

## ABSTRACT

Juvenile offenders have reported higher rates of mental health problems compared to the general population. Their unique experiences and social risks factors place them at an elevated risk of mental and physical health concerns. This study further examined the relationship between gang-involvement, exposure to violence and anxiety among juvenile offenders. The study utilized secondary data from the Pathways to Desistance mixed-methods, longitudinal study. The study evaluated 1,354 juvenile offenders, ages 14-18, from juvenile and adult court systems that had committed serious offense including felonies, misdemeanor weapon offenses, and sexual assault. The original data was collected utilizing collateral interviews, official record information and self-reported techniques.

The findings in this study suggested a relationship between exposure to violence and higher anxiety levels. Furthermore, the results also indicated a significant difference of gang-involvement and exposure to violence among gender and ethnicity groups. The findings in this study features the importance of mental health services for juvenile offenders. Additionally, these findings help emphasize the significance of exploring commonly shared risk factors of juvenile offenders and implementing culturally sensitive programs and prevention strategies to mitigate further mental and physical health concerns.

## INTRODUCTION

### Significance of Study

- Higher rates of mental health problems exist within juvenile offenders compared to the general population (Wylie & Rufino, 2018).

- Their unique experiences place them at an elevated risk of mental and physical health concerns.

### Purpose of the Research

- The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between gang-involvement, exposure to community violence and anxiety among juvenile offenders

### Research Question

- What is the relationship between gang-involvement, exposure to community violence and anxiety among juvenile offenders?

### Hypothesis

- It is hypothesized that gang-involvement and higher exposure to community violence are related to higher levels of anxiety among juvenile offenders.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Consequences of Gang-Involvement

- Compared to their nongang peers, gang members have a higher likelihood of being involved in serious and violent crimes (Gillman, Hill & Hawkins, 2014).

### Exposure to Community Violence

- Adolescents that are exposed to community violence often exhibit internal and external behaviors.

### Anxiety among Juvenile Offenders

- Juveniles that experience traumatic stress are more likely to develop internalizing problems and if not dealt with appropriately could lead to developmental problems when reintroduced to environments that are stressful (Jaggers et al., 2016).

### Gaps

- Little work has been done regarding the association between anxiety, gang-involvement and community violence among juvenile offenders. Literature does not present recent studies on externalizing and internalizing behaviors among youth that have been involved in gangs or have been exposed to community violence.

## METHODS

### Research Design and Data Collection Procedures

- The design of this research study is a secondary data analysis from The Pathways to Desistance Study of 2000-2010. The original multi-site and longitudinal study was to evaluate patterns of antisocial behaviors and identify roles of developmental and social context in promoting positive change. The study also aimed to evaluate the pathways and characteristics of adolescents that successfully exited the juvenile system.
- The current study was based on the data of 1,354 juvenile offenders, ages 14-18, from two different juvenile and adult court systems in Maricopa County, Arizona and Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania.
- Baseline interviews were conducted from 2000-2003 and then ten follow-up interviews were conducted every six months (Mulvey, 2016). Baseline interviews were conducted for youths in the juvenile system within 75 days of their adjudication hearing while youths in the adult systems were conducted interviews at 90 days of their hearing.

### Sample and Sampling Method

- 1,354 juvenile offenders, ages 14-18, participated in the Pathways to Desistance study. Convenience sampling was utilized since participants were selected from juvenile and adult court systems. The research was conducted in Maricopa County, Arizona (N = 654), and Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania (N = 700). Participants eligible for the original study must have been at least 14 years of age but younger than 18 years at the time of their offense and must have been found guilty of a critical offense.

### Measures

- Items from the Exposure to Violence (ETV) inventory were utilized to measure frequency of exposure to violence (Selner-O'Hagan, Kindlon, Buka, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1998; Mulvey, 2016). Items about community violence documented both experienced and observed violence.
- Questions about gang-involvement were taken primarily from Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth, and Jang, (1994) and Elliot (1990). The questions assessed current and past gang-involvement. Additional items were explored if participants marked "yes" to "ever been in a gang." Additional individual questions included: Position in the gang/posse.
- Items from the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI) were utilized to measure anxiety symptoms within the past week (Mulvey, 2016). Answers to these questions were on a 5-point Likert scale. Statements utilized to measure anxiety symptoms included: During the past 7 days, how much were you distressed by: Feeling tense or keyed up?. Spells of terror or panic? Feeling uneasy in crowds?
- Demographic characteristics in the present study included ethnicity, gender, and whether there is a history of family members previously arrested.

## RESULTS

- Results from this study did not reveal a significant relationship between gang-involvement and anxiety.
- The results indicated a positive and statistically significant association between exposure to violence and anxiety scores. Exposure to violence was related to higher levels of anxiety.

Figure 1: Total Score of Exposure to Violence and Ethnicity

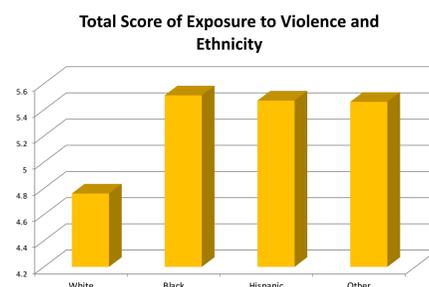


Figure 2: Total Score of Exposure to Violence and Gender

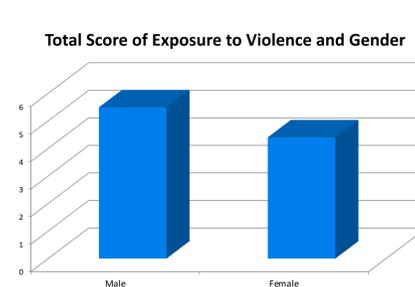


Figure 3: Anxiety Scores and Gender

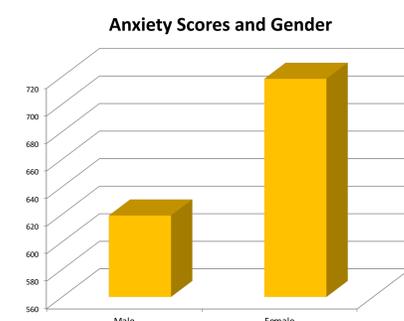


Figure 4: Gang Membership and Ethnicity

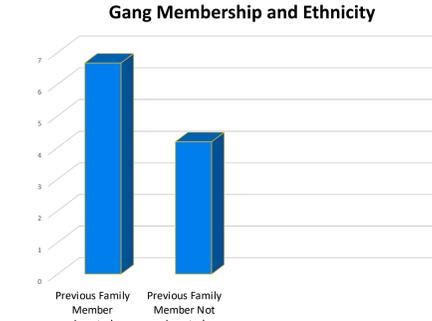
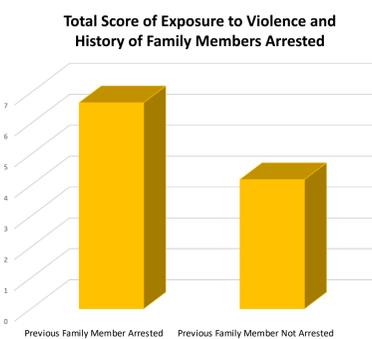


Figure 5: Total Score of Exposure to Violence and History of Family Members Previously Arrested



## DISCUSSION

### Summary of Findings

- Exposure to violence scores of study participants from different positions in a gang did not differ significantly. There was not a statistical difference between anxiety scores of participants who held higher levels of positions in gangs.
- Results indicated a statistical relationship between exposure to community violence and higher levels of anxiety among juvenile offenders. Results also indicated a significant difference of exposure to violence and gang-involvement amongst ethnicity and gender groups.

### Practice and Policy Implications

- It is vital to provide greater attention to evidence-based programs and mental health treatment in the juvenile justice systems. Implications from this study include an increase in funding for mental health services to provide adequate assessments and support for juveniles that have been impacted by social risk factors like exposure to violence and/or gang involvement. To address gang-involvement, exposure to violence and anxiety within juvenile offenders, providing culturally sensitive programs and prevention programs can help intervene any further physical and mental health risks and concerns.

### Strength

- One strength of this study is the large sample and collection of background characteristics of juvenile offenders.

### Limitations

- Since the data collected was secondary and cross-sectional data, causality could not be inferred. The self-reporting techniques and convenience sampling method utilized from the original data allows for possible bias in data collection. As a result of convenience sampling and the different locations of data collection, it is difficult to generalize the outcomes of this study. The use of self-report surveys present the possibility that juvenile offenders may have been reluctant to report gang-involvement. Due to the few responses for gang-involvement, it can be suggested that important information about the effects of gang involvement were overlooked.

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