

Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency

<http://jrc.sagepub.com/>

Female Gang Involvement

G. DAVID CURRY

Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency 1998 35: 100
DOI: 10.1177/0022427898035001004

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://jrc.sagepub.com/content/35/1/100>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York

Additional services and information for *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://jrc.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://jrc.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://jrc.sagepub.com/content/35/1/100.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Feb 1, 1998

[What is This?](#)

FEMALE GANG INVOLVEMENT

G. DAVID CURRY

A review of the research literature on female gang involvement identifies three central research themes. These are the need for a feminist perspective, changes in the magnitude of the problem, and the degree to which membership can be a form of liberation. A research agenda is proposed that offers examples of how a common set of theoretical issues might guide studies of both male and female gang behavior.

Female participation in gang-related crime (Candamil 1992; Cosmos 1993; Felkenes and Becker 1995; Howell 1994), although apparently less prevalent than that of males (Curry et al. 1994; Miller 1975, 1982; Spergel 1990), has attracted much attention from policymakers, the public, and scholars. Here I review the literature on female gang involvement and set forth a research agenda that, I hope, will bring us a better understanding of male as well as female gang behavior.

THEMES IN RESEARCH ON FEMALE GANG INVOLVEMENT

Three questions have emerged from the literature on female gang involvement: (1) Is a feminist perspective required for understanding female gang involvement? (2) Is female gang involvement increasing? (3) Is female gang involvement "liberating"?

This research was partially funded by Grant No. 93-IJ-CX-0051 from the National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice, and Family Youth Services Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to Development Services Group, Bethesda, Maryland, and a subcontract between Development Services Group and the University of Missouri–St. Louis. The views are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Department of Justice, the Department of Health and Human Services, or the Development Services Group. The author acknowledges and appreciates the usefulness of the comments and criticisms on earlier versions of this article by Maria Candamil, Meda Chesney-Lind, Scott H. Decker, James Finckenaer, John Hagedorn, Jody Miller, Winnie Reed, Charles Tittle, and the anonymous reviewers.

JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN CRIME AND DELINQUENCY, Vol. 35 No. 1, February 1998 100-118
© 1998 Sage Publications, Inc.

*Is a Feminist Perspective Required for
Understanding Female Gang Involvement?*

Over time, the research on female gang involvement has moved closer to a feminist approach that involves understanding female gang participation from the point of view of the females themselves rather than from an externally imposed male perspective. A feminist perspective is one "in which women's experiences and ways of knowing are brought to the fore, not suppressed" (Daly and Chesney-Lind 1988:498). Those who pursue a feminist perspective in developing theories of criminal behavior do so under the assumption that heretofore criminological theory has been "unable to explain adequately the phenomenon of women and crime." There is also the assumption that "unwittingly" focusing on "the activities, interests, and values of men, while ignoring a comparable analysis of women" results in a perspective that is inevitably "sexist" (Leonard 1982:182). One of the strongest arguments for a feminist perspective is the comparatively narrow range of behaviors attributed to females under the male-centered perspective. From the male-centered perspective, participation in gangs is by nature a male behavior, and females can be either tools to serve the interests of male gang members or the instrument of other social institutions antithetical to male participation in the gang.

Thrasher ([1927] 1963) in his study of Chicago gangs has been praised for his appreciation of the diversity and dynamic vitality of gang life (Hagedorn 1988:84) and as "an activist, a person committed to putting what he learned into practice so that the lives of others might be improved" (Monti 1993:17). For Thrasher gang involvement was male behavior. The female gang involvement he reported (p. 151) was by the young female "tomboy" and more transient than that of men, soon giving way to a concern with "hair" and "long skirts." Thrasher's reasons for why females did not participate in gangs both have counterparts in contemporary feminist theories of female delinquency. That "the social patterns for behavior of girls, powerfully backed by the great weight of tradition and custom, are contrary to the gang and its activities" (p. 161) could be interpreted as an early presentation of gender-based subcultural theory (Brownfield 1996), and his observation that "girls even in urban disorganized areas, are much more closely supervised and guarded than boys" (p. 161) is in keeping with power control theory as an explanation of lower levels of female participation in delinquency in patriarchal families (Hagan, Gillis, and Simpson 1987).

Still, when it came to the relationship of females to gangs, Thrasher produced a male-centered perspective that was to dominate the literature for decades. Thrasher described females as either the instruments of male gang

members or the instrument of the social forces that undermine male participation. As instruments of the gang, females were portrayed by Thrasher ([1927] 1963) in terms of sexuality, "certain girls may be taken under its protection or in other cases may become members of the gang in their sexual capacity" (p. 155). His examples ranged from female participation in "orgiastic" or "immoral" gangs, "the stag party" usually involving female nude dancers (pp. 164-65), and the "gang shag" in which multiple gang members engaged in sex with the same female (p. 166). The specific way in which girls received "protection" by these activities was not made explicit. As external to the gang, females were identified by Thrasher as "the chief disintegrating force in the gang."

For the gang boy, marriage usually means reincorporation into family groups and other social structures of work, play, and religion which family life as a rule brings with it. The gang which once supplanted the home, now succumbs to it. (P. 170)

Thrasher's male-centered view of gang life was reflected in other classic studies of gangs. Two examples serve to make the point. In Whyte's (1943) study of the Norton Street Gang, his vivid images of the "corner boys" can be contrasted to his description of the Aphrodite Club. For a period of time during Whyte's observation, the Nortons entered into an alliance with the Aphrodite Club. As a result of their association with this nondelinquent female group, relations within the structure of the male group experienced strains and, in some cases, permanent rearrangements. In a comparable way, Spergel (1964) in his study of male gangs and delinquent groups in New York City neighborhoods described the females who associated with his gang members in terms of utility associated with their gender or sexuality or as a threat to the integrity of the gang through marriage. Females "played various roles, contributing highly to the maintenance of the gang-fighting system. She was the carrier of tales—the magnifier, the distorter, and fabricator of derogatory remarks which served to instigate conflict among the various clubs" (pp. 88-89). More direct participation in conflict as "weapon-bearer" or "spy" were described. As in Thrasher, women still retained a role as gang destroyers. For Spergel, "Marriage and employment, in particular, compel the patterns of orientation and behavior previously developed during the stage of adolescent delinquency to change" (p. 148).

The research of Whyte and Spergel had as a central focus male participation in gang activity, but comparable views were generated by other studies with female gang involvement as the primary concern. Two studies of female involvement in gangs were Rice's (1963) "A Reporter at Large" and Hanson's

(1964) *Rebels in the Streets*. Each elaborated on the theme that female gangs and their members are “marginal and parasitic” (Campbell 1991:17) to the greater social world of male gangs.

The shortsightedness of androcentric perspectives of female participation in gangs was revealed as research that transcended the male-centered stereotypes became available. The work of three male researchers is generally cited as beginning to transcend the male-centered stereotypes dating from Thrasher. Miller (1973) reported the results of his study of two female gangs, Brown (1977) recorded the gang-related activity of African American female gang members in Philadelphia, and Quicker (1983) studied Chicana involvement in gangs in southern California. One of Miller’s gangs, the Molls, a gang of White Catholic girls, and the Holly Ho’s, a gang of African American girls studied by Brown, were described as autonomous female gangs with their own female leadership and gang-based patterns of criminal involvement. The other gang studied by Miller, an African American gang, the Queens, and the Latina girl gangs reported by Quicker were affiliates or auxiliaries of male gangs, but sexual availability to male gang members was by no means a condition of membership as recorded by these researchers.

The argument that understanding female gang involvement required a feminist perspective was first enunciated in Campbell’s (1984, 1991) *The Girls in the Gang*. Her research was presented as a set of social biographies of three women involved in three separate female gangs in New York City from 1979 into the early 1980s. Two were Puerto Rican and the other African American. All were mothers at the time of the study. Two were involved in female auxiliaries to male gangs. One had been a member of an autonomous female gang, but she had subsequently joined a mixed-sex gang with rules supporting a hegemonic gender structure of men over women. From her research, Campbell (1991:32) arrived at two major conclusions about female gang involvement in the early 1980s. (1) “It is still the male gang that paves the way for the female affiliate and opens the door into many illegitimate opportunities and into areas that serve as proving grounds.” With some exceptions, females become involved in gang activity through male relatives or boyfriends. (2) Once involved in gangs, however, “a more visible solidarity or ‘sisterhood’ within the gang appears. A girl’s status depends to a larger extent on her female peers.” “Worth” within the gang was not a matter of relationships with males or “simple sexual attractiveness.”

Campbell’s findings were themes that had not been absent from prior work, such as that of Miller, Brown, and Quicker reviewed above. The perspectives of females, however, had never been emphasized as being so strikingly different from the perspectives of male gang members nor had the method of taking a female-based perspective been characterized as explicitly

feminist in orientation. It could be argued that as an issue or theme in research on female gang involvement, the question of the need for a feminist perspective has historically only been an issue insofar as earlier generations of male scholars ignored the issue, and, as a result of that earlier neglect, a more recent generation of scholars feels compelled to emphasize it. Whether a feminist perspective has any meaning for theory and future research on female gang involvement other than as a manifestation of generational differences will be examined below. First, though, the other themes that have characterized research on female gang involvement will be reviewed.

Is Female Gang Involvement Increasing?

A second theme in research on female gang involvement has been the issue of whether female gang involvement is increasing. This should not be confused with the more interesting theoretical question of what the correlates of changes in levels of female gang participation might be. Likewise, this question cannot be disentangled from the question of whether gang-involvement rates for females are changing proportionally to rate changes for males (Klein 1995:111). The idea that female involvement in gangs is increasing has often been taken for granted by researchers in the face of media and law enforcement declarations (Chesney-Lind 1993), but the idea's popularity has led Chesney-Lind, Shelden, and Joe (1996) to critique its validity.

Three national surveys of law enforcement agencies spanning two decades have gathered information on female gang involvement. Relying on data from six cities, Miller (1975) provided an estimate of the gang crime problem by gender that is still cited and used as a rule of thumb, when he noted, "A general estimate that gang members are 90 percent or more male probably obtains for all gang cities" (p. 23). Miller's 10 percent estimate was greater than his reported statistics for any of the cities included in his study. For example, in New York City, where half of the gangs identified by police were reported to have had female auxiliaries, only 6 percent of gang membership was estimated to be females. Computations from data gathered by a 1988 survey sponsored by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) (Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research 1993; Spergel and Curry 1993) produced an estimate of 4,803 female gang members reported for 34 jurisdictions. This was 3.98 percent of all gang members reported for these jurisdictions. The 1992 National Institute of Justice survey (Curry et al. 1994) of law enforcement agencies requested available information on female gang members from agencies in the nation's 79 largest cities and smaller cities that had been included in the 1988 OJJDP

survey. For 61 law enforcement jurisdictions reporting statistics for female gang members, a total of 9,092 female gang members was reported. As a percentage of the total number of gang members reported to the study for the nation, this came to only 3.65 percent. If, in an effort to control for law enforcement policies that officially excluded female gang members, gang members are only counted from cities reporting some number of both male and female gang members, the percentage increased to only 5.7 percent, still well below Miller's 10 percent estimate.

Another statistic that is used as a measure of increased female gang involvement is greater reported numbers of autonomous female gangs. Miller (1975:23) classified female gangs into three types: (1) female auxiliary gangs affiliated with male gangs, (2) mixed-sex gangs with both male and female members, and (3) independent or autonomous female gangs. His results indicated that by far the most common of these was the female auxiliary. Without doubt, the rarest of gangs involving females were independent, autonomous female gangs. Miller found only one in 1975. As he extended his study, Miller (1982:74) reported six autonomous female gangs in the Bronx and Queens, but few more in other locations. The 1988 OJJDP compiled reports of the existence of 22 "independent" female gangs. The 1992 National Institute of Justice national survey (Curry et al. 1994) received reports of 99 independent female gangs spread over 35 law enforcement jurisdictions in 1991. There are, however, several problems with treating these survey results from law enforcement agencies as indicative of increasing female gang involvement.

First, the data from national surveys were not derived by using comparable methodology. Miller used official data. The OJJDP survey used estimates. The National Institute of Justice survey returned to official records statistics only. Each study emphasized differences in definitions of what constituted a gang or a gang-related crime across jurisdictions and time. Only 23 of the 34 law enforcement agencies offering 1987 percentage estimates to the 1988 OJJDP survey provided official statistics on the number of female gang members in their jurisdictions to the 1992 NIJ survey. The increase for these 23 jurisdictions, over a four-year period, was from an estimated 4,803 female gang members in 1987 to a tabulation of 4,971 female gang members in 1991. Given the time lapse, the increase was not a particularly radical one. The apparent increases in the number of "autonomous" female gangs is also subject to skepticism. Klein (1995:66) has questioned the ability of police or researchers to distinguish with any accuracy differences between Miller's typology of female gangs by gender mixture. Given the absence of uniform definitions and limited law enforcement ability to get accurate internal information on gangs, it would be unwise to place too much emphasis on the

increased numbers of autonomous female gangs reported by studies of local law enforcement data. A related point is that these observed increases in statistics on female gang involvement occur within a context of even greater increases in similar statistics on male gang members. Within the context of these perceived increases in male gang participation, it might even be possible to argue that female gang participation as a proportion of male gang membership is declining.

It has also been argued that law enforcement agencies and researchers who have relied on law enforcement data have greatly underestimated the number of females in gangs. In a longitudinal survey of Denver respondents, Esbensen and Huizinga (1993) found that about 25 percent of youths self-reporting gang membership were females. This finding led Esbensen and Huizinga to suggest that the participation of females in gangs may be greatly underestimated. From her fieldwork with gangs, Moore (1991) estimated that females accounted for one third of all gang members. The difference between these survey estimates and the analyses of official records may be a methodological one. Not all delinquency is detected and not all gang members are identified by law enforcement. Given the lower levels of offending by females in comparison to males, even among gang members (addressed below), it may be that female gang members are less likely than are males to be identified as such by law enforcement agencies. Still, Curry et al. (1994:8) noted that "in a number of cities females as a matter of policy, were never classified as gang members" (p. 8). In an argument linked to the first theme about the need for a feminist perspective, Chesney-Lind et al. (1996:194) has cautioned that given the "gendered habits" of many gang researchers, gang involvement by females could easily have been undercounted in the past.

Is Female Gang Involvement "Liberating"?

The third theme that has arisen from the research on female gang involvement concerns the impact of female gang involvement on the young women participating. Is female gang involvement becoming more independent and autonomous of males? Is it in some way liberating for the females involved? Of the three themes in female gang involvement identified here, this is the only one around which a debate in the literature has arisen. From the research literature that has explicitly focused on the role of females in gangs, two divergent hypotheses have emerged. Chesney-Lind (1993) has characterized the first position as the "liberation hypothesis." The second is here labeled the "social injury hypothesis."

Campbell's (1991) conclusion that there exists among female gang members "a more visible solidarity and 'sisterhood'" (p. 31) is reached through her emphasis on how much this female independence and solidarity are reached through the diminished importance of their relationships with males. Harris (1988), who conducted in-depth structured interviews with 21 Chicana girls aged 13 to 18 who were involved in gangs in southern California, found that female members governed their own cliques and gained status through their own behavior within their cliques (pp. 125-26, 130). It is important to note that Campbell in her account of Sun-Africa and the Five Percent Nation detailed the paternalistic and sexist structure of that particular gang, and she concluded her book by emphasizing the limits of the liberation that was to be obtained through gang involvement. Harris, likewise, observed that the independence of the Chicana gang members she studied was achieved through continued resistance to recurring male gang member efforts to control and exploit them. For other research, however, the liberation hypothesis is presented with less qualification.

The two most extreme statements of the liberation theme are found in separate accounts of female gang member involvement in drug sales. Lauderback, Hansen, and Waldorf (1992) studied the Potrero Hill Posse, "a strictly independent group of young African-American women" (p. 57). Ten members of the posse were interviewed as part of a larger study of 65 gang-involved females. The evolution of the Posse paralleled Campbell's two propositions. The five posse founders learned drug selling from their boyfriends during the proliferation of crack sales in San Francisco in the late 1980s. Reportedly, the posse founders broke off on their own because they perceived the distribution of drug profits in the operation they were involved in to be unfair. At the time of the study, the Potrero Hill Posse included 22 to 23 members. Initiation into membership required having grown up in the community and proof of criminal skill through shoplifting or crack-selling ability. The major profit-making activity of the gang was a systematic and well-organized crack cocaine dealing operation.

A similar image of female involvement in gangs and drug sales was offered by Taylor (1993) from his series of case studies of female gang members in Detroit. From his analysis of gang types and infrastructure based on "structure, function, and motivation," he concluded, "Women are participating in gangs in crime as never before in urban America. And, this is not exclusive to Detroit" (p. 10). For Taylor, "A new attitude of female criminal independence is emerging. The male-female gang relationship is also being altered" (p. 23). Crucial to this change had been the involvement of female

gang members in the drug trade. According to Taylor, "The dope business has empowered young and old, female and male, in many major cities" (p. 9).

The "social injury hypothesis" holds that any benefit in personal liberation that girls may gain from gang involvement is outweighed by the social costs of such affiliation. The strongest proponent of the social injury hypothesis has been Moore (1991). Moore grounded her position in her interviews with a random sample of 156 male and female gang members from a population of members from two barrio gangs in two Los Angeles Mexican American communities. To some extent, Moore's results were in line with those of Campbell and Harris, with females having some level of autonomy within their cliques, but Moore based her conclusions about the greater impact in terms of social injury on the cumulative influence of gang involvement as female members made the transition into adulthood and the perspectives of male gang members toward female members.

Moore (1991) concluded that the damage that gang involvement did to the immediate and long-term social future of gang girls far surpassed that experienced by males in the same context. The stigma associated with gang involvement was particularly injurious to the social reputations of Chicana females. Few managed to escape drug addiction or gang life, and most of those required the assistance of marriage to a "reasonably square man with a reasonably stable job" (p. 129). Long-term harm on children was also a concern. While a majority of the male and female gang members studied by Moore ultimately had children (82 percent of the men and 94 percent of the women), the women (85 percent) were significantly more likely than the men (43 percent) to rear their children (p. 113). The women (22 percent) were more likely to report that their children had joined gangs than the men (only five percent) (p. 114).

Moore chastised Campbell for suggesting "that girl gangs have outgrown their sexist image" (p. 55). Moore herself found sexist attitudes prevalent among a majority of the male gang members and many of the female gang members whom she interviewed. Male gang members displayed one or more of three attitudes toward female gang members (p. 54). (1) Females were not considered worthy of gang membership. (2) Males should always be dominant over females in gangs. (3) Females were regarded as sexual objects for male "gang warriors." Moore even recorded several instances in which gang females supported or assisted in the rape of other female members. Moore's emphasis on social injury has received support from other researchers. In her study of female gang members in Ohio, Miller (1996) described sexist attitudes among female gang members and incidents of sexual exploitation in mixed-sex gangs. From their study of female gang members in Hawaii,

Joe and Chesney-Lind (1995) explicitly rejected the liberation hypothesis. For them, gang involvement was not an act of rebellion but an attempt of “young women to cope with a bleak and harsh present as well as a dismal future” (p. 28).

Although the disagreement between the supporters of the liberation hypothesis and the social injury hypothesis has been spirited, there is evidence for both views, and, with some reservations, there are essential elements of each from which an understanding of female, and male, gang involvement can be enhanced. The option of gang involvement for at-risk females is indeed one that may offer an opportunity for some level of “solidarity” and even limited individual liberation, while, at the same time, increasing risk of exposure to violence, loss of legitimate opportunities, and victimization by male and female gang members. From a dialectical perspective, there is really no theoretical problem in the same social activity being simultaneously rewarding and destructive. The same thing can be said about a wife in a paternalistic family structure, the worker in a capitalist economy, or the volunteer to military service (Foucault 1979). Similarly for male gang members, it may be possible that the “defiant individualist” (Sánchez Jankowski 1991) can simultaneously be the individual alienated from the community with no employment future (Hagedorn 1988).

The dialectical and contradictory nature of female gang involvement can be found even in some research supporting the liberation hypothesis. Despite the observation of Lauderback et al. (1992) that the Potrero Hill Posse was similar in nature to a family, the gang’s practice was far from being a generalized “sisterhood.” The ties that bound the posse together were business oriented and instrumental. A social by-product of the crack operation as administered by the posse was the recurring exploitation of nonposse females as “toss-ups,” women used for sex in crack houses, and as heads of household in residences used as temporary crack houses.

The dialectical interplay of liberation and social injury was especially clear in Fishman’s ([1988] 1995) observations of a Chicago female gang called the Vice Queens from her perspective as a fieldworker for the Short and Strodbeck project from 1960 to 1963. The Vice Queens were the African American female auxiliary to the male Vice Kings. In congruence with the more male-centered views of female gang participation, the Vice Queens were described in sexually instrumental roles to their male counterparts that included being available for sex—and even bearing children and working as prostitutes. They were pictured as instigating conflicts between the Vice Kings and other male gangs and serving as weapons bearers and lookouts when conflicts were most intense. At the same time, a number of Vice Queen

activities were reported that do not fit stereotypic restrictions. They engaged in property crime activities independently of the Vice Kings and participated in fighting with members of other female gangs that were independent of male conflicts. Despite, or perhaps as a result of, their sexual exploitation by the Vice Kings, a number of the Vice Queens expressed a preference for homosexual relationships with each other. Although the debate over liberation versus social injury has probably been the most spirited in the literature on female gang involvement to date, its extension, if not resolution, is discussed below as one amenable to measurement and empirical testing.

*AN AGENDA FOR RESEARCH
ON FEMALE GANG INVOLVEMENT*

An agenda for research on female gang involvement must overcome shortcomings of past research while building on the themes that have been central to that research. It should also be linked to major themes in the larger research literature on male gangs. Space prevents more than providing the simplest outline for such an agenda here.

BUILDING ON PRIOR RESEARCH

When reviews of the literature on gangs (female or male) are organized chronologically, the cyclical nature of the history of gang research is quite apparent. Nothing has characterized research on gangs more than a tendency to emphasize the degree to which each piece of research is a new "discovery" that more or less invalidates earlier efforts. Thanks to a contemporary revival of research on gangs, more is known about gangs and there is more ongoing research on gangs than ever before. Where links with earlier gang research have been made, there has been a preference to reach back to Thrasher, sometimes without a very careful reading of the original. The problems of invoking Thrasher in the case of studying female gang involvement have been noted above by emphasizing the narrowness associated with his male-centered approach.

It is important that the central themes of prior research neither be dismissed out of hand nor accepted without reservation. In particular, popular media presentations have taken for granted propositions such as increased female gang involvement, the growing violence of female gang members, and that gangs play a major role in the organized distribution of drugs. Scrutiny of the

available research literature reveals the intellectual riskiness of generalizing from such reports.

Linking Research to Theory

As noted above, gang research on males and females has been characterized by a tendency to "invent" rather than expand or integrate existing theories of gang involvement and delinquency. In too much gang research, the facts have just been too exciting to bend to the mundane demands of more rigorous theory. An effective research agenda on female, or male, gang involvement must make the transition from simply describing gang behavior to developing and testing theories about gang behavior. In so doing, it must also move toward integrating research on gangs into the mainstream of research on delinquency and crime in general. Three theoretical themes strike me as being particularly worth pursuing.

GANGS AND THE THEORY OF THE URBAN UNDERCLASS

The growth of the urban underclass (Wilson 1987) has been linked to the emergence of gang problems in Milwaukee (Hagedorn 1988) and St. Louis (Decker and Van Winkle 1996), the entrenchment of gangs in Los Angeles (Moore 1988, 1989), and the proliferation of gangs nationwide (Klein 1995:194-95). Wilson has postulated that unlike socially disadvantaged minority populations of the past, contemporary inner-city minority residents are irrevocably segregated and isolated from existing avenues of economic opportunity. The value of Wilson's theory to understanding gangs was enhanced by Bursik and Grasmick's (1993) reconstruction of Shaw and McKay's social disorganization theory. By integrating Hunter's levels of social control into social disorganization theory, Bursik and Grasmick were able to incorporate Wilson's conceptualization of the urban underclass into a community-level theory of gang problems.

A research effort that indicated the importance of macro-level social factors such as those posited by Wilson on female gang involvement was conducted by Bowker and Klein (1983). Bowker and Klein studied gang and nongang girls inside and outside the juvenile justice system. Survey results from 78 girls identified within the juvenile justice system were supplemented with official records information. Survey data were also collected from a comparison group of girls residing in the neighborhoods in which gangs were active. This second population had no record of contact with the juvenile

justice system. In all, the study compared 122 gang girls and 100 nongang girls. The survey data included the results of several batteries of psychological tests. Because they found no significant differences in keeping with psychological explanations of the etiology of female gang membership, Bowker and Klein (1983) suggested that

the overwhelming impact of racism, sexism, poverty and limited opportunity structures is likely to be so important in determining the gang membership and juvenile delinquency of women and girls in urban ghettos that personality variables, relations with parents, and problems associated with heterosexual behavior play a relatively minor role. (Pp. 750-51)

Wilson (1987:90-91) in his construction of the urban underclass theory devoted special attention to the differential impact of the social structural changes inherent in the theory on men and women. Campbell (1991:35-36) provided a good foundation for this kind of approach in her description of the way gender provided different kinds of access to the mainstream culture and economy for Puerto Rican women and men. As research efforts emerge to test the hypothetical importance of the emergence of the urban underclass on the emergence and proliferation of gang problems, it is important that this research encompass the measures of the differential impact of these social forces on males and females.

CULTURAL FACTORS AND GANGS

The influence of cultural context was stressed by Moore in her studies of Chicano gangs in Los Angeles, and its importance has not been overlooked in other research on female gang involvement in Mexican American communities. Female participation in gangs was not the primary focus of Horowitz's (1983) study of "coming of age" in a Chicago Chicano community, but her work illustrated how interpreting gang involvement for males or females required an appreciation of the cultural context of the community setting. Horowitz observed female gangs that were both affiliated with male gangs and autonomous, but in every case, female participation emerged as a form of (largely unsuccessful) struggle against male control (p. 133). Whereas male gang involvement was pictured by Horowitz as a central component of personal identity, the role of gang involvement for females was a peripheral concern subordinate to other dilemmas facing young women.

The Chicana female gangs studied by Quicker (1983) in East Los Angeles were all affiliates of male gangs with in most cases names that were feminized versions (in Spanish) of the male gang affiliate. For the "homegirls" studied

by Quicker, their role as full participants in the social life of their barrios was as important as their gang membership. The importance of cultural factors for the gang girls studied by Harris (1988) was reflected in their self-identification as *Cholas*, the female plural form of *Cholo*, a term used by Americans and more established Mexican American residents of southern California for “the poorest of the poor, marginalized immigrants” (Vigil 1990:116).

Klein (1995) has argued that a major element in the proliferation of gang problems in the United States has been the development and diffusion of a “gang culture” (p. 205). This gang culture has become integrated into a broader popular youth culture. Future research on gangs should examine ways in which such gang culture structures the relationships between, and the roles of, men and women. The research of Horowitz, Quicker, and Harris showing how gang behavior is influenced by community cultural context makes it essential that studies that focus on gender relations within gangs also be sensitive to the influences of broader cultural settings on these relationships.

GANGS AND DELINQUENCY

A recurrent finding in gang research has been higher levels of delinquency associated with gang membership. Using the Denver Youth Survey, Esbensen and Huizinga (1993) found two to three times as much delinquency for gang members as nongang members. From longitudinal survey results on a representative sample of Rochester youths, Thornberry et al. (1993) also concluded that gang-involved youths were significantly more likely to report involvement in violence and other delinquency. By following youths over time, their analysis showed gang involvement to be a transitional process with delinquent activity increasing during gang involvement and declining afterward.

Differences in levels of delinquency between gang members and nongang members has held up when gender is controlled. Relying on samples of high school students and dropouts from three cities, Fagan (1990) found that both male and female gang members had higher levels of self-reported delinquent behavior than their nongang counterparts. Although male gang members exhibited higher levels of delinquent behavior than female gang members, female gang members had higher levels of delinquent behavior than nongang males. Using the Thornberry data from Rochester, Bjerregaard and Smith (1993) systematically examined gender differences in gang involvement. Increased involvement in delinquency and substance abuse were observed for both male and female gang members in comparison to nongang members, but they found surprisingly little difference in the factors that explained male

and female gang involvement. The only major difference observed was that failure in school was a stronger explanatory variable for females than males.

Although research has demonstrated differences between gang members and other youths regardless of gender, it has also been shown that male gang members engage in more delinquency than female gang members and especially more violent delinquency. In a series of studies that have combined analysis of official records and interviews with gang members, Joe and Chesney-Lind (1995; Chesney-Lind, Shelden, and Joe 1996) found that male gang members offended more and engaged in more violence than female gang members. From the limited available law enforcement data on gang offenses by gender, Curry et al. (1994) concluded that female gang offenders were proportionally more likely to have been involved in property offenses and less likely to have been involved in violent offenses. Both Klein (1995) and Spergel (1995) have emphasized these differences in levels of violence by gang member gender by drawing attention to the extremely small portions of gang-related homicides that have been attributed to female offenders respectively in Los Angeles and Chicago in recent years. For Spergel (1995), "The youth gang problem in its violent character is essentially a male problem" (p. 58).

Two papers presented at the 1996 annual meetings of the American Society of Criminology contained empirical evidence linking gender-specific attitudes toward violence and differences in violent behavior. Chesney-Lind et al. (1996), using data from their Hawaii research, argued that females regardless of gang membership status are more likely than are males to consider specific behaviors as violent in nature. Deschenes et al. (1996) analyzed survey data on 5,935 eighth-grade students from 42 schools in 11 cities. They found significant differences between females and males in the neutralization of violence. Males were more likely than were females to accept physical violence and feel that violence was justified. Gang members regardless of gender were more likely to accept violence than were nongang members. Among gang members, differences between males and females, although not as pronounced, were still observed. In multivariate logistic regression analysis, these attitudinal differences were shown to be statistically significant predictors of levels of violent offending for the total population, for males, and for females.

A Gender-Conscious Perspective

Of the three themes central to female gang involvement identified in the first section of this article, the recognition of the need for a feminist perspective may be most important as a prelude to developing more useful theories

of criminal behavior. A review by Leonard (1982) of the major theoretical approaches to crime and delinquency, including those that had been developed from studies of male gang involvement, found anomie theory and subcultural theory (among others) inadequate to explain female criminality. Subsequent and comparable reviews reached the same conclusion (Chesney-Lind and Shelden 1992; Daly and Chesney-Lind 1988; Mann 1984). Campbell's (1984) conclusions from her review of the gang literature was a comparable revelation. This review of the literature reaches a similar conclusion that an androcentric perspective can result only in narrow interpretations that cannot encompass the empirical results of available research. A comparable example of improving the breadth of theory by the addition of a feminist perspective was suggested by Tittle (1995:22) for the study of rape. The feminist perspective defined rape as a crime of violence, an abstraction that moved rape into the same theoretical category as other forms of violent assault. Adding a feminist perspective to the study of gang involvement has resulted in similar changes in how concepts and propositions are developed that will make it possible to incorporate a greater range of themes into the research agenda on female gang involvement.

A feminist perspective brings its demands as well as its rewards. Daly and Chesney-Lind (1988) suggest that a feminist approach must deal with two theoretical problems: the "generalizability problem" and the "gender-ratio problem" (p. 517). The generalizability problem concerns the degree to which findings about male gang members can be applied to understanding and responding to female gang involvement. The gender-ratio problem concerns the differences between males and females in participating in delinquency and crime. In addition, much of what has been described as male gang involvement (Horowitz 1983; Moore 1991) can be described as "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987). The degree to which female gang involvement reflects "doing gender" from a female perspective and what this means is one that must be part of the future research agenda.

As Short (1996) noted, "Gangs probably have always been more diverse than they have been portrayed in either our limited studies or in the media" (p. xi). For Moore (1991:136-37), stereotypes that emerge from the traditional view of the gang are important tools of those who would isolate and separate gang-involved youths from the rest of society. Picturing gang members as non-White minorities is one element of creating a "social cleavage" that separates them from White, middle-class America. In the same way, picturing gangs as quintessentially male through an act of cognitive purification is likewise part of the process of social cleavage. As all-male, violent social entities, gangs can be perceived as fundamentally different from the dual-gendered society in which they exist. Attention to gender as a

variable requires "the understanding that in any community or location, men and women assume different social roles" (Weiss 1993:2). The gender-based analysis demanded by a feminist perspective, with its focus on the social roles of men and women as different, complementary, and intersecting, offers an especially useful tool for understanding the gang-related activities of females by studying the behavior of *both* men and women in gang-related roles.

REFERENCES

- Bjerregaard, Beth, and Carolyn C. Smith. 1993. "Gender Differences in Gang Participation, Delinquency, and Substance Use." *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 4:329-55.
- Bowker, Lee H. and Malcolm W. Klein. 1983. "The Etiology of Female Juvenile Delinquency and Gang Membership: A Test of Psychological and Social Structural Explanations." *Adolescence* 18:739-51.
- Brown, Waln K. 1977. "Black Female Gang Members in Philadelphia." *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 21:221-28.
- Brownfield, David. 1996. "Subcultural Theories of Crime and Delinquency." Pp. 99-123 in *Criminological Controversies: A Methodological Primer*, edited by John Hagan, A. R. Gillis, and David Brownfield. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Bursik, Robert J. and Harold G. Grasmick. 1993. *Neighborhoods and Crime: The Dimensions of Effective Community Control*. New York: Lexington Books.
- Campbell, Anne. 1984. *The Girls in the Gang*. Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell.
- . 1991. *The Girls in the Gang*. 2d ed. Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell.
- Candamil, Maria T. 1992. "Female Gangs: The Forgotten Ones." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; Administration for Children, Youth, and Families.
- Chesney-Lind, Meda. 1993. "Girls, Gangs, and Violence: Reinventing the Liberated Female Crook." *Humanity and Society* 17:321-44.
- Chesney-Lind, Meda, Marilyn Brown, and Dae-Gyung Kwack. 1996. "Gender, Gangs, and Violence in a Multi-Ethnic Community." Presented at the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology, November 21, Chicago, IL.
- Chesney-Lind, Meda and Randall G. Shelden. 1992. *Girls: Delinquency and Juvenile Justice*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Chesney-Lind, Meda, Randall G. Shelden, and Karen A. Joe. 1996. "Girls, Delinquency, and Gang Membership." Pp. 185-204 in *Gangs in America*, 2d ed., edited by C. Ronald Huff. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cosmos Corporation. 1993. *Forum on the Prevention of Adolescent Female Gang Involvement*. Washington, DC: ACE-Federal Reporters.
- Curry, G. David, Richard A. Ball, and Robert J. Fox. 1994. *Gang Crime and Law Enforcement Recordkeeping*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice Research in Brief.
- Daly, Kathleen and Meda Chesney-Lind. 1988. "Feminism and Criminology" *Justice Quarterly* 5:497-538.
- Decker, Scott H. and Barrick Van Winkle. 1996. *Life in the Gang: Family, Friends, and Violence*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Deschenes, Elizabeth, Fran Bernat, Finn Esbensen, and D. Wayne Osgood. 1996. "Gangs and School Violence: Gender Differences in Perceptions and Experiences." Presented at the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology, November 20, Chicago, IL.
- Esbensen, Finn-Aage and David Huizinga. 1993. "Gangs, Drugs, and Delinquency in a Survey of Urban Youth." *Criminology* 31:565-87.
- Fagan, Jeffrey. 1990. "Social Processes of Delinquency and Drug Use among Urban Gangs." Pp. 183-219 in *Gangs in America*, edited by C. Ronald Huff. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Felkenes, George T. and Harold K. Becker. 1995. "Female Gang Members: A Growing Issue for Policy Makers." *Journal of Gang Research* 2:1-10.
- Fishman, Laura T. [1988] 1995. "The Vice Queens: An Ethnographic Study of Black Female Gang Behavior." Presented at the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology, November, Chicago, IL. Reprinted in *The Modern Gang Reader*, pp. 83-92, edited by Malcolm W. Klein, Cheryl L. Maxson, and Jody Miller. Los Angeles: Roxbury.
- Foucault, Michel. 1979. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage.
- Hagan, John, A. R. Gillis, and John Simpson. 1987. "Class in the Household: A Power Control Theory of Gender and Delinquency." *American Journal of Sociology* 92:788-816.
- Hagedorn, John M. 1988. *People and Folks: Gangs, Crime and the Underclass in a Rustbelt City*. Chicago: Lake View.
- Hanson, Kitty. 1964. *Rebels in the Street: The Story of New York's Girl Gangs*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Harris, Mary G. 1988. *Cholas: Latino Girls and Gangs*. New York: AMS.
- Horowitz, Ruth. 1983. *Honor and the American Dream: Culture and Identity in a Chicano Community*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Howell, James C. 1994. "Recent Gang Research: Program and Policy Implications." *Crime and Delinquency* 40:495-515.
- Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. 1993. National Archive of Criminal Justice Data. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan and Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- Joe, Karen and Meda Chesney-Lind. 1995. "'Just Every Mother's Angel': An Analysis of Gender and Ethnic Variations in Youth Gang Membership." *Gender and Society* 9:408-30.
- Klein, Malcolm W. 1995. *The American Street Gang*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lauderback, David, Joy Hansen, and Dan Waldorf. 1992. "'Sisters Are Doin' It for Themselves': A Black Female Gang in San Francisco." *The Gang Journal* 1:57-72.
- Leonard, Eileen B. 1982. *Women, Crime, and Society: A Critique of Theoretical Criminology*. New York: Longman.
- Mann, Coramae R. 1984. *Female Crime and Delinquency*. University, AL: University of Alabama Press.
- Miller, Jody. 1996. "Gender and Victimization Risk among Young Women in Gangs." Presented at the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology, November 21, Chicago, IL.
- Miller, Walter B. 1973. "The Molls." *Society* 11:32-35.
- . 1975. *Violence by Youth Gangs and Youth Groups as a Crime Problem in Major American Cities*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- . 1982. *Crime by Youth Gangs and Groups in the United States*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
- Monti, Daniel J. 1993. "Origins and Problems of Gang Research in the United States." Pp. 3-25 in *Gangs: The Origins and Impact of Contemporary Youth Gangs in the United States*, edited by Scott Cummings and Daniel J. Monti. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Moore, Joan W. 1988. "Introduction." Pp. 3-17 in *People and Folks: Gangs, Crime and the Underclass in a Rustbelt City*, by John M. Hagedorn. Chicago: Lake View.

- . 1989. "Is There an Hispanic Underclass?" *Social Science Quarterly* 70:265-83.
- . 1991. *Going Down to the Barrio: Homeboys and Homegirls in Change*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- . 1993. "Gangs, Drugs, and Violence." *Gangs: The Origins and Impact of Contemporary Youth Gangs in the United States*, edited by Scott Cummings and Daniel J. Monti. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Quicker, John C. 1983. *Homegirls: Characterizing Female Gangs*. San Pedro, CA: International University Press.
- Rice, Robert. 1963. "A Reporter at Large: The Persian Queens." *The New Yorker* 39(35):153-189.
- Sánchez Jankowski, Martin. 1991. *Islands in the Street: Gangs and American Urban Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Short, James F., Jr. 1996. "Forward: Diversity and Change in U.S. Gangs." Pp. vii-xviii in *Gangs in America*, 2d ed., edited by C. Ronald Huff. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Spergel, Irving A. 1964. *Rackerville, Slumtown, Haulburg*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1990. "Youth Gangs: Continuity and Change." Pp. 171-275 in *Crime and Justice: An Annual Review of Research*, edited by Norval Morris and Michael Tonry. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1995. *The Youth Gang Problem*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Spergel, Irving A. and G. David Curry. 1993. "The National Youth Gang Survey: A Research and Development Process." Pp. 359-400 in *Gang Intervention Handbook*, edited by Arnold Goldstein and C. Ronald Huff. Champaign-Urbana, IL: Research Press.
- Taylor, Carl S. 1993. *Girls, Gangs, Women and Drugs*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.
- Thornberry, Terrence, Marvin D. Krohn, Alan J. Lizotte, and Deborah Chard-Wierschem. 1993. "The Role of Juvenile Gangs in Facilitating Delinquent Behavior." *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 30:55-87.
- Thrasher, Frederic M. [1927] 1963. *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tittle, Charles R. 1995. *Control Balance: Toward a General Theory of Deviance*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Vigil, James Diego. 1990. "Cholos and Gangs: Culture Change and Street Youth in Los Angeles." Pp. 116-128 in *Gangs in America*, edited by C. Ronald Huff. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Weiss, Carolyn. 1993, November. "Gender Research of Economic Development Planning." Presented at the Regional Research Institute, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV.
- West, Candace and Don H. Zimmerman. 1987. "Doing Gender." *Gender & Society* 1:125-51.
- Whyte, William F. 1943. *Street Corner Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wilson, William J. 1987. *The Truly Disadvantaged*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.