The Relationship between Gang-Involvement, Exposure to Community Violence and Anxiety among Juvenile Offenders
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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 two different juvenile and adult court systems in Maricopa County, Arizona and Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania.

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. 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. The design of this research study is a secondary data analysis from The Pathways to Desistance Study of 2000-2010. The use of self-collection, it is difficult to generalize the outcomes of this study. Limitations include the few responses for gang involvement. Due to the few responses for gang involvement, it is difficult to generalize the outcomes of this study.

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 system 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/purse?

Results from this study did not reveal a significant relationship between exposure to violence and anxiety scores. Exposure to violence was related to higher levels of anxiety.

RESULTS

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

- 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.

Practical 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.

Strengths

- 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.

REFERENCES


