

ANALYZING GROUPS

from the author

I come from a small town—population: 5,000. A town where people are of similar racial, economic and even cultural backgrounds. A town where you can't drive down Main Street without seeing someone you know or walk into the grocery store without engaging in conversation. A town where a person walking down the street past 11:00 p.m. is reason for concern. This town is a far cry from Syracuse, New York. While Syracuse is surely no New York City or Los Angeles, it is plagued with its bout of "inner-city" problems, including youth gang involvement—a concept, which was once foreign in my mind, that has continued to intrigue me throughout my college career. Studying the issue through much of my course work, I've even had the unique opportunity to interview a former—and quite notorious—Syracuse gang leader. And most of my studies have focused on male gang members—until now. This paper ("Gang Girls: The Myth of Rising Equality") was my first real look into the more "feminine" side of this culture, proving to be the most interesting aspect of youth gang involvement I've studied so far.

from the professor

This assignment from WRT 205, which I title "Writing as a Researcher," was an individual research paper on a topic of the student's choice, in any appropriate genre. Allison had done a wonderful inductive analysis in an earlier project, where students created and collaboratively studied descriptions of children's "secret spaces." She showed her versatility in choosing to write a classic research paper for this project. Allison draws on a strong library research base to challenge conventional wisdom and public perception about "gang girls," refuting the myth of gang life as liberatory and showing the historical continuity of sexist roles for girls in gangs. Her argument is distinguished by its lucid prose, elegant organization, and scrupulous effort to limit and qualify claims to what the evidence could support. - Louise Wetherbee Phelps

Girl Gangs: The Myth of Rising Inequality

Comparing present-day female gang members with those from the past, some media and scholars claim that females - compared to males - are earning increased autonomy and equality on the streets

by Allison Eckelkamp

Starting in the 1980s, reports of female involvement in gangs, drug sales, and violence began to surface as a serious problem in America. To support claims of increased female delinquency, reporters and scholars often cite crime statistics or anecdotes from field studies. The reasons they give to explain this female crime wave generally fall into one of two categories: **drugs as a means for economic success** *the idea that the increased availability of crack cocaine provides economic means to poverty-ridden women suffering from the effects of urbanization and deindustrialization* and **social movements** *the idea that female “liberation” has hit the streets.*

Statistics on female crime and gang involvement may leave the public with little reason to question claims of converging levels of delinquency between males and females. In the 1980s and 1990s, studies revealed that 20 to 46 percent of all gang members were female and that up to 20 percent of urban females were in a gang (Esbensen and Deschenes 799; Miller 2). Similarly, the American Bar Association was cited in the *Tulsa World* newspaper with claims that between 1990 and 1999, drug charges against girls increased 200 percent, assault charges increased 100 percent, and aggravated assault charges increased more than 50 percent, while the percentage of charges for males decreased (Ryan).

In general, the news media call much attention to the rising female delinquent as an increasingly autonomous being who commits criminal acts without the help of males. *The Boston Phoenix* reports, “Now, many fear, more young women are adopting the rituals of gang life,” while an article in the *Christian Science Monitor* claims that female gang involvement is now a “documented problem.” The article in the *Christian Science Monitor* by Alexandra Marks features Carl Taylor, who has extensively studied female gang culture in Detroit, saying, “young women raised in a violent sexist culture have begun to turn their aggression outward.” He continues, “Young women I’m talking to in gangs are no longer willing to hold the weapon or be the mules—carry the drugs for male gang members. They’re becoming much more autonomous.” Coinciding with the notion of female liberation and increased equality in other parts of society, the media have often used the concept of “liberation” to explain the rise in female gang involvement (Miller 4; Pearson).

The liberation hypothesis as an explanation for female gang involvement and delinquency is rooted in scholarly thinking. Freda Adler, author of *Sisters in Crime*, says, “In the same way that women are demanding equal opportunity in fields of legitimate endeavor, a similar number of determined women are forcing their way into the world of major crimes” (13). Economic

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Did you know? Allison Eckelkamp was inspired to write this paper after an interview she conducted with a former gang leader of the 1970s.

factors are also cited as reasons for increased gang involvement. Arguing that “a new attitude of female criminal independence is emerging” and that the “male-female gang relationship is also being altered,” scholars like Taylor claim that an influx of crack cocaine in the mid 1980s, during a time of deindustrialization and increased poverty, provided females with incentive to take advantage of “gender-neutral” employment opportunities on the street—and continues to do so. He says, “The social structure and economic plight of Detroit and other cities play a significant part in shaping female roles and attitudes.” When the economic motive for joining is similar, gender inequality disappears (*Girls* 27).

Contradicting this idea of equality, however, is evidence that female involvement in gangs has not changed much over the years. While females may have become slightly more involved in violent- and drug-related crimes, gender-specific roles and attitudes have prevailed throughout history, making these apparent strides toward autonomy no more than baby steps. Craig Palmer and Christopher Tilley, who have studied the sexual dynamic within gangs, said that “even authors emphasizing ‘equality’ of female participation in gangs will provide evidence of fundamental differences in the motives and activities of male and female gang members” (qtd. in Palmer and Tilley 214). This paper will demonstrate the truth underlying Palmer and Tilley’s statement—that gender is as relevant on the streets today as it was in the past—and show that claims of increased female equality, autonomy, and liberation are deceiving, if not entirely false.

To support the latter claim, the paper summarizes females’ historical involvement with gangs and follows with a discussion of female gang involvement today in terms of the following categories: gang structure, reasons for joining, gang roles, and gang members’ attitudes toward females. Female equality and autonomy in gangs today will be discussed within each section, and where possible, compared to historical aspects of female gang life. Overall, the paper will demonstrate that (1) gang girls maintain many of the sexist roles they filled historically and (2) regardless of any strides they’ve made toward autonomy or equality, females maintain a level of subordination that outweighs any “progress.” The paper will close with suggestions for future research on the topic and for programs that aim to ameliorate problems associated with female gang involvement.

A Brief History of Female Gang Involvement

As early as the 1800s, females were reported to have been involved in gangs, but their level of gang involvement is unclear. This lack of clarity is due to the fact that females were not the focus of gang curiosities. Rather, female involvement was typically mentioned in passing as male gang members relived experiences for male journalists (“Female Participation” 166). Because gang life has been considered a “quintessentially male phenomenon,” most historical accounts defined gang girls as sex objects, tomboys, or “mules” who carried drugs or weapons for males, and it is unclear the degree to which these definitions are true (Moore and Hagedorn 1).

In the 1920s, most gang members were economically marginalized males who had recently emigrated from Europe (Moore and Hagedorn 3). Between the 1920s and 1940s, the role of female gang members in Detroit existed only in association with male gang members. While females were often girlfriends or relatives of male members, there is evidence that girls participated in some of the gangs’ criminal activities. According to a doorman from the 1940s, gang women were criminals who worked for pimps, sometimes “selling” or “boosting” alcohol during prohibition. This doorman, quoted in Taylor’s book *Girls, Gangs, Women, and Drugs*



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This paper combines two different critical studies, comparing a) the behavior of present-day gang girls to interpretations of their historical roles and b) the degree to which gender equality does or does not exist in gangs today. A complex examination of topics such as these will aid in a longer, more thorough examination of one’s subject.



the it. factor

A good process for writing this paper, Allison explains, is the notecard system. Researching and taking notes on notecards allows for physical organization of one's idea, as well as a more easily re-organized essay. In addition to this organization system, Allison incorporates explanations on her process and direction to help the reader follow her work. Do you think that this is an effective method to engage the reader?

said, "Maybe they weren't gangsters but some of them gals were more than just floozies. The problem is that in those days you didn't think of women as being tough enough to do business with those boys" (30-31). During the same decade, New York City experienced an increase in the number of female gangs, which existed solely in association with male gangs. Taking on feminized versions of male names, gang girls would "lure in" in younger girls for boys "with the express intention of rape," carry weapons for men because females were considered "immune" to police searches, provide alibis for male gang members, spy on rival gangs, and provide sex for male gang members ("Female Participation" 168). Interestingly, gang girls today often serve similar purposes.

In 1950s Detroit, females were also developing associations with male gangs, taking on feminized versions of male-gang monikers, such as the female "Shakerettes," who belonged to the male "Shakers." To demonstrate the difference between female gang members in the 1950s versus today, Taylor includes a quote in one of his books from a former Shakerette, who says, "Well, it's really a lot different today, you can't compare our gangs with the young jits today...girls were the sister gang...without boys, there wasn't anything" (*Girls* 33). Interestingly, most gang girls today exist in association with male-dominated crews, and many support this male dominance—a phenomenon discussed within the section of the paper titled "Attitudes about Gang Girls." The same Shakerette later contradicts herself, saying, "we were the same as the Shakers, we got drunk, smoked, had sex and would kick your ass if needed and that's the truth" (33). Similar contradictory statements are commonly made today by gang girls, who often imply gender equality in one sentence and inequality in the next (Miller 81)—a point underscoring the complexity of studying female gang involvement in both the past and present.

By the 1960s, perceptions of female gang members had not changed much. They were often viewed as unattractive, loud, and crude and as weapon carriers who competed for male attention (Miller 11). Ex-female gangster Johnnie Gladstone, who is quoted in Taylor's book, said, "In the 60s, girls had to do what the man said or get her ass kicked, but today, it's different, these young girls aren't taking no shit" (*Girls* 49). Beginning to show signs autonomy by the 1970s, females were committing violent acts independently of men in Detroit and New York, according to Taylor. By the 1980s—a time, like today, when most gang members were African American or Latino—a huge influx of crack cocaine changed females' gang role from friend or girlfriend to one of "secondary employee" or "freelancer" in the drug trade (44). This, combined with female liberation movements of the 1970s, gave rise to increased female autonomy on the streets (44). Taylor argues that today, gender is irrelevant in competent, drug-selling gangs. He says, "Female gang members and non-members are beginning to display attitudes that are diametrically opposed to earlier theories about female participation in gangs" (27). Adler agrees, saying gang girls are no longer subscribing to the sex roles prescribed by males. Unfortunately, it seems that Taylor and Adler are wrong, a point that will become clear in the discussion of today's gang girls.

Today's Gang Girls

Some of the more historical elements of female gang involvement just presented are similar to female gang involvement today. The following characteristics of gang membership today demonstrates how gender inequalities within gangs today are similar to those reported in the past.

1. Gang Structure

To understand the various roles females play within a gang, it is important to understand the types of gang structures—and corresponding gang behaviors—that exist. Gang scholars often agree that girls join gangs that have one of the following gender structures—autonomous (independent, all-female gangs); auxiliary (all-female counterparts to male gangs); or mixed (males and female) (“Female Participation”; *Girls*; Miller). Historically, girls were primarily involved with *auxiliary* or *mixed* gangs as girlfriends, sex objects, or drug-toting, weapon-carrying “mules.” Implied by many media and scholars today is the idea that females are joining autonomous gangs at an increasing rate and moving away from subordinate roles within mixed-gender and auxiliary gangs. Regina Heurter, a gang expert quoted in an article written by the Associated Press, says gangs today are not divided along gender lines and that females are no longer “mules” who carry guns and drugs for men. With an increase in individual crime by women, girls are “no longer just auxiliaries,” she said (Mendez). Similarly, Boston Police Lieutenant Gary French tells the *Boston Phoenix* that girl gangs are close to becoming as organized as male gangs (McNaught).

Contradicting these claims, a 1997 study of 110 female gang members in three cities revealed that only 6.4 percent of female gang members were in all-girl gangs, 57.3 percent were in mixed-gender gangs, and 36.4 percent were in auxiliary gangs, meaning that 93.7 percent of the gang girls studied maintained a “historical” role in terms of gang structure. Further demonstrating females’ lack of autonomy is the fact that most mixed-gender gangs in this study were led by males, and 74 percent had more male than female members (Miller 12).

Studies also show that gangs behave differently and serve different functions based on the male-to-female ratio. Delinquency levels are highest in gangs with the largest proportion of men, while delinquency is lowest in all-girl gangs (Miller 187). In fact, the all-girl gangs of Columbus, Ohio and St. Louis, Missouri serve more of a familial than criminal purpose. The family structure of these all-girl gangs provides females with support and protection—often from the controlling behaviors of males. As a member of an all-girl gang, Jennifer elaborates on this idea in an interview conducted for Miller’s book: “[Men], it’s like when they’re in control they know it. So they’re gonna take advantage of it. They like tell [girls to do] stupid things.” She went on to say, “Most of the girls that I’ve seen in [mixed and auxiliary] gangs, they have no respect for themselves. They’re too easily taken advantage of because they’re with a boys’ group” (Miller 171). It is for these reasons that Jennifer chose to join an autonomous crew.

Considering the reality and characteristics of gang structure, one may infer the following: (1) that females are not moving away from historical involvement in mixed-gender and auxiliary gangs; (2) that females are not truly equals in terms of street-level violence and delinquency—an idea that will be elaborated on in part three of this section; and (3) that females have some gendered motives for joining, especially if those joining all-girl gangs are doing so to escape male domination. Gang girls’ need for familial and emotional support may be more clearly understood in light of research revealing their reasons for joining gangs.

2. Reasons for Joining

This section explores factors, variables, and motivations that lead to female gang involvement. These factors are discussed in terms of *underlying variables* (behaviors, attitudes, and backgrounds of gang members) and *surface variables* (self-reported reasons for joining). Where possible, variables associated with female gang involvement are compared to variables

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Dividing a paper into subsections is great for keeping the reader active in an essay, particularly one of longer length. One caution, however, is to avoid using too many subsections—they can become confusing.



the it. factor

Be sure to include proper citation format. If you are allowed to use your style preference, make sure that your choice agrees with a specific format like MLA or CMS. Don't pick and choose from each style. Allison's paper is a great example of MLA style.

contributing to male gang involvement; surely, if a gang fulfills different needs, motivations, and desires for each sex, gender-specific gang roles are likely to result.

A. Underlying Variables

Both male and female gang members are typically from marginal, economically suffering communities where schools are not functioning properly, families are dysfunctional, and job opportunities are limited (Esbensen and Deschenes 801). Demonstrating the correlation between poverty and gang membership is the overall increase in gang involvement during the 1980s and 1990s when a loss of factory jobs in many cities resulted in higher rates of poverty (Moore and Hagedorn 1). Also recall that in the 1920s, most gang members were economically marginalized European immigrants. Additionally, many male and female gang members also suffer from low self-esteem, seek risky behavior, experience a lack of guilt over delinquent behavior, and are victims of past abuse (Esbensen and Deschenes 811). In terms of gender differences, a lesser commitment to school correlates more closely to female gang involvement, while male gang members tend to have better academic records (812). Furthermore, male gang members also tend to have a higher self-esteem than females, while girls are more likely than males to be risk-takers (816). Finally, a higher percentage of female gang members have suffered from physical or sexual abuse as a child (816). In fact, the Center for Women and Policy Studies reports that up to 70 percent of gang girls have suffered from sexual victimization (Marks). While these variables reveal little about the evolution of female gang involvement, they do indicate subtle differences between male and female gang members—differences that may manifest into gender roles later on.

B. Self-Reported Reasons for Joining

Self-reported reasons females give for joining gangs often support the “liberation”-type thinking of Taylor and are often taken as proof of modern female street attitudes. For example, many girls self-report that they join gangs as an assertion of individuality, to establish meaning or identity, and to defy traditional role expectations, which include early marriage and pregnancy—clear liberationist thinking (Moore and Hagedorn 2-4; “Self Definition” 146). Their very association with the gang may be considered a rebellion or a “public proclamation of their rejection of the lifestyle that the community expects from them,” claims Campbell (“Self Definition” 146). Some females report to join gangs for the power and perks associated with money and a lavish lifestyle (*Girls* 71-95; Moore and Hagedorn 3), while others enjoy the “fear the gang inspires in others” (Molidor). Former gang member, Isis Sapp-Grant, said to the *Christian Science Monitor*, “It made me feel good, high and powerful—visible when for the most part I felt very invisible and powerless.” If the girls are to be powerful and respected in a neighborhood where protection is essential, they must get into the gang life. Grant continues to say, “You had crazy people all around. You’ve got idiots hanging on the corner, and drug dealers were the ones making the money...We just learned how to become a part of that environment.” This idea that gangs provide members with an atmosphere of “respect, a sense of protection and belonging, and power and control over their environment” is nothing new and is not gender-specific (Wood, et. al). However, a study conducted by Palmer and Tilley, who claim that the “most striking differences between male and female gang members, now, as in the past, involves sex,” found that one major motivator for males—not females—is sexual access to females. They quote a male gang member who was previously cited in work by Covey, Menard, and Franzese saying girls are in gangs to “fill” the “needs” of boys.

Similarly, some of the reasons girls give for joining intuitively seem conducive to future

victimization. For example, women often claim to join gangs for protection from past male abusers. Unfortunately, these girls are often unaware that gangs may expose them to the very vulnerabilities they wished to escape (Dennehy 79-80). And often these very vulnerabilities that lead females to join gangs result in consequences, such as pregnancy and injury, that also motivate females to leave gangs at an earlier age than males (McNaught; Moore and Hagedorn 9).

3. Gendered Gang Roles

Scholars and media who support ideas of increased female autonomy often emphasize increased female participation in violence and drug sales while ignoring the sexualized nature of gang involvement (Marks; *Girls*). For example, Molidor says that viewing women only as victims is inaccurate and that female roles are evolving to include women as perpetrators of serious crimes; however, in the same paper, she recognizes that females are often still “sexed in” to gangs and forced to commit sexual acts as punishment by male gang leaders. Clearly, this is not liberating for females, and some scholars would even argue that the sexual role of females in gangs has not changed in 50 years (Palmer and Tilley). A report of female gang involvement published by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention found that “sexual exploitation of female gang members at home and within their gangs is one reason for considering female gang membership a serious social concern” (Moore and Hagedorn 4). It will soon become clear that sexual victimization is prevalent in all aspects of gang life today, that males commit a disproportionate number of gang-related crimes, and that characteristics of female criminal acts are incredibly gendered. This section will demonstrate that “historical” gender inequalities exist in all aspects of gang life and that males still commit a disproportionate number of crimes compared to females.

A. Gender in Initiations and Consequences for Later Gang Life

The historical definition of gang girl is nearly synonymous with “sex object”—defined as “being a girlfriend to a male member, providing sexual services to gang boys, luring rival male members to preassigned locations, acting as a spy by establishing a romantic relationship with a boy from an enemy gang, and carrying drugs or weapons for boys” (“Female Participation” 168). While sex roles may be less extreme today, research indicates that females are still being “sexed in” to gangs, a requirement that does not apply to males. Miller found that women most often become members of mixed or auxiliary gangs in one of three ways—(1) a neighborhood acquaintance, boyfriend, or family member; (2) a ritual beating; or (3) a sexual act with one of the males (Miller 187). A male gang member quoted in a study conducted by Covey, Menard, and Franzese said, “If a girl want to be in [the gang], either they could have sex or be beat in...Sometimes there are three guys with one girl, they take turns.” Unfortunately, perceptions of girls within the gang depend greatly upon their means of entry, which consequently affects their roles.

Sexed-in gang girls are perceived as weak, taking the “easier” route to entry, and as sluts who male members can justify taking advantage of indefinitely. Girls who want to be considered equal to males choose to be beaten in, proving that they’re worthy of acceptance and equal treatment—especially in drug commerce. But, regardless of how a girl enters a gang, male and female gang members alike will always question whether she is a legitimate gang member (who was beaten in like a man) or a “slut” (who chose the easy way out). This question opens females to victimization in all aspects of gang life. For example, females who are not dating fellow gang members may be viewed as sexually available (especially if there is a perception she was sexed



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Vary the lengths of your paragraphs, and don't make them too long! A reader can become confused when description and details aren't broken up spatially. How long is *too long* for a paragraph?



the it factor

Incorporating details from all sides of an argument, regardless of your stand on the issue, will make you a more credible writer. Considering both sides is important and necessary for swaying undecided readers.

in) and, as a result, are open to indefinite sexual abuse by members of their own gang. Furthermore, if a woman is considered weak, she might be viewed as *deserving* of mistreatment. In one instance, a male gang member got mad at a weak female member of his gang and made her have sex with five other members. It is not surprising that girls who join autonomous gangs often do so to avoid sexual abuse at the hands of males (Miller 168-173).

Females in autonomous gangs suffer from less sexual victimization than girls in mixed or auxiliary groups as demonstrated by initiations, gang activities, and rules regarding sex. Formal initiations in autonomous gangs may involve a fistfight, if anything at all. Once in the gang, girls often participate in activities that help protect the group from abuse by male gangs. In terms of sex, females in autonomous gangs are often prohibited from promiscuous behavior and perceive girls in mixed or auxiliary gangs as sex objects and “whores” (“Female Participation” 179). This perception may imply that because most gang girls today belong to mixed or auxiliary groups, many female gang members still occupy the historical gang role of sex object.

B. Drug Sales as Gendered Aspect of Gang Culture

From the mid 1980s until today, it has been implied that drugs have “gone beyond the traditional limits of prostitution and shoplifting into major-league drug trafficking, extortion, auto-theft, loan sharking and high jacking” (Maher 197). An article in the *New York Times* claimed that drug trade has contributed to the rise of the urban “gangsta” (Maher 197). However, Lisa Maher, who studied female street crime for several years in New York City, found that women are still marginalized in the street-level drug economy and that slots opening for drug sales still require “masculine qualities and capacities” (197). Furthermore, Miller, in her ethnographic research, found that only half of the females between the two cities she studied engaged in drug sales and did so an average of two times per week; in one of the cities, gang girls were not even permitted to participate in drug commerce (197). Similarly, in Milwaukee, where researchers found female participation in drugs sales to be increasing, only 50 percent of gang girls sold cocaine as compared to 75 percent of male gang members (Moore and Hagedorn 6).

If a woman is, in fact, *allowed* to sell drugs, it may be because she looks less guilty on the corner, lowering her chances of being questioned by police officers. This type of role resembles females’ historical gang role of “mule”—pushing drugs for men. Furthermore, females are often used as decoys and as alibis, roles from history that will be explored farther in the next section. Justifying this type of behavior, a female gang member quoted in Miller’s book says that girls are needed to get “dudes” out of stuff that “dudes couldn’t do.” She continues, “they need us girls, they need us” (Miller 158).

C. Females and Violence/Crime

Increased levels of street violence have been used as evidence to indicate growing female autonomy on the streets. Some say that with the “rise” in female crack dealing, women have increasingly engaged in violence. However, Maher, the author of *Women’s Work*, found that females are not becoming more violent as a result of an influx in crack cocaine (197). In general, female gang members are still more likely to commit property crimes and status offenses than violent crimes (Moore and Hagedorn 5). Furthermore, scholars and reporters who use statistics to demonstrate females’ increased involvement in criminal activity often fail to acknowledge that males still commit most crimes (Miller 6).

From 1965 to 1994, the number of arrests for serious crimes was greater for male gang members than female gang members. For non-lethal violence, the male-to-female arrest ration was 15.6 to one; for drug offenses, the ration was 39 to one; and only 1.1 percent of gang-related

homicides were committed by females (Moore and Hagedorn 5). In the mid 1990s, women only accounted for 9.5 percent of homicide arrestees, 9.3 percent of robbery arrestees, 17.7 percent of arrestees for aggravated assault, and 11.1 percent of burglary arrestees (Miller 6). Furthermore, those who “prove” increased levels of female crime using statistics often leave out contradictory data. For example, Miller notes that Baskin and Sommer’s 1980-1994 female-violence study, which revealed an increase in female crime, failed to mention that female homicide rates were decreasing as compared to male rates (Miller 209). And while a 200 percent increase in female drug involvement and a 100 percent increase in aggravated assault seem significant, Frank Zimring of UC Berkeley, who is quoted in the *Tulsa World*, makes a valid point: “If you’re 3 feet 5 inches tall, and I’m 6 feet 4 inches tall and we both grow an inch, your percentage of growth is enormously higher than mine” (Ryan). In other words, if females committed very little crime historically, even small increases in the *number* of crimes females commit would result in a huge *percentage* increase. Furthermore, because much data “proving” increased female delinquency comes from arrest reports, it is possible that female arrests increased in the 1980s as a result of a heightened awareness of female delinquency rather than an increased number of actual crimes committed by females. It is also important to note that regardless of the degree to which female crime has actually increased, female participation in other “male-dominated” segments of society has increased much more significantly. Zimring says, “For 30 years, we’ve been waiting for a female crime wave. Gender roles have been diversified and so we’ve been waiting for the other shoe to drop from women’s liberation. But 90 percent or more of serious youth violence still turns out to be male, and it’s just as male in 2003 as it was in 1960.” Even if female delinquency has not increased significantly, overall, it is still important to consider the extraordinarily gendered nature of the crime and violence gang girls do engage in—often as a result of gendered attitudes and perceptions.

Males perceive females as weak and will rarely seek them out as a target for violence (Miller 165). In general, females fulfill their gang role of “violence” by targeting women in rival gangs, while males are responsible for targeting rival males. Male-on-male violence is typically serious, involving guns or knives, while female-on-female violence is less severe and rarely involves guns (Miller 159-170). In contrast to males, females are more likely to use a knife, razor, or bleach spray bottle (McNaught). And when males direct violence toward females, it is often in the form of rape or kidnapping, taking advantage of females’ weaknesses. And when males harm females, it is often not to get back at the female, herself, but as an indirect way to get back at the males in rival gangs, instead. A male gang member quoted in Miller’s book says, “If the boy Crip think that the boy Blood more tougher than the girl, he might go off on the girl just to hurt the other gang member... It be the same way if somebody that your cousin, it’s gonna hurt you more than killing you, that’s your cousin. You gonna have the same feelings” (Miller 167).

What is perhaps most surprising about male-on-female sexual violence is that gang girls sometimes help their “brothers” sexually victimize other females (167). Just recently, four of the 11 St. Louis gangsters who kidnapped, whipped, sodomized, cut, and burned a female associated with a rival gang were women (167)—an incident many would find abhorrent and shocking. Females who help male gang members brutally victimize other females fill a role that is similar to the historical gang-girl role of “lure”—catching females for the purpose of rape by male members.

This female acceptance of male-on-female violence seems to be rooted in historical attitudes supporting female subordination held by males and females alike. Some scholars suggest that a

factor in a girl's aggression toward other females may even be a direct result of low self-worth, resulting from victimization she suffered as a child (Artz). Gendered attitudes held by male and female gang members will be discussed next and may help explain the gendered nature of many violent acts discussed above.

4. Attitudes about Gang Girls

While many feminists see gender as an issue gang girls react to, Miller also sees it as something females participate in, a characteristic that is surely not conducive to equality on the streets. Females may portray themselves as tough and as equal, but this lingo is often an act—a way of deceiving others and themselves. This follows the general trend of gang girls using scripted answers to highlight benefits of gang life by overplaying the “glory days” and failing to mention the “loneliness and drudgery” they experience (“Female Participation” 176). Females also tend to contradict themselves when discussing gender equality in gangs. For example, one gang girl said, “Gals gonna do whatever dudes do over there,” and follows this later by saying, “Ain’t no girl over there doing like the dudes” (Miller 181).

In Los Angeles, a random sample of gang members revealed that half of the males viewed women as “possessions” (Moore and Hagedorn 3). It is also common for male gang members to perceive women as weak and as whores, the result of which is often inequitable and gendered gang roles, especially in terms of the violence discussed previously (Miller 166-169). Even some females hold negative views about femininity and often choose to distinguish themselves from other girls by identifying as “one of the guys” (180). A number of females think that to be in a gang, females have to be “thuggish”—a concept similar to the historical notion of gang girls as “tomboys.” Recall initiation procedures: if a girl wants to be seen as equal, she must be beaten in to prove her toughness, whereas males are assumed to be tough from the start. Just as female gang members were once described as tomboys or sex objects, one may justly define many in the same way today.

In terms of gang leadership, many gang girls, even those with “thuggish” traits, often feel that gangs should be governed by males (Miller 185). Claiming that female gang leaders would garner no respect, some girls in mixed gangs balk at the idea of autonomous girl gangs. Interestingly, even girls in autonomous gangs have a tendency to dislike females and identify more with males (185). This clear distaste for females held by girls in gangs may very well explain their acceptance of male-on-female violence and traditional gender roles. If girls look down upon themselves, one would not expect them to defend members of their own gender. Similarly, one would not expect them to fight for equal rights, especially if they don’t see themselves as deserving such rights. Because these sexist attitudes are held by male and female gang members alike, it does not seem plausible for equality to exist on the streets, specifically because attitudes must change before behavior.

The Big Picture—A Summary

Regardless of the popular view that females are becoming more autonomous and equal in gangs and on the streets, this paper—which reveals the inequalities in terms of gang structure, reasons for joining, gang roles, and attitudes—indicates the falsity behind such claims.

As demonstrated throughout this document, females who are involved in gang life are often parts of mixed or auxiliary gangs with hierarchal and gendered structures of governance. While six percent of female gangs are autonomous in nature, these all-female gangs lean less toward



the it. factor

When writing an essay that refers to different cultural groups, one can incorporate the personal voice of the members through quotes and vivid descriptions. Do you think that Allison used enough personal accounts and reflections in her work?

delinquency—though there are outliers—and more toward a structure of familial support. Gang girls' primary association with male gangs is a trend that has been maintained throughout history. And while some all-girl gangs exist today, there is evidence that all-girl gangs existed in the 1950s (*Girls*). And because research was less comprehensive 50 years ago, there may have been more female gangs than recorded or perceived at that time—meaning, gang structure may not be that different today than it was 50 years ago. Unfortunately, there is no true way to tell.

In terms of crime, autonomous female gangs commit less crime than their male counterparts, indicating gender differences in gang delinquency. And while crack cocaine may have increased overall female involvement in drug sales (as the opening of more corporations would result in more females working in corporate America), female involvement in gang-related drug sales is still less than that of male involvement (just as females still hold fewer corporate jobs today). Furthermore, the increase in female gang involvement resulting from the influx of crack cocaine is similar to the increase in the number of gang girls during the 1930s and 1940s when females could profit from “boosting” liquor during prohibition; certainly, no one during that time period claimed females were becoming more autonomous (possibly because there was less media attention to the topic). Furthermore, some females maintain the drug-delivery role, which is characteristic of the more historical female role of “mule.”

While female violence appears to be increasing more rapidly than male violence, men still commit a disproportionate number of major crimes. Additionally, among females who are actively involved in gang violence, their violence is often gender-specific. Females are used to attack females, while males commit most serious violence against males. Male-on-female violence is often kidnapping or rape, reinforcing the female role as sex object, which is even more clearly defined when male gang members sexually assault females in their own gangs.

Quite possibly the most stunning indicator of female inequality on the streets is the demeaning sexist attitudes some females help propagate. If gang girls think that they are subordinate to males and that the street is a man's world, clearly no one can legitimately claim that females are achieving equality—especially when attitudes must change before behavior.

Together, this evidence reveals that, although female involvement in gangs and certain crimes may have increased slightly over the years, this increase is not significant enough to claim that females have become autonomous on the streets. Furthermore, the victimization suffered by females as a result of highly gendered roles within gangs today indicates that any claims of female equality on the streets are entirely fallacious and exaggerated.

What Next?

Regardless of the inequalities in female gang membership, females' level of participation is significant enough for intervention, especially since the victimization suffered by females is so great. Unfortunately, comprehensive research on female participation in gangs does not exist, and clearly it is important for intervention and prevention tactics to be based on an accurate understanding of female gang involvement.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention calls for more comprehensive research conducted on a national level. It recommends further research into the reasons females join gangs, their actual level of delinquency, and the consequences females face as a result of gang membership in later life (Moore and Hagedorn 8). Some of these consequences—such as teen pregnancy, sexual abuse, and physical injury—demonstrate a need for gender-specific approaches to intervention and post-gang support. However, I would argue that local studies

are more important than national studies for the development of such programs.

While research on a national level would be helpful for the scholarly purpose of painting an accurate picture of gang involvement in America, development of intervention and support programs requires site-specific data because most programs are not run on a national level. Clearly, if girls in Milwaukee are more involved in drug sales than girls in Columbus, an intervention program local to these cities should account for such differences. Furthermore, the age at which females begin associating with gangs also differs from city to city. For example, girls in St. Louis and Columbus begin—on average—associating with gangs at the age of 12 (Miller 35), while girls in Los Angeles do so as early as six years of age (Harris 151). An effective program would take into account such differences.

Currently, the OJJDP has partnered with the Boys and Girls Clubs of America to pilot test in needy communities gang-prevention programs, which require females to account for 20 percent of participants (Moore and Hagedorn 9). Others suggest more gender-specific programs that target females only. For example, Girls Incorporated approaches the problem with programs that instruct girls on how to avoid drug abuse, teach strategies for avoiding pregnancy, provide health care, teach job skills, and provide peer support in the areas of drug abuse, sexual and physical abuse, and gang involvement (Weiler). Because of the gendered nature of gang involvement, an all-female program seems to be the best approach. Unfortunately, all-female programs addressing issues of violence, delinquency, and gang involvement receive less support than similar programs designed for males; in 1999, only 2.3 percent of delinquency programs served just girls (Weiler). To demonstrate this need for all-female programming, additional research is necessary both on the national and local level.

Overall, an increased commitment by researchers to the study of this topic would make the argument for increased female programming stronger. And because of the variances in the nature of female gang involvement throughout the country, it is extremely important for those developing programs to research the unique characteristics of gang girls within their own communities.

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