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Do Youths Lacking Proper Adult Role Models, Guidance, and Supervision, Respond to the Stresses of their Transition from Adolescents to Adulthood, with Gang Membership?

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Introduction

The source of street gangs has been a widely debated topic for years. Originating in the Five-Points area of New York City since the 1800s, Forty-Thieves is thought to have been the first youth street gang. Since this time, youth street gangs have emerged in numerous U.S. cities and more recently have even spread to suburban and rural areas. Researchers who study this phenomenon have looked to topics such as immigration, ethnicity, and poverty as possible explanations.

Although New York City was much smaller at the turn of the 1800s, in many ways the city was similar to what we see today. At this time, the city was experiencing a growing immigration population who came to America seeking work and prosperity. This forced many immigrants to compete for limited low-paying jobs and to work long hours in factories, which left their children unsupervised in this new world. In addition, these children were exposed to a variety of social ills such as overcrowding, discrimination, and filth and were witness to the struggles for jobs, inadequate education, and illiteracy amongst those they encountered. In some instances, these children responded by banning together in order to attain food, protection, a sense of family, or just to pass the time.

With a description such as this, one can notice that these ordeals must have been strenuous on these youth. Strain theorists, such as Robert Merton, Albert Cohen, Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin, and contemporary theorist, Robert Agnew, would come to view the formation of gangs as an adaptation to the ills of the inner-city (Agnew, 2009; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1960; Merton, 1959). They would hold that past and present youth gang members have experienced strenuous events that make them more prone to crime, and for the case of this paper, to join street gangs.

Although this argument makes sense on the surface, when looked into further a different picture is painted. If gangs are a response or adaptation to the stress of these social ills, then why is this same inner-city problem now present in suburbia? The emergence of street gangs in rural and suburban areas challenges the traditional thoughts of gangs as a response to poverty, heterogeneity, high residential mobility, lagging traditional institutions, or other problems thought to plague the inner-city (Shaw & Mckay, 1942). Instead, it suggests that either these same ills have penetrated our perceived "safe-haven" of suburbia or that there is something else going on.

In my research, I have noticed a common thread between the emergence of suburban and urban street gangs. While the common thread is strain, as noted above by strain theorists, I propose that the source of strain is not unique to the problems of the inner city, but rather to youth attempting to make the transition to adulthood without adequate supervision and adult role models. While current research on strain, adolescence, and urban gangs is in abundance, there is little academic research on the emergence and characteristics of suburban gangs.

This paper seeks to fill this void in the literature by proposing a theoretical framework for exploring the issue or suburban and rural gang membership and to propose a research strategy for testing the proposed theoretical connections. Specifically, in this paper I explore whether youths lacking proper adult role models, guidance, and supervision, may respond to the stresses of their transition from adolescents to adulthood, with gang membership. Building upon the work of previous strain theorists, I will propose a research design exploring how lacking proper guidance may result in increased levels of strain among adolescents as well as unconventional responses to such strain or stress. This paper will provide the reader with a glimpse as to not only why youths join gangs, but also whether crime is a response to strain. In addition, it will also explore reasons why individuals age-out of crime, how adult role models, or lack thereof, may influence gang membership, and why the problem of urban street gangs is spreading. Not only is this paper seeking to establish whether these relationships have any significance on the spread of gangs, but also to examine why and how the quality of these relationships affect individual decisions to join gangs and commit delinquent acts. In the next section, I further elaborate the ways in which strain, proper adult presence, and street gangs are intertwined.

Theoretical Framework

In 1927, Thrasher's research on youth gangs led him to define them as interstitial groups that form out of spontaneity, and are then integrated through conflict**Error! Reference source not found.**. These groups, according to Thrasher, develop from an inability of primary and secondary community institutions to provide opportunities and control**Error! Reference source not found.**. Primary and secondary community institutions are places such as school, church, family, media and peer groups. These institutions are expected to transmit cultural goals and values to

residents. The term "interstitial" give us a glimpse early on into a possible explanation of youth street gangs. Interstitial refers to physical areas within slum neighborhoods. In these areas, youths tend to congregate without adult supervision or other authority figures to guide their behavior. These places would be the park, sandboxes, street corners, and other areas out of adult earshot and within slums. For the purposes of this paper, this term will be used in a slightly different manner. Instead of only being ascribed to slums, this term will be used to describe areas in general that are out of adult supervision. As these children transition into adolescents, their areas of congregation change to places such as movies, roller rinks, parties and other popular hang-out spots for teens. These new arenas bring new stresses and societal expectations. These transitional stresses ,combined with the second part of the definition, referring to inadequate traditional social institutions, seems to suggest that these spontaneous play groups are responding to pressures outside of themselves, and within the neighborhood. Drawing from Thrasher's definition, one can conclude that these institutions failed to aid these youths in their transition to maturity. Although Thrasher does not state this, from a strain perspective, these gangs would be a response to the stresses of this transition.

Thrasher's study was conducted in neighborhoods characterized by deterioration, poverty, shifting populations, and residential mobility, resulting into what we would call today a disorganized slum**Error! Reference source not found.**. Although Thrasher does not specifically state how adults affect this phenomenon, one can conclude that these would be stressful circumstances for anyone, let alone a child. The various versions of Strain theory all connect such stresses to crime and the emergence of gangs, but provide a slightly different causal explanation. For example, Merton's version of strain theory assumes all American's hold the same values and goals while subcultural strain theories, such as Cohen's Status Frustration

theory suggest that subcultures arise in which members actually adopt different goals. The following sections briefly review the basic assumptions of the various forms of Strain theory.

The first of these pioneers is Robert Merton, whose *Anomie theory* proposed that America's promotion of material success is met with adaptations when the means to attain that goal are limited or unfound. This is described as a state of anomie, in which the societal goal of material success is focused on more than the means used to attain that success (Merton, 1959). In our society, "proper" means to attain this goal are education and hard work, however in American society the attainment of material success is the focus rather than how one attains it. Strain occurs when these individuals are unable to access these means, resulting in adaptations like crime or a complete rejection of the goal**Error! Reference source not found.**. Instead of being content with education and hard work, these individuals either seek material gain and status to represent success or reject the goal and result to five adaptations proposed by Merton. Individuals either are compliant with the societal goal and means, which are conformist, or they can be supporters of the goal but not the means to attain it, making them innovators. An innovator resorts to behaviors like dealing drugs, gangs, and other behaviors outside the norm to reach success. Individuals could also result to retreatism, in which they completely reject the goal and the means. These tend to be drug addicts or the mentally ill. Another adaptations people may result to is ritualism, in which one is not compliant with the goal, however they are willing to comply with the means, such as hard work. The last adaptation is rebellion, in which the means and goals are rejected in hopes for a new set of societal values. An example of this would be subcultures where individuals have established their own set of rules, values, goals, and expectations.

Cohen goes further with his *Status frustration theory*, challenging Merton's belief that individuals are frustrated because they are trying to attain material success (Cohen, 1959). Instead, Cohen suggests that lower-class males are seeking status, not money. Cohen suggests that these males are strained in their hopes to attain status amongst their peers and the outside world (Cohen, 1960).The main stage for his feat is school, however according to Cohen, these males are unable to measure up to middle- class standards due to differences in socialization (Cohen, 1960). Instead of being socialized into middle-class values, such as delayed gratification, self-control, and conventional success, these individuals adapt to their "failure" in these traditional middle class settings by developing their own set of values and goals. Cohen refers to this subculture as literally "spitting in the face" of conventional standards. Thus, if the middle class values school, these youth will not. If the middle class values peaceful solutions to a problem, these youth will favor violence. In more recent years scholars such as Elijah Anderson (1994) have described this set of goals and values as "Street-Culture."

Cloward and Ohlin (1960) also look at strain and socialization as sources of gang membership. However, they propose its effects in a different manner. These scholars questioned the notion that strained individuals will automatically respond with crime. Instead they held that these individuals needed to be presented with illegitimate opportunity structures, in order to acquire or learn deviant behavior (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960). An illegitimate opportunity structure is one that facilitates and develops unconventional societal means. For example, if one is unable to attain success through a legitimate opportunity structure, such as school, in order for them to turn to an illegitimate structure such as gangs, they would need gangs be present. Instead of utilizing traditional education system to attain material success, these individuals would use gangs. Depending on the context of the neighborhood, individuals would either respond with

6

criminal, conflict, or retreatist behavior (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960). Criminal gangs develop in more organized areas, and aim at the goal of conventional society through unconventional avenues. Conflict gangs develop in disorganized areas, in which the main goal or focus is establishing a reputation through fighting since there is limited access to illegitimate or legitimate structures. This also holds in line with Miller's theory, and like Miller, it does not explain how these same gangs are present in suburban and rural areas. Retreatist gangs turn to drug use, rejecting the societal goal. These individuals have access to both legitimate and illegitimate opportunity structures, however they have not had success in either avenue.

Going back to Miller's *Lower-class Focal Concerns Theory,* in which the conditions of these slums result in a subculture with an alternative set of values, goals, and means of attainment (Miller W. , 1958). This subculture focuses on being tough, getting into or out of trouble, not allowing anyone to get over, thrill seeking, and autonomy. These individuals also have a lack of hope or uncertainty for their future (Miller W. , 1958).

Although many of these characteristics are important to the explanation of gang membership, this theory poses coping mechanisms to the strains of economic conditions, along with female-headed households (Miller W. , 1958). This lack of male role-models is important to this study since I focus on guidance. If I am correct, young males lacking adult male role models may be responding to the pressures of inadequate guidance. Young males are forced to rely on their own interpretations of masculinity. With financial pressures placed upon single mothers, youths are also more susceptible to poverty, crime, and ill-education. These strains coupled with a perceived subculture (stemming from this same issue) perpetuates violence and hopelessness as a response to all issues.

This once again opens up the question as to how a perceived urban ill, such as gangs, can emerge or spread to a suburban and rural areas, in which organization and prosperity are in plain sight. Is there a gang subculture that has been spreading, regardless of economic standing? From this perspective gangs would be a result of these concerns, and if gangs are emerging in these areas, then street gangs could not be a result of these concerns alone. The concerns also represent goals that individuals experiencing these conditions are seeking to attain, however what about youths who do not turn to deviant behavior or why youths that do not experience these conditions also turn to the same behavior? The answers to these questions may establish whether youths have the same goals of adult status attainment, and what influences their choices in this transition. Utilizing early and contemporary strain theorists, this paper will establish the goal(s) of youths, along with the coping mechanisms used to adjust to the strains, if present, these individuals experience in their transition. It will also describe the effects of adult presence in coping with these stresses or conditions.

Most recently, contemporary strain theorist Robert Agnew presents a collective view of these theories, offering what he entitles a *General Strain Theory*. This theory holds that strain is the blockage of positively valued goals, the loss of positive stimuli, and the presentation of negative stimuli (Agnew, 2009). Those that are more prone to respond with crime are those who have values conducive to criminal behavior, and also have the presence of criminal others or groups, and an opportunity for crime. Agnew also points out several possible ways to cope with strain. These strategies are cognitive, in which the individual psychologically deals with the issue, behavioral, in which the individual utilizes physical actions like stealing or overeating, and emotional, in which the individual acts directly on the emotion**Error! Reference source not found.**.

An example of emotional coping would be exercising, deep breathing, or music as an expressive outlet for the emotion(s) they are experiencing (Agnew, 2009).

As illustrated above, while each strain theory proposes slightly different sources of strain, they all also offer different descriptions of how youths adapt to strain. Although these theorist point out that strain may cause deviant behavior, they do not hold that this response will be used by youths facing these circumstances at all times. According to Agnew there are several conditions that youths need to experience which will make them more likely to respond with unconventional behavior, or crime. One condition is that the strained area is an important aspect of the individual's life. The next condition is that the individual has poor coping skills and resources**Error! Reference source not found.**. Another condition that increases the likelihood of a criminal response to strain is when the costs of crime are less and the benefits are high (Agnew, 2009). The last condition Agnew points out is that the youth may be disposed to delinquency. This proposition is a result of delinquent role models, behavioral reinforcement, or personality traits including lack of control**Error! Reference source not found.**. In the next section, this paper will explore how competent adult models, guidance, and supervision affect youths in how they cope with strain. If Agnew is correct, one would expect that all youths have strain, but that youths experiencing these conditions without proper adult guidance will have a higher probability of turning to crime, or for the purposes of this paper, street gangs.

The Adolescent Experience

In our society, the adolescence phase holds great importance. As Caldwell points out, it is a time when one not only goes through physical, cognitive, social, and behavioral maturation, but also one in which youth are expected to delay their short-term gratifications for long-term future benefits**Error! Reference source not found.**. Keating holds that adolescents are equipped with skills

or resources, however as they grow older they are taught how to channel those skills into a more specific goal or expertise (Keating, 1990). According to Sampson and Laub, culturally, these benefits or achievements are centered on a decent education (graduating high school), stable employment, adequate housing, financial support, and to sustain a family. These benefits represent stages to a successful transition into adulthood, demonstrating that one is a contributing, or from Hirchi's perspective, a more bound member of society (Hirschi; 1969).

Stemming from a control perspective, Hirschi holds that individuals are bound to society through attachment to others who conform, commitment to conventional goals, involvement in conventional activities, and an internalized belief of conventional values (Hirshi, 1969). Although this paper is coming from a strain perspective, it is important to note that control theorists assume that everyone would be criminal if he/she is not "controlled" from committing such acts. Thus, they focus on explaining sources of both internal and external control. This directly relates to Shaw and Mckay's *Social Disorganization* theory (1942), in which individuals that reside in socially disorganized areas, are not subject to external controls, thus are freer to violate social norms and commit criminal activity.

While it is important to understand why certain teens join gangs or resort to other unconventional forms of behavior, it is also important to understand why they do not. As Ianni (1989) notes, whose work will be discussed more in-depth, teens only deviate from societal norms as far as adults will allow. This suggests that there are external controls which curb teen's behavior. From a strain perspective and for the purpose of my argument, the fact that teens respond to external controls may also indicate that their behaviors are a response to external factors (goals and strains), and that this response is tailored by the control systems put in place. For teens in areas lacking these controls, it would be expected that their behaviors would not

only be counterproductive to the societal goal, but that they would also be reflective of the responses to stresses that adults within their communities utilize. For example, teens referred to as stress resilient adolescents, are those that experience significant stress, but utilize protective factors as buffers for this stress (Bowlds & Hauser, 1990). Those with extensive external support systems, such as close relationships with ministers, teachers, older friends, and peers, demonstrate positive values regardless of their circumstance (Bowlds & Hauser, 1990). These support systems represent control systems, which lay the context and examples for the teens' behavior. These close relationships may not only keep the teen in line, but may also serve as examples of positive coping mechanisms to the strains they encounter.

A successful transition and actual adult experience is measured in attainment, and is held in high-regard. This fits in line with Strain theorists' assumption of a common goal and sanctioned ways to attain it. Adolescents are expected to follow these stages, and if one is unaccomplished, the youth may encounter difficulty in the later stages of development. Sampson and Laub believe that these stages build social capital or positive relationships with individuals and institutions to improve one's quality of living. Like Hirchi's *Social Bond theory*, this concept suggest that the extent to which one is attached or invested in conventional society dictates their likelihood of conformity (Hirshi, 1969). As stated before, youths are taught and expected to be conforming individuals, however the degree to which they fulfill this is dependent on the environment they are raised in. If one is raised in what Shaw and Mckay describe as a socially disorganized area, they are more likely to encounter strain and non-conforming individuals (Shaw & Mckay, 1942). These non-conforming individuals most likely have little social capital, leaving them less invested in society, which in-turn gives them little incentive to respond to their

stresses in conventional manners. In inner-city neighborhoods, teens not only encounter these individuals on a daily basis, but are also reliant on their leadership.

Although the stages to adulthood are socially sanctioned, due to modernization there is much standardization and variability in achieving adulthood. As Kholi (1986) describes, youths are becoming less influenced and attached to their family and location, and are also experiencing standardization to their life due to institutionalization**Error! Reference source not found.**. Since the 1960s, along with the changes in the labor market, the state has begun to play a more vital and influential role in individuals lives**Error! Reference source not found.**. Now free from traditional restraints, such as family and locale, youth are expected to become their own agents in constructing their futures. In other words, youths are utilizing more pathways to attain adulthood. As more opportunities are becoming available to youth, due to historical and developmental changes, youth are re-directing their pathways to adulthood**Error! Reference source not found.**.

However, how does this effect youth with little guidance? Families set the tone for adolescent behavior, expectations, and goals. Parents and siblings serve as models for children, however as they grow older this influence dwindles as their social network increases (Entwisle, 1990). Through school, adolescents are introduced to stresses of not only preparing for their future, but also fitting-in with their peers. When youths transition from intimate elementary schools, to large less personal junior high schools, they are expected to stick-out academically and fit-in socially (Entwisle, 1990). As Shanahan points out, Western societies' schools are less structured or tailored to fit individual paths, but are geared more to reach a broader student audience. This leaves adolescents to create and direct their own path, often resulting in a delayed initiation of taking on adult roles. For example, in the 1960s, women became more career oriented, resulting in a delay of parenthood in order to attain skill sets for white collar jobs**Error!**

Reference source not found.. On the surface this seems like a great accomplishment, however according to "hurried child" theorists, little structure and high demand has been detrimental to true childhood and adolescence. Authors such as Elkind (1981) hold that too much demand is placed on children and adolescents, resulting in a blurred distinction between adults and children**Error! Reference source not found.**. Elkind argues that children are given adult-roles, exposed to adult behavior through the media, and are expected to constantly prepare for the future, while receiving little feedback from overwhelmed parents, teachers, and other adults youths encounter. Although there are gaps in Elkind's reasoning, such as the fact that the thought of a childhood is historically recent due to industrialization, changes in the labor market, and less infant mortality, his concern for the lack of structure is something to explore. With growing choices, higher demand, and more competition, one would expect that youths are experiencing a high amount of stress, however as suggested before the stress is not the problem, it is the lack of guidance.

This paper does not seek to explore whether youths are too adult-like, but rather how these factors are mediated by adult presence. It is difficult to lead oneself without proper instruction or previous leadership, along with the weight of societal expectations. According to Elkind (1981), adults help put information in perspective for youths. For example, Keating found that adolescents tend to cognitively respond to problems by focusing on the context of the situation, however when they know more about the situation they are more apt to change the solution they have either used or thought to use (Keating, 1990). He also found that these individuals cope with stress mainly cognitively, by understanding and controlling the situation through advice from acquaintances (Keating, 1990). They also feel compelled to make the proper decision by what is described as the "imaginary audience" (Entwisle, 1990). In this period,

researchers have found that youths feel that their ups and downs are the focus of everyone they encounter. The stresses of an "imaginary audience", internal and external expectations, coupled with a lack of individuals with useful advice may result in an ill transition, and if so, may explain why youths turn to themselves and each other for guidance.

If you can remember, in the beginning of the paper, Agnew's *General Strain Theory* pointed out various conditions under which youths will be more likely to respond to strain with maladaptive behaviors. These conditions centered on the importance of the area of strain, the individuals access to coping skills and resources, the costs and benefits of the behavior, and having a disposition to the observed behavior. For teens, adolescence is an important time in which youths feel everyone is watching. From the description given in the last few paragraphs, one can notice that while high expectations are placed on teens, however reaching those expectations are a difficulty due to transitions from spending majority of time at home and in intimate school settings, to less personal junior and senior high school settings. These settings not only force youths to compete for attention and access to various arenas of success, but also exposes youths to the outside world, in which not all examples of behavior are socially sanctioned.

Francis Ianni (1989) also views parents or adult-run institutions as the authority for youth behavior. Although youths may deviate from the norm, according to this perspective, they only deviate as far as adults allow**Error! Reference source not found.**. For example, as Ianni (1989) points out, peer groups are an important reference group for youths to understand who they are and how they are supposed to act, however they also are a source of anxiety and stress since youths are seeking to be accepted. On the surface it may seem that these peer groups act on their own, however their behaviors are only a response to the tone social institutions provide**Error!**

Reference source not found.. As Ianni (1989) puts it, adolescents do not generate their own norms and rules, but respond to societal norms and values. This fits in line with Merton's (1959) innovative approach, in which one adapts to their surroundings, rather than creating their own.

With that said, what if there was a complete breakdown in adult cohesion? Adolescents are given competing and conflicting messages about adulthood (Ianni, 1989). Through media culture, their own interactions with each other and adults within and outside of their family, adolescents are given multiple messages of what they are expected to make sense of. If the previous studies are correct, adolescents are expected to process all of this information and react in societally sanctioned manners. If proper adult guidance is not given to filter what they are experiencing, then youths are forced to rely on themselves and other peers in their circumstances, resulting in the blind leading the blind.

This same reasoning is explored by Chung and Steinberg (2006), who explored the relationship between parenting, peer deviance, and neighborhood factors. They found that it is not the neighborhood characteristics that determine delinquency, but the interplay of parenting behaviors, deviant peers, and neighborhood social organization. There were no significant direct links between delinquency and parenting behaviors, social cohesion, or neighborhood characteristics such as poverty or residential mobility**Error! Reference source not found.**. Instead, neighborhood characteristics or structure impact the neighborhoods ability to organize (Chung & Steinberg, 2006). The effects of social disorganization are filtered through parenting behaviors, which in turn influence time spent with deviant peers, and influence individual decision making**Error! Reference source not found.**. They also found that the link between social cohesion and delinquency was only significant when parenting is taken into consideration.

This finding is important, since it emphasizes what both Shaw and Mckay, and Sampson and Groves pose in their macro-level theories. Shaw and McKay's *Social Disorganization* theory emphasizes that it is not the community characteristics that pacifies delinquency, but rather the inability of formal and informal social institutions to exert control (Shaw & Mckay, 1942). In 1989, Sampson and Groves survey study refers to residents' ability to work together as collective efficacy (Sampson & Groves, 1989). Sampson and Groves hold that adult residents are unable to provide the proper supervision and entertainment for adolescent youth throughout the neighborhood. Collective efficacy varies depending on the neighborhood (Sampson & Groves, 1989). These theorists' findings demonstrate that it is not population characteristics that determine delinquency, placing more attention on how neighborhood characteristics shape its structural organization. This is the same notion this paper seeks to explore, however it is not the ability of adults to entertain and supervise youth that will be explored, but how adequate adult presence and cohesiveness influences how youth cope with their struggles.

It is also important to point out again that this paper seeks to explore the quality of these adult interactions. As Anderson found in his examination of "street culture", this study also concludes that not all disadvantaged neighborhoods have weak communal ties, but that some are so strong that when external social control efforts are put in place, the residents may block or interfere with them**Error! Reference source not found.**. Within the "street culture" is a "street code" in which individuals protect the neighborhood, meaning actions like "snitching" or telling, are forbidden and looked down upon**Error! Reference source not found.**. Due to negative experiences with traditional social institutions, these individuals have adapted to their struggles with rules and regulations counterproductive to conventional society (Anderson, 1994; Caldwell, Wiebe, & Cleveland, 2006). Youth are socialized, by both adults and peers, into conforming to

or against street culture, forcing many of the youth to tolerate violence, an overemphasis on material possessions, and an obligation to defend oneself and their "hood"**Error! Reference source not found.**.

This is why it is important for us to not only look at whether adult influences are present, but also what these relationships are transmitting within and outside of the neighborhood. From Anderson's (1994) study, it is apparent that stress and struggle have shaped a way of life that had transcended generations. From historical struggles within these mainly African-American neighborhoods, to mistrust of government-run institutions, these individuals have relied on their own set of values, norms, and traditions, demonstrating that this is a response to mainstream society. The sentiments of "street culture" are not only taught to youths but are observed and upheld by them as proper responses to their conflict. This demonstrates that youths observe from adults and older siblings how to respond to conflicts, and in-turn choose whether to uphold or disengage from these activities. From what Anderson (1994) has found within this neighborhood is that youths' decision to support this culture are mainly influenced by their family, but are reinforced by their encounters within the neighborhood.

Hoffman and Ireland (2004) also discovered that environmental characteristics are not a direct link to delinquent behavior. In examining the effects of opportunity structures and delinquency, as Cloward and Ohlin (1960) conclude that one has to be exposed to delinquency in order to respond with it, Hoffman and Ireland find that there are other factors to determine this. They did find that strain and heightened life events have a significant effect on delinquency. During this time, adolescents experience a host of stresses. They are not only bogged down by making the right move for their future, but they also have to encounter external pressures. In Caldwell's (2006) study, he found that African-American adolescents tend to experience a state

of hopelessness, due to personal and historical experiences, that in turn alter their perception of their future. They view their future as uncertain, warranting them to make decisions that satisfy the current need, rather than their future promise.

Uncertainty is not the only battle. As described before, peer groups and the school itself are areas of great influence for adolescents. Through these interactions, teens gain a perception of who they are to the outside world, many hoping to be accepted. Home life is also an area of distress. In less-advantaged neighborhoods, youths may be experiencing poverty, absentee parent(s), abuse, and more. This is also the time when youths are seeking autonomy from not only home, but adult's period**Error! Reference source not found.**.

Other stresses adolescents may experience stem from heightened victimization both within and outside of the family, often resulting in a weakened perception of self and mistrust of society**Error! Reference source not found.**. Perception of self and mistrust of society are important concepts in Hoffman and Ireland's study. They found that school where students perceive faculty as fair and get along had less delinquent behavior**Error! Reference source not found.**. They also found that youths experiencing strain had altered self-concepts, resulting in heightened delinquent behavior**Error! Reference source not found.**. The school's physical condition only affected delinquency in that it deterred self-concepts, which as stated before resulted in higher instances of delinquent behavior**Error! Reference source not found.**.

Desistance of criminal or delinquent behavior is also an important area to focus on. Terry Moffit introduced two types of offenders, the life-course persistent and the adolescent-limited offender. Life-course persistent offenders begin criminal behavior at an early age, peaking in the adolescent stage, and continuing their criminal behavior well into their adult life (Agnew, 2009).

An adolescent-limited offender, which is the most common path for individuals, begins their criminal acts in early adolescence and peak during late-adolescence (Sampson & Laub, Crime and Deviance over the Life Course: The Salience of Adult Social Bonds, 1990). During their adult years, adolescent-limited offenders' crimes rapidly drop and tend to remain low for the remainder of their adult-life (Sampson & Laub, Crime and Deviance over the Life Course: The Salience of Adult Social Bonds, 1990). This is another important finding since it points out that criminal or deviant behavior peaks in the adolescent phase, a time when their rate of victimization also increases. This is a key aspect for desistance theorists to understand since majority of individuals tend to age-out of crime. Building off of Hirshi's *Social Bond theory*, which suggests that individuals will commit less deviant acts if they are bound to society, Sampson and Laub explored not only the bonds individuals held, but also the quality of the bonds. They found that it was not enough for offenders to have employment or a family, but that stable employment and a strong family was more influential in deterring future criminal acts**Error! Reference source not found.**. For example, stably employed males had a 40% drop in new convictions. They also found that couples with a child had less new convictions**Error! Reference source not found.**.

Fatherhood has also been cited as a deterrent for future criminal acts. In Moloney et al. (2009) study on gang members in the San Francisco Bay Area, they found that fatherhood served as a turning point or motivation to leave or decrease their gang activity. Like Sampson and Laub, they also recognized how stable employment and family often promote internal controls. Majority of the fathers attributed their desistance to either an epiphany, being too busy as a father, or pressure from the child's mother**Error! Reference source not found.**. Many described the

change as gradual, some not completely desisting until their third or fourth child**Error! Reference source not found.**.

For the purposes of this paper, the key findings in the studies done by both Sampson and Laub and Moloney et al. provide evidence that the introduction of conventional factors play an important role in criminal desistance. Is it possible that the lack of conventional factors also plays a part in their criminal beginnings? It suggests that these individuals did not completely reject the societal goal of being a successful adult, but that they utilized different paths to get there. It also demonstrates that crime or gang membership filled a certain void in these individuals' lives. From the accounts Moloney et al. (2009) noted in their interviews with these males, they felt inadequate and detached from traditional social institutions. Some of the males felt emasculated, and saw street gangs as a way to fulfill their voids (Moloney, MacKenzie, Hunt, & Joe-Laidler, 2009). These notions easily connect back to the ideas of original strain theorists presented earlier in this paper. For example, according to Cohen (1960), this would be a result of cultural differences, in which individuals are measured by middle-class standards. These same standards of materialistic success and prestige, or status, are perpetuated throughout society, as what Merton (1959) defines as the societal goal. Cloward and Ohlin (1960) would hold that these alternative paths are a product of the opportunity structure these individuals are exposed to, determining their adaptation to the strain in trying to achieve the goal of adulthood. According to Johnson et al. (2007) study, there is a positive relationship between role transitions (graduating, parenthood, marriage) and feeling like an adult, which is strongest amongst youths with highly educated parents. These youths most likely may have been more exposed to opportunity structures tailored to achieve the societal goal and promote the proper means to attain it, possibly explaining why they associate adulthood with these transitions. Youths without college educated

parents may have less exposure to the goal and access to the proper means. This may result in frustration with their situation, and if there is an inadequate system of adults in place to guide youths through this frustration, delinquency is a possible outcome.

This does not suggest that this can only effect less privileged youth. Youths with educated parents may also feel a sense of inadequacy or detachment from society, its traditional institutions, and amongst their peers. "Hurried-Child" theorists suggest that the demands placed on middle-class children are becoming more stringent and competitive**Error! Reference source not found.**. These youths may also feel as if they do not add up to middle-class standards, also possibly explaining Johnson et al.'s (2007) finding. These youths may also be encountering a lack of guidance or adequate supervision. As will be discussed in the following sections, we will explore this as an explanation for suburban gangs. By comparing knowledge gathered from urban street gangs, I hope to illustrate the effects of strain and adult presence on delinquency, demonstrating that it is not neighborhood characteristics that determine social ills such as delinquency, but its effects that impact the amount of strain youths experience in trying to attain the societal goal of adulthood, and how adults play a role in negative coping mechanisms, such as street gangs, when obstacles are encountered while striving to reaching this goal.

Youth Street Gangs: An Urban Ill Penetrates Suburbia

In the 1890s, gang research focused on topics such as immigration, ethnicity, and poverty as the source of this phenomenon (Decker & Winkle, The History of Gang Research, 2006). Researchers hypothesized that the increasing influx of European immigrants to New York created unsuitable conditions for youths, leading to the rise of youth street gangs. Gang researchers held that the increased immigrant population in overcrowded cities resulted in a lack of activities and the difficulty many faced when trying to integrate into the American or

capitalistic economy. Urban America became plagued by discrimination, filth, declining jobs, little education, and a lack in literacy. Researchers held that these youths banned together for social and material needs, forming their own institution and rules to access what has been referred to in more recent times as "The American Dream". Later theorists such as Klein also held that gang-involved youth were responding to the external pressures of their neighborhood**Error! Reference source not found.**. According to Klein, these youths form short-lived, spontaneous groups, utilizing external sources of cohesion, such as their common experiences with poverty, unemployment, work, and family**Error! Reference source not found.**. Although these gangs began as a survival tactic, their persistence resulted in increased tension between the community and these youths, resulting in more police contact with these individuals.

Stemming from the first youth street gang, the Forty-Thieves, street gangs have increased in number. In 2008, according to the Attorney General there were more than 20,000 known gangs in the United States, with over 1 million members. Although this number may seem alarming, there are a few difficulties to assessing its validity. The first is that there is no standard definition for what a gang is. There is also no agreement on how to formally differentiate of types of gangs. For example, the Attorney General's report to Congress examines not only street gangs, but also prison gangs and motorcycle gangs. For the purposes of this paper we are focusing on youth street gangs.

The report's statistics also do not differentiate between how many of these gangs are national, regional, or local. This is important since it establishes whether street gangs have a migratory or emergent trend. It is also important to note this as a limitation to past and future studies of gangs, such as the one I am proposing.

The Attorney General's report also does not give details as to how involved the members are. For example, it would be more alarming if there were an increase in "hardcore" gang members than for what Daniel Monti (1994) describes as "wannabe" gang members. The Fremont Hustlers in Chicago, Illinois described to Fleisher the different levels of membership, ranging from praised associates to the inner-clique (Fleisher, 2006). Majority of their members are informally inducted. All one has to do is know a member of the gang, and ask them to join. Their activities center on hanging-out, partying, and an overall concern for looking out for each other (Fleisher, 2006). This is important since it not only establishes the extent of the problem, but it also provides evidence of the purpose of gangs to youths. If youths are seeking friendship and thrills, it may suggest that these youths need to have more programs and activities to guide them to more conventionally productive activities.

"Wannabe" gang members tend to only last for a year, and are not as dedicated to the group's mission (Monti, 1994). In Monti's research on suburban gangs in Fairfax School District, he noted from his interviews that wannabes were more attracted to the image and popularity of being a gang member than to the actual goal. Although this may be, the rising rates of gangs and gang membership is something that should be examined. Majority of gang involved youth last for a year (Peterson, Taylor, & Esbensen, 2004). Although this may seem like a harmless phase, gang involved youth experience heightened victimization during their membership, and continue to experience higher levels of victimization (although lower than when active) than before they began**Error! Reference source not found.**. Gang involved youth also account for 1/3 of the population, but account for 2/3 of delinquent acts, more than non-gang involved delinquents (Thornberry, 2006). Sampson and Laub hold that difficulty in early stages of youth development will affect later stages. This is important since gang-involved youth, whether "wannabes" or

"hardcore" members' lives are impacted by their membership for life. As noted before, gang –

involved youths victimization and crime rates tend not to return to the rate it was before they

joined, making it an important area to explore in adolescent development.

The perception that this phenomenon has moved to rural and suburban America is also an

area of concern. Many fear that an increase in families moving out of the inner-city and into

suburban or rural areas will result in a high gang influx. Individuals also feared that in search for

new territory or markets, gangs would pour into these areas, seeking to take over by force or by

influence (Maxson, 2006)This is the picture painted by a recent report by the Attorney General

(Attorney General, 2008). According to this report, although suburban and rural areas have

gangs, these gangs did not originate there but rather represent a spread of inner-city gangs**Error!**

Reference source not found.. The report states that urban street gangs are utilizing these areas in

order to acquire new territory, new members, new drug markets, and to avoid law

enforcement**Error! Reference source not found.**. The report suggests that this is a rapid growing

problem that is the cause for gang proliferation. However, other studies disagree.

In a study conducted by Cheryl Maxson in 2006, the authors found that 54% of the

emerging gang cities that were affected by gang migration, had local gangs before the migration

occurred, as opposed to 31% that reported migration a year before local gangs appeared. It was

also found that most cities had little migration. Maxson (2006) also found that gangs are

proliferating at an increasing, but stable rate. There is a positive relationship between population

size and the amount of gangs, making larger cities the most affected area (Maxson,2006). At the

time of the study, using data from 1996-2002, they found that while gang proliferation in larger

areas was growing, members diffused out to smaller cities and rural/suburban areas; however,

within this same time period, street gangs were in a stable phase, making the suburbs and rural

areas only brief and minimal contributors to the problem (Maxson, 2006). This is also a time when gang membership was decreasing in both urban and suburban counties (Maxson, 2006). Each of these studies point out a different aspect of gang migration and proliferation. One may receive mixed messages from these studies, however one can also conclude that gangs are not overtaking the cities, suburbs, or suburban areas at alarming rates (Maxson, 2006). However this does not mean there is not a problem with gangs or gang membership. Just because a problem is not excessive does not mean that it does not exist or impact the balance of society, which can be deduced from the facts provided in previous sections.

Now, after reading this section, one may feel bogged down with facts about gangs and gang membership. However, these facts are important to understanding not only the next section, but also provide grounding for understanding the impact of youth gangs. The facts presented provide a picture of the increase in gangs and gang membership, how we define gangs, the impact gangs have on youths and society, and the characteristics of gangs and its members. This section also illustrates the limitations and difficulties in gang research. It is important to understand these facts, in order to establish where a problem stems, whether it is an area of concern, and possible solutions for that problem. The facts presented also establish a pattern deduced from the multitude of urban gang literature, which can also be observed in the limited suburban and rural gang literature. The next section will examine accounts from both Daniel Monti's exploration of suburban street gangs, in *Wannabe: Gangs in Suburbs and Schools*, and Luiz Rodriguez' account of his life as a street gang member, in *Always Running*. Both accounts are used to compare suburban street gangs and urban street gangs, establishing that the same issue plaguing the inner-city is also present in suburbia.

Putting It All In Perspective: "Wannabes" and "Locos"

So far this paper has discussed how officials define and report gangs and gang activity, how scholars have theorized about gang activity, and the struggles and strains adolescents are proposed to face in the transition to adulthood. In this section, I delve deeper into ethnographic studies that take a closer look at the lives of gang members providing us with the youth's perspective on the lure of gang life.

In the book *Wannabe*, Monti reports qualitative findings from a series of interviews conducted with students from Fairview School District. Encompassed within this district are what is described as an "inner-ring of suburbs" or Fairview towns**Error! Reference source not found.**. Since the 1960s these towns have experienced demographic changes, shaking up the white area majority. In the late 60s, more black families (mainly middle-class) moved to Fairview (Monti, 1994). In the late 70s and 80s, less well-off black families moved, many with one adult. This caused many white families to move-out, resulting in blacks constituting 70% of the population**Error! Reference source not found.**, and minorities making up 90% of the student body**Error! Reference source not found.**. These changes resulted in tension between the remaining black students. The white male adolescent students were especially bothered, often resulting in fights to protect what they saw as an invasion of their territory. Teachers hold that black students did not introduce fighting cliques as a way to protect themselves, however they did note that they put their own spin on defending their neighborhood and pride**Error! Reference source not found.**. Before blacks came, teachers noted that white students would fight to defend the honor of their hood. This notion is similar to Geoffrey Canada's account in *Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun.* Canada describes how neighborhood boys were pushed into fights by older boys. If one would not fight,

they were a disgrace to their neighborhood, and to the outside world the neighborhood would be thought of as "punks"**Error! Reference source not found.**.

During his study, Monti noted how these fighting groups sprang up from the older boys in the neighborhood and was passed down to the younger ones. These gangs started off as play groups, and were inspired to transition into their own local gangs after being encouraged by their older siblings**Error! Reference source not found.**. Their older siblings added onto the fighting by teaching these youths how to deal drugs. In addition, older siblings also taught youths how to initiate and participate in gang activities. Many of the youth acknowledged that they had gang involved older siblings who they took lead from**Error! Reference source not found.**. As Monti discovered, most of these youths only understood gangs through the media and older adolescents. Through these channels, Fairview youths deduced their own perspective on gangs. Local gangs were structured around township, making it more important than any financial gain.

Moving as a collective unit, these individuals would organize one-on-one fights and community brawls in order to demonstrate their toughness**Error! Reference source not found.**. They used these same tactics of violence to dominate their school, gain popularity or status amongst their peers and to combat rival national-level gangs trying to overtake them (Monti, 1994). These types of gangs would be described by Cloward and Ohlin as territorial or conflict gangs. This status fits their gang typology, since these individuals have access to both legitimate and illegitimate opportunities through school, older siblings and youths, parental involvement, and other avenues. Many students expressed how they did not want to be like more serious gang, with drive-bys and random shootings. They expressed that their relatives would be a part of a rival gang just because of their location. Fighting, rather than killing, was viewed as more prestigious and acceptable. Unlike traditional gangs, this particular case seeks to defend and

27

uphold their territory, not to acquire new ones. They also are characterized by little organization, dedication (wannabes), and direction.

There were also members who spoke of desisting from the gang life, stating that it was too hard. Most of the students were considered "wannabes", however other hardcore members stated conventional reasons for wanting to leave. Many of the gangs were also involved in drug deals, however this was a secondary aspect**Error! Reference source not found.**. Many of the members cited having a legitimate job, going to college, or simply phasing out as their reasons for either leaving or contemplating leaving**Error! Reference source not found.**. They were also in fear of either being arrested or being caught by their parents, fitting in line with Ianni's discovery that adolescent peer groups only deviate as far as social institutions allow.

Rodriguez describes his neighborhood in a Los Angeles slum, as one characterized with violence, drug use, poverty, and unemployment. He and others were in constant search of ways to adapt to these conditions. Traditional institutions, like school and the police were found to be unreliable**Error! Reference source not found.**. Schools in his neighborhood provided secondary education, and were insensitive to their culture. Rodriguez gave detailed accounts on the tension within his school between whites and Mexicans. He described an instance when he was not taught English in his school for two years (Rodriguez, 2005). He also gave accounts on what is referred to as the "Tradition" within their high school. This was an annual showdown between the white students and the Mexicans, where there were continuous fights against each other (Rodriguez, 2005). Police were mainly a source of harassment and discrimination. Many utilized gangs to provide what they felt they were lacking. As Rodriguez describes, "I had certain yearnings at the time, which a lot of us had, to acquire authority in our own lives in face of police, joblessness, and powerlessness. Las Lomas was our path to that…" (113).

Las Lomas demanded more loyalty and dedication than Fairview gangs. They also emphasized toughness and the ability to defend oneself from rivals. Santos, a rival gang, was in constant competition for respect (Rodriguez, 2005). Like Fairview gangs, these gangs were based on turf, which was defended on a regular basis. These individuals utilize local dances and community events to demonstrate to the public who was tougher and deserved more respect. Younger siblings were also more prone to membership. Rodriguez referenced to several individuals who were prone to gang membership due to neighborhood or family influence. For example, Rodriguez's sister began imitating her brother's behavior. As Rodriguez describes, "…my sister Gloria, 13 years old…looked up to me. To her, I was independent…Her inexperienced mind soaked it all up" (119).

Both accounts demonstrate the foundation of this paper, strain and guidance. There are various commonalities between both experiences, providing evidence that the lack of adult guidance is problematic for the effectiveness of traditional social institutions on ensuring a successful transition to adulthood. For example, although Rodriguez had two hardworking parents, he still fell subject to the streets. This demonstrates that it is not just familial guidance, but also communal guidance that influences conventional behavior. In his neighborhood, there were inadequate adult-run institutions**Error! Reference source not found.**. Rodriguez and other youth did not have many options to turn to in order to cope with the strains of his life. Experiencing poverty, discrimination, and social rejection, Rodriguez turned to what he thought was the next best option, gangs. The same could be said for Fairview youth, who informed Monti that they knew more inadequate adults than adequate. Monti described accounts of faculty and staff buying and using drugs from students. They also expressed that their relationships with adults were a source of strain, and that adults chose to ignore or remain oblivious to the gang

activity, deducing it to "kids being kids"**Error! Reference source not found.**. Youths experiencing the strains of adolescence, popularity, and acceptance expressed not having an adult they could go to in order to aid in this difficulty.

If youths are unable to get an adult ear, then who could they turn to next? From both Monti and Rodriguez, one can conclude that the next best option to these individuals is each other. As stated before, adolescents only deviate as far as adults allow**Error! Reference source not found.**. If there is little structure or consistency in dealing with problems in adolescence, it would make sense for youths to turn to either their peers or older peers. This would fit in with Chung and Steinberg's finding. They found that youths tend to commit crimes in groups. This also fits in line with Scott Decker's (1996) finding, in which gangs utilize collective deviance or behavior in majority of their processes. This collectiveness is utilized to combat actual and perceived threats, which intensifies when in public altercations, in which both Monti and Rodriguez mention in detail**Error! Reference source not found.**.

There is other evidence that guidance plays a role in coping with strain. For example, after Chente, a local activist, took an interest in Rodriguez, Rodriguez began to use more conventional methods to combat the strains he was experiencing in his neighborhood. He joined student groups such as ToHMAS, began writing poetry, and organizing plays**Error! Reference source not found.**. The same is true for Fairview youth. When they felt that they would either be arrested or caught by their parents for dealing drugs, they decided to leave the gang and pursue legal jobs**Error! Reference source not found.**. Both instances demonstrate how adult pressure or guidance influences how adolescents respond to their difficulties. With a lack of cohesion amongst adults, youths receive mixed signals as to how to process and manage strain, resulting in ill coping methods. In each account, youths expressed the obstacles in their life, and how ill-

equipped they were to deal with it. Adults provide structure due to their experiences, and if unavailable who are youth to turn to? They are either forced to rely on inadequate adults, their own reasoning, or their peers.

Along with these personal accounts, there are other studies in which members cite problems with adults, whether through the home, community, or school, as their reasoning for joining gangs. Gang involved individuals experience strain through these institutions due to a failure to meet or counsel their needs. For example, in Jody Miller's study on female gang members, the top three reasons given for joining were family problems, neighborhood or peer influences, and having family members in gangs. Each of these reasons fit in line with what is being proposed.

The family problems that were cited by teenage gang members were centered on adult competency. Many of the females noted drug or sexual abuse within the family. 58% reported drug addiction and abuse within the household**Error! Reference source not found.**. They also noted how this or other circumstances resulted in lack of supervision, lack of attachments, and violence (Miller, 2006). These led teens to feel neglected or abandoned, pushing them to turn to gangs**Error! Reference source not found.**. Many of the members also reported that associating or hanging-out with gang involved youth increases chances. They also cited that the conditions of their neighborhood or the presence of gangs was influential in their decision**Error! Reference source not found.**. For example, Traci joined her gang to fit in since she moved around a lot**Error! Reference source not found.**. Miller also found that over 52% of the members moved within a year or two years prior to their involvement. Popularity was an underlying factor, in which gangs provided a way to fit in, demonstrating a negative coping skill to the difficulties of acceptance adolescents' experience.

If a youth is experiencing abuse within the home and feels detached, gangs would also be a response, as was cited by some of the interviewees. Gangs provide a sense of protection and inclusion. Having gang involved family members also fits in-line with what Monti noted about the emergence of street gangs in Fairview. Interviewees expressed how their clashing or detached relationships with their parents led to a closer bond with either an older sibling or another older family member who is looked upon for guidance (Miller, 2006). If this family member is gang involved, it was more likely that they would follow suit. This demonstrates that it is not only the presence of the adult, but also the quality of messages that are being transmitted by the adult or older figure of guidance. The last two reasons also demonstrate that youths find the next best individual to associate with is one dealing the same hardships or providing a solution to their strain. These coping methods may be detrimental or hinder the transition to adulthood, leading to more types of strain stemming beyond gang involvement.

Generational Cohesion Theory

The established framework has led me to the conclusion that there is a breakdown between generations, affecting the pathways youths choose in order to obtain a successful adult status. *Generational Cohesion Theory* focuses not on how strain affects adolescents' choices, but instead how adult guidance moderates the effects of strain on youths' decisions. This theory poses that strain is not the problem or driving force for ills such as gang membership, but instead that the messages and actions transmitted by adult culture are not aiding youths in their coping or adapting to strain. For example, Merton looks at society's emphasis on the goal of material success, rather than how it is attained, introducing frustration which in turn results in conventional an unconventional strategies or adaptations to attain success. The proposed theory

explores how the societal goal of adulthood for youths has placed high expectations on youths, with little guidance on proper means to obtain this goal. One would expect that with any goal there is adversity, however it helps to have a safety kit at hand with instructions.

This is the problem adolescents from inner-cities and suburban areas are facing. As established in the framework by Kholi's research, due to historical and social changes, adolescents are expected to create their own avenues to success (Kholi, 1986). While they may be provided with basic opportunity structures to reach this goal such as school, the quality of these institutions is the better question. Just as a safety kit is difficult to navigate through without proper instruction or examples of its use, the same issue is present in youths struggle for adulthood. The Sunday morning conversations with grandma or the long talks with mom or dad are missing. The student-teacher mentoring relationship or the conversations with local business owners are slowly being replaced by machines and rush. The widely held phrase, "it takes a village to raise a child" is fading in this capitalist post-industrial society. The essence of a community has slowly withered away to individualism, a world detrimental to a growing adolescent.

Forced to make sense of the world through their own conclusions drawn from the media and daily interactions, youths are responding to strain in their own sanctioned manner. Although this manner is still tailored by adult culture's thirst for materialism, these individuals have created their own culture of values and processes. Wisdom is up for-grabs, and youth gangs are providing the setting for self-gained wisdom to play out. Instead of relying on conventional society or opportunity structures put in place to provide controls and examples, youth gangs have become their own institution. These gangs provide a network of resources and opportunities, dependant on the established rules and values, while seeking to, amongst other things, eliminate

strains in adolescents lives. By providing food, shelter, money, acceptance, "employment", and other "perks", youth street gangs demonstrate an alternative path to reaching adulthood.

Like the emphasis on material goals, the attainment of a successful adulthood is reliant on symbols such as education, housing, transportation, marriage, and parenting, all demonstrating stability. From my reading, gang- involved youth are seeking the same notions of autonomy, stability, and maturity through gang life. Many of the youth described in the literature are interested in having money, buying their own clothes, appearing independent, and most of all tough or masculine. These are all qualities one can recognize as societally promoted, however the proper ways to attain them are lost in the emphasis on appearance. Youths are strained in trying to attain this goal, especially inner-city youths who are not only faced with deterioration neighborhoods, but also the average strains of adolescent hood. These individuals I would classify as high-strained youth, and would expect that the effects of adult presence would be higher, than low-strained youth (suburban youths). It is important not to ignore environmental conditions, since gang membership is still highest in inner-city areas. The fact that gang membership is higher in these areas only expresses the need to look at the quality of adult presence and the messages transmitted in order to understand the relationship between strain and gang membership.

This theory proposes that the solution to this ill is encouraging an atmosphere in which children, adolescents, young and old adults are able to come together. If adults take a more active role in mentoring youths or exude a certain character, it is possible that youths will not stray as far as they have. Even if youths do not take advantage of relationships with adult figures, they may have the proper tools through adult examples to make their own way. This would mean that programs such as Big Brothers Big Sisters or by simply internalizing and practicing the cultural

goal may decrease the probability of gang membership. Programs and actions such as these may bridge the gap making a more cohesive and less strained society. If one thinks hard enough, they may notice that it is not the times of struggle that have made them fail, but struggling alone without a foundation or support system makes failure all the more obvious. This may be the case with gang involved youth. *Generational Cohesion theory* proposes that gang membership is not an isolated phenomenon, but instead a response to the struggles of daily life and misguidance. With our generations on one page, we may be able to better guide youths through their struggles, providing a detour away from gang membership or any other negative institution that provides a sense of acceptance and shelter.

If correct, one would expect that the effects of adult presence are higher among high strained individuals than for those classified as low-strained. Now you may ask why this is. The reasoning is that if one is facing not only poverty within their home and community, and are then faced with little structure as to how to deal with the resulting issues, they will be more susceptible to gang membership than an individual with failing parents and a decent school. One would expect that the second individual has some type of hope in that their school system is decent, most likely encompassing conventional adults with more social capital to aid in their transition. The next section will propose ways to explore and test this theory, hopefully providing a better understanding of whether strain, youth development, and generational bonds culminate into or away from gang membership.

Study Design: A Work In Progress

Through literary review of personal accounts, interviews, and theoretical literature, I establish my own theory of gang membership which accounts for the spread of the phenomenon from urban to suburban and rural areas. I then use this as a framework to propose a study designed to test my theory. The study I am proposing is an explorative study, in which I seek to test my hypothesis. There are two hypotheses I will be exploring. The first is that youths with high strain and little adult influence, will have the highest probability of gang membership. The second hypothesis that I will explore is that youths with little strain and high adult influence will be least likely to join a gang.

To explore this I will conduct a cross-sectional study (subjects only studied for a set, brief period of time) that will encompass in-depth interviews from adolescents (ages 13-19) and compare their statements to young adults (ages 20-25). My unit of analysis (who I will be studying) is at the individual level, and encompasses previously mentioned age-groups. My population is adolescents and young adults, both gang and non-gang involved. My sampling frame will be lists of individuals that I will obtain from various institutions. I propose to select institutions that I believe will provide a population of adolescents and young adults representative of the population of interest. Specifically, I will obtain a list of students from Albany High School, and young adults from SUNY University at Albany. Instead of a traditional simple random sample, I will utilize a purposive sampling technique because there are various characteristics of the youth that I need to have adequately represented in my final sample in order to test my hypothesis. Purposive sampling is also helpful since this is a small study that only seeks to explore a possible explanation in hopes to create a more in-depth, conclusive, and representative study.

Because my key question of interest is gang membership and gang membership is still a relatively rare trait, I will have to oversample gang-involved youth. I will also over sample minority populations and ensure that the final sample represents youth from a variety of demographic backgrounds that represent various levels of strain. The final sample will have an equal number of gang involved individuals, former gang involved individuals, and non-gang involved individuals for a more accurate conclusion.

The age groups I have chosen are useful since at those age ranges crime, victimization, gang membership, and the influence of adults and peers are at their peak. The interview questions will be designed to explore, their definition of adulthood and status, the motives and goals of these individuals whether there is strain present, and the influence of having a significant adult presence on levels of strain and coping mechanisms. From the literature, specifically personal accounts from both Daniel Monti's *Wannabe* and Luiz Rodriguez' *Always Running*, I can conclude that the strains from adolescent hood and environmental factors or conditions, coupled with the quality of adult presence influences gang membership, however this study will allow me to explore a more conclusive answer to the proposed question.

In-depth interviews will be more useful than a general survey. With these interviews, I will be able to see if there is any validity in my thesis, however these findings cannot be generalized since will not be representative of the entire youth population. Instead, this small number of individuals will provide grounding, allowing me to assess how to better ask questions, whether this is something in which more time and resources should be put into, and what follow-up questions are needed. Follow-up questions are the main benefit of in-depth interviews, since I will have more leeway in exploring the topic. Interviews will also allow me to gather more rounded answers from the subjects. Surveys only allow the researcher to read into an answer so-

much. Answers on a scale or "yes" and "no" will not give me the proper insight I need with such an understudied topic. Reading into survey answers is also detrimental since it is from my insight, rather than being as objective as possible. Interviews do have their limitations, the main one being that I will be asking the questions. There is also a chance that individuals' answers will not be consistent or that they may chose their answers based on what they think I or the rest of the world would want to hear.

Definitions of Adulthood

The first step to establishing my theory is to explore and understand adolescents' and young adults' definition of adulthood. It is important to first establish whether adolescents do hold a common goal and whether that goal is defined the same way by all adolescents. This is consistent with the strain perspective, in which individuals hold a common goal, means, expectations, and definition of that goal. If I am correct, I would expect that both youth and young adults hold the same connotation of adulthood, and are or have aspired to attain it. I would also expect that the interviewees would define adulthood as a transition from adolescence, and that the markers of this transition will be those that have traditionally been promoted by our society. Traditional markers would be marriage, children, graduating either high school or college, a stable career and material gains (house, car, ect.). In addition, it would be interviewees would have the same expectations in attaining and maintaining their adult status. For example, I would expect that all individuals would expect a successful transition would be graduating, however I would not expect all individuals to utilize graduating as a means to transition, also consistent with Merton's definition of anomie.

The measurements used in this section would be questions like what do you consider an adult? I would also ask, who do you consider an adult and why? Another question that will be

used is what symbols do you associate with being an adult and why? If the answers are consistent with what I expect to find, then there will be follow-up questions to aid in my assessment. For the adolescent age-group, I would ask whether they are in preparation to become an adult and if they feel they are on the right path? I would also ask what they are doing in preparation, and for the older age-group I would ask whether they have prepared for their adulthood, how, and why? I would also ask the age-group whether they feel they have been successful in this transition, why they feel successful, and whether that was a goal of theirs as an adolescent? Another question the would be useful is what do youths expect adulthood to "look" and "feel" like, and for the older group I would ask what expectations did you have about adulthood as a youth, what were they and whether those expectations have been met? If they have or have not been met, why? If adult status is the common goal, I would also ask where this goal, definition, and expectations come from?

Relationships with Adults

This next section will explore the impact of adult bonds on these individuals. This will allow me to see whether there are any adult bonds, how they are viewed by the interviewees, what messages are sent through these bonds, and the effects of the relationships. Questions for the section are as follows: "Do you have relationships with adults?", "Are those relationships positive or negative?", "Do you feel the adults you are acquainted with or that you encounter are competent, helpful, role models?", "Could you give a few examples of what type of advice you have received?", "Was the area that the advice was given about important?", "Do you feel the advice was useful?", "Did you or do you reflect on their advice?", "Do you feel the advice given to you aided you in any of your goals, mainly in transitioning to adulthood?", and "Do you feel the advice given was or is societally sanctioned?".

If my theory is correct, I would expect that individuals that have positive adult relations, with competent wise adults would be those that are not gang involved. For those that are gang-involved, I would expect that they either have no adult bonds, negative adult bond, no adults present, or that those adults that are present are not competent and offer illegitimate opportunistic advice.

Strain

Another important aspect to establish is whether youths have strain and how they cope with it. I would expect that all youths are experiencing strain or have experienced it. However, I would not expect all youths to have the same response to that strain.

The following questions will be used to assess strain and its effects on youths: "Have you experienced strain or stressful situations, and if so what were those situations, and where do they stem from?", "Are the stressful events in your life resolved?", "Do you feel these events have affected your life? Positively or negatively? Long term or short term?", "How do you cope with stress?", "Have you been taught how to cope with stress, and if so what where you taught and by who?", "Do you look to anyone to aid you in dealing with stress? Who is it? How old are they? Do you feel their advice was or is effective? And what advice is given?", and "Do you carry long-lasting relationships with anyone? Could you describe the individual and the characteristics of this relationship?"

Gang Activity

In order to gain a better understanding of gang membership, and from a Control perspective, non-gang involved youth, the questions posed in this section are structured around why individuals feel they did or did not join gangs and what purpose is fulfilled within gangs. I also seek to understand external factors influencing or deterring gang membership. In order to

40

prove my theory, I would expect that individuals' decision to join or not to join would be dependent on external events provoking internal responses, leading to their ultimate decision. I would also expect that gang involved youth have more access or exposure to gangs, consistent with Cloward and Ohlin's opportunity structure proposal. I would also expect that gang-involved individuals' decision to join gangs will be influenced by a combination of stresses and lack of appropriate avenues to handle this strain. For example, I would expect gang-involved youth to join due to physical abuse at home and an inability to find help or an outlet for such a strenuous experience. Non-gang involved youth I would expect to have strain, but also to have proper coping methods in place within their community.

The first question in this section that would be asked is whether the individual is gang involved or not? I would also ask why or why not? There are also separate sets of questions I would ask current members, former members, and non-gang members (currently not involved, or never involved in any part of your life). For those that are or were gang involved, I would ask whether they knew of or had gangs present within or in close proximity to their neighborhood. I would also ask whether they knew members before joining, and whether they influenced their decision. I would also ask how did the influence their decision, if the answer to the previous question is yes. I would also ask gang involved individuals, both present and former, whether they feel they have accomplished anything in gangs, and what those accomplishments were? I would also ask what purpose gangs serve for these individuals, if any, and what purpose do they feel they served for the gang? This will help establish not only what youths are lacking and seeking for within gangs, but also how youths see themselves and their purpose.

For those individuals who are not or have not been involved in gangs, I would ask how they view gangs. I would also ask where they feel their insight or opinions come from. I would

also ask whether gangs were present within or around their neighborhood, and the characteristics of their presence (number, size, organization, actions). The next question that would be asked is why they feel they did not join gangs and whether their community / upbringing have affected this and how? The answers to this question will either refute or provide evidence for why join gangs and how community efforts effect this. I would expect that non-involved youth would not view gang in a positive light or a way to attain something. I would also expect that their answers, like gang-involved youth, will be heavily influenced by their community and presence of gangs.

In each section, the questions proposed measure various concepts of my question. It is important to follow this order to see whether further questions are needed. The questions will provide in-depth background on each aspect, creating a more valid and concrete theory. I would expect that the answers to these questions would not be heavily influenced by race, class, or gender, but instead the proposed mediating factor such as adult influence. As opposed to traditional view points, this study is not seeking to prove that certain youths are strained and have different goals, but that all are strained in pursuit of a common goal, mediated by adult influence or guidance.

Conclusion

From the information I have gathered, I can conclude that the bond between adolescents and adults is important to the decisions youths make. Adults are viewed as a source of guidance, protection, role models, and overall caregivers. When these adolescent-adult relationships fail, they result in a generational gap, leaving youths exposed to the strains of the world. Youths are left to teach themselves how to cope with and respond to stressful ills such as poverty, familial issues, uncertain futures, low self-esteem, and the reality of acceptance. These issues range from

environmental factors to the strains of growing up. With a modernized society, youths are left in the dust in pursuit of a common goal, adulthood. They are expected to make sense of the demands and expectations placed on them with little adult influence directing or filtering these messages.

In the end, gang-involved youth have created their own avenue to understand and accomplish adult status. Through gangs, youths from inner-city and suburban areas have looked to each other and the examples set by older adolescents in response to their stresses. Through the accounts provided by Luiz Rodriguez and Daniel Monti, one can notice that the motives for gang membership did not break away from traditional societal goals. These individuals noted common goals such as respect, popularity, success, masculinity, equality, and education as some of their needs. Regardless of background, these youths felt as if they could not turn to adults for help due to failed communication attempts or lack of faith in the quality of information that will be given.

These findings are the baseline for my proposed study, in which I hope to explore a new way to apply strain to gang-membership. *Generational Cohesion theory* proposes that programs geared toward mentoring and influencing youths to take more conventional paths to success and adulthood will lessen the likelihood of gang-membership. My theory also points out other ways to restore the cohesion needed between generations in order to deter deviant behavior. A restoration of communities, meaning family meals, block parties, simple friendships, and other actions that will increase communal cohesion are necessary.

Efforts such as these require more than new buildings, policies, or shiny tools. They require heartfelt action to ensure that youths understand the path to adulthood, and how to navigate through the obstacles. They require dedicated adults, willing to open themselves up to

43

youths. This may repair the bond between youths and adults, while allowing youths to trust their caregivers and protectors. This may also influence youths to follow more positive examples if there are more of them, while also decreasing the likelihood of encountering the more negative ones. Youths from both inner-city and suburban neighborhoods should be encouraged by adults to seek their help and guidance to more positive, social capital building responses to their stressful situations. Instead of providing youths with examples of how to sell drugs to gain money for better clothes, adults should demonstrate the importance of working, rather than appearance. These efforts may bridge the gap youths are experiencing, lessening the impact gangs have on our communities. Rather than seeking these spontaneous conflictual groups for their needs, youths may find more solace and comfort in following the lead of conforming adults, possibly leading to conventional decisions.

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