, contradicting popular stereotypes associated with youth in gangs.

In “Why Children Belong to Gangs: A Comparison of Expectations and Reality.” Hochhaus and Sousa aim to understand why children join gangs through the exploration of expectations and realities associated with gang membership. Their research question is essentially the title of their paper and heavily relates to the research question discussed in this paper. In their research, Hocchaus and Sousa support the idea that gang members, especially those who join as youth are not failed members of society, but are failed by society’s limited provision of companionship, protection, and excitement.

Their study includes nine boys aged thirteen to sixteen who were members of neighborhood gangs in Los Angeles. The research consisted primarily of interviews with focuses on background, motivations, feelings about the gang, and activities within the gang. Through their empirical research methods, Hochhaus and Sousa discovered the motivations for joining a gang included the companionship, protection, and excitement that is not otherwise offered to them. However, the study reveals that the protection offered by the gang comes with personal hazards that include violence and the fear of harm if they leave their territory.

This paper also offers limited demographic information about the subjects and contains possible bias because of the location and timing of the conducted interviews. However because of the early insights provided by this paper being published in 1987 and the in-depth exploration into the conflicting experiences of gang members, Hochhaus and Sousa’s research is beneficial overall to the scope of this paper. Their paper could be improved by providing a more extensive background of each of their subjects so we can further understand the motivations and reasonings behind joining and participating in gang activity.

In "It's Gang Life, but not as we know it: The evolution of gang business." Densley answers the research question: “How has the business aspect of gang activities evolved, and what

are the contemporary manifestations of this evolution?" He uses historical analysis, interviews with active gang members, and content analysis of media reports to understand the evolution of gang business. He examines changes in illegal enterprises like drug trafficking and explores multiple economic factors and how they impact various gang dynamics. Through his empirical methods, Densley finds a shift in gang business, from historical forms like drug sales to more complex and diverse activities such as identity theft and digital crime. This shift, Densley states, stems from economic factors like a change in the drug markets along with increased accessibility to advanced technology. Shortcomings of this study include the reliance on media reports that may introduce bias and limitations in capturing the full scope of gang activities. Also, because of the inherent nature of the interviews conducted, generalizations might be constrained and limited quantitative data may affect the strength of Densley's findings. More extensive data and a comparative approach across multiple diverse regions or gang types could contribute to a deeper understanding of the topic and strengthen the research as a whole. However, because the paper offers insight into the changing landscape of gang activity and moves beyond conventional views of gangs shared among society, the research is highly relevant to this paper. He discusses that economic factors often make gang involvement more attractive. Densley shows that gang involvement often stems from individuals searching for survival in a tough economy. The paper also utilizes a mix of historical analysis and contemporary data, contributing to a unique gang operation and involvement perspective. In addition, the paper incorporates perspectives from active gang members which adds depth and real evidence to the exploration.

In a chapter titled "Joining the gang: A process of supply and demand." in his book titled "The Handbook of Gangs" Densley answers the research question: "What are the supply and demand factors that contribute to the process of individuals joining gangs?" This question is

relevant to this paper because it aims to analyze real economic decision-making behind individuals who choose to join gangs. The question aligns with the broader scope of this paper by understanding why individuals make the choices they make and how they are not failed members of society but are often failed by the society around them. Densley uses a qualitative approach in his research, by drawing on in-depth interviews with real gang members and making observations about them. His study also explores the recruitment process of gangs and the motivations and external factors like social and economic conditions that lead to gang involvement.

Densley's research examines many theories, including the theory of structural control which suggests that gangs emerge in neighborhoods with social distance, racial and ethnic heterogeneity, and residential instability. This theory states that gangs form in the absence of social cohesion and control to provide goods and services that conventional institutions fail to provide. Densley shows that gangs are institutionalized in communities affected by joblessness and the withdrawal of working-class families. This theory and others like it that Densley examines provide a deeper understanding of gang membership and the factors that influence the presence of gangs. A shortcoming of this chapter could be found in the unbalance of the presentation of the theories. Densley doesn't mention many critiques or limitations to the theories he discusses. Despite this, the chapter offers a valuable understanding of many theories surrounding individual gang involvement and presence within certain communities. The paper was convincing in this regard but could have been improved if he offered critiques on the theories he discussed. However, within the scope of this paper, Densley's theories contradict the overall argument that gang members are failed members of society.

III. Summary and the possible extensions of the literature

The literature review shows that gang members and their relationship with societal failure is complex. The evidence found in the literature supports the idea that gang members are not inherently failed individuals, but rather products of societal failures and systemic inadequacies. Sobel and Osaba emphasize that youth gangs, when acting as pseudo-governments, form in response to a lack of social opportunities, social organization, and failures in social policy. “They claim that, especially in black neighborhoods, the street gang provides control and employment opportunities that are not provided by legally recognized institutions.” (Sobel & Osaba 998) Because youth gangs often act as pseudo-governments, there are sets of rules and punishments agreed on between these pseudo-governments. Violent crime is well moderated within these gang territories which contributes to the safety and protection of their members. Sobel and Osaba point out that their members wouldn’t otherwise receive this protection from public governments, which is often the deciding factor in gang membership. “There is a common misperception in society that only the government can provide peace and order. In fact, according to Reuter(1983), conflicts in an organized crime setting are usually settled peacefully. (Sobel & Osaba 1001)

Expanding on Sobel and Osaba, Omizo explores the positive aspects of gang membership beyond safety and protection. He discusses how individuals with low self-esteem and no access to structured communities join a gang to find a sense of belonging and improved confidence. “The gang members felt that being a member of the gang made them feel like an important part of a group. They liked being depended upon and being able to depend on others. Gang membership made them feel important and respected by others.” (Omizo 41) These youth

resorted to joining an illegal organization in search of these feelings when other youth with more affluent backgrounds or from different regions have access to legal non-violent organizations that cultivate these feelings for them. We cannot blame youth for joining gangs in search of these feelings, because it is in their nature to do so. So many cases of gang membership stem from youth craving community and excitement that is not available to them otherwise.

Hochhaus and Sousa point out similar ideas. They argue that the fact that children even join gangs in the first place is a failure of society to provide care, companionship, protection, and excitement. “Companionship is a critical issue; members simply want more and closer friends. Protection is also important, especially for those who might appear by the way they dress, act, walk, or talk, to be members of rival gangs. Excitement fills a void for many whose lives are not as eventful as they wish.” (Hochhaus and Sousa 75) Governments that cannot offer these rights to children have unequivocally failed them. Society cannot blame children for wanting these things, especially when circumstances like absent parents, poor school systems, and other factors frequently found in low socioeconomic areas play a role.

In “Its Gang Life, but not as we know it: The evolution of gang business.” Densley addresses and challenges stereotypes by delving into the evolution of gang business beyond conventional views. He discusses that individuals often join gangs because of economic conditions that make illegal activities like gang involvement attractive and sometimes necessary. “The majority of Londoners, however, lacked the specific human capital necessary to service this new knowledge-based economy.” (Densley *Gang Life*) Here, Densley points out that in London, many citizens don’t possess the skills or resources to survive in the modern economy. Again, this proves that it is often societal failures that contribute to increased gang membership. In London, if the majority of citizens cannot participate in the economy, how can they be expected not to

resort to illegal activities to make ends meet? In a chapter titled “Joining the Gang: A Process of Supply and Demand.” in another book, Densley again challenges the notion of gang members as failed individuals by exploring supply and demand factors that motivate gang membership. He examines many theories, the most prevalent being structural control. He suggests that gangs emerge in communities that lack social cohesion and control. “Gangs, in short, supply the goods and services that conventional social institutions, such as police, families, or schools, cannot provide.” (Densley *Joining the Gang* 240) He supports the notion that gang members may be failed by their government and the institutions prevalent in their communities.

The literature opens avenues for further exploration, including policy implications, intersectionality, and comparative analyses. The research discussed in this paper heavily mentioned societal failures as a large motivator for gang involvement. Some major questions left unanswered in much of the research examined in this paper include: What are the long-term consequences of gang membership when joining at such a young age, and what are some better ways of facilitating the disengagement of members already involved? Also from the policy perspective, how can society address the systemic issues contributing to increased gang membership? Examining and proposing policies to address these societal failures is a complex and important topic for future research. Policies may look like mandatory construction of successful community centers or increased police protection in areas of heavy gang involvement. However, these proposed policies may have unintended consequences associated with them, so further research must be conducted before imposing policies in areas with high levels of gang involvement. Intersectionality is another topic revolving around gang membership that current and future researchers will certainly focus on. Racism, classism, and gender inequalities are all dimensions of societal failure that contribute to gang involvement. Future research will certainly

contain improved comparative analysis. In much of the research discussed in this paper, the data was limited to small, local samples of gangs and gang members. Because of aggregation challenges and limited demographic information, Sobel and Osaba's study and Hochhaus and Sousa's study may lead to evidence in favor of the research question. It may be true that gang members are failed members of society because not all youth from the aforementioned communities end up joining gangs despite having the same needs for community and security. However, despite the lack of in-depth comparative analysis, the literature suggests that gang members are not failed individuals but are shaped by the society around them. Future research should expand on systemic solutions and diverse perspectives to create a more complete understanding of youth and their involvement in gangs.

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