WestEd Justice & Prevention RESEARCH CENTER

# Push and Pull Factors for Female Involvement in Gangs and Collateral Involvement in Sex Trafficking

## Systematic Review of Research

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# Introduction and Prior Research

Research on the factors that contribute to male gang involvement is extensive and varied. It includes studies of environmental, cultural, and social factors that increase the risks of gang involvement or lead to gang involvement, including how these factors vary by race and ethnicity. These factors are typically referred to as "push" and "pull" factors. Push factors are external to the gang (e.g., history of abuse, lack of parental support or supervision) and push an individual toward membership, and pull factors are internal to the gang (e.g., street credibility, protection, economic benefits) and draw an individual into membership. This paper extends the focus on push and pull factors by providing a systematic review of research from the past decade specific to female gang involvement.

Until recently, research on the roles of females in gangs has been minimal because violence and gang membership have historically been thought to be male-dominated phenomena (Esbensen et al., 1999). Females have commonly been thought to be auxiliary members or nonactive members because of the roles they would stereotypically inherit or be placed into by male gang members. For example, initial research on the female roles within gangs was focused on narrow parameters regarding what constitutes an appropriate or even possible set of gang activities for girls and women (Coughlin & Venkatesh, 2003). These activities were usually based around sexual favors to their male counterparts, weapon concealing, drug carrying, and whatever else may be instructed to them by the dominant males.

Furthermore, longitudinal research has not been conducted on the push and pull factors that attract females to gang involvement. Often this research has disregarded gender differences when observing push and pull factors by assuming factors were the same across genders. Additionally, insight into female gang involvement has often reflected male-gendered

perspectives, suggesting a deficit model for gang affiliation and engagement (Deuchaur et al., 2020).

However, some literature has provided fresh perspectives that argue that female gang affiliation is much more "agentic" than previously thought (Bandura, 2001). For instance, Moore and Hagedorn (2001, p. 3) found that gang membership can be viewed as an "assertion of independence" from familial, cultural, and class constraints. In this way, the gang lifestyle offers females empowerment and the prospect of individualism that counters previously reflected gendered perspectives that suggested a deficit model of gang affiliation and engagement (Deuchar et al., 2020). In a qualitative comparative study, Deuchar and colleagues (2020) compared female gang involvement in Los Angeles and Glasgow and found that the method of entry and point of entry into gangs were especially important to female respondents. Their entry determined not only how they were viewed, categorized, and perceived by their male counterparts but also how they were positioned within their own street gang hierarchy. This finding challenges the common assumption that females join gangs to be affiliated with male gangs. In fact, it could be argued that street gangs offer females a variety of reasons for joining—for some, gang affiliation is a way to escape from past experiences; for others, gang affiliation is a way in (i.e., past experiences have normalized gang involvement); and for others, gang affiliation may be a way of achieving social mobility and power (Deuchar et al., 2020).

Although some factors may be similar for male and female gang involvement, others may be uniquely identified by expanding the research on female gang involvement. To start, numerous studies have demonstrated that females involved in gangs experience different forms of and more severe victimization than do their male counterparts (Klein & Maxson, 2006; Sutton, 2017; Valasik & Reid, 2019). For example, studies show that many female gang members experience an excessive amount of victimization early in life, even prior to joining a gang (Sutton, 2017). Female gang members often have a history of physical and sexual abuse at home by older male figures who are either family members or family friends (Valasik & Reid, 2019). This victimization is known to continue in various forms between female and male gang members upon joining a gang. Once they join a gang, females are at increased risk of being victimized, especially sexually, by older male counterparts in the gang (Valasik & Reid, 2019). They are also at increased risk of being forced by established female gang members to have sex with multiple male members (Gibson et al., 2012). This form of victimization is rarely experienced by male gang members and is uniquely identified in female gang members. Moreover, another stark gender difference between males and females is that females who experience a lack of family support are at increased risk of joining a gang to fulfill their desire of having an emotionally satisfying familial group, while males are typically seeking adventure and excitement in gang lifestyle and relationships (Valasik & Reid, 2019). Common gang-involved factors such as street status, protection, physical and sexual victimization, delinquency, lack of parental monitoring or support, and a craving for an emotionally satisfying familial peer group are only a few mentioned factors that are not completely generalizable across genders

(De La Rue & Espelage, 2014; Deschenes & Esbensen, 1999; Deuchar et al., 2020; Esbensen et al., 1999; Gold, 2000; Simon et al., 2013).

In his early research, Gold explored power and status as prominent pull factors due to the significant number of females who join gangs because of limited opportunities in their homes and communities that in turn push them toward gang involvement. His research around female gang involvement showed that roles for female gang members have expanded, and they are no longer viewed as just sexual objects or the girlfriends of male gang members; they have gained their own gang autonomy and control (Gold, 2000). In addition, Gold (2000) researched the ways in which peer relationships among females are fostered in gangs and how such relationships influence their decision to join, stay, and pressure other peers to conduct delinquent activities. Some scholars suggest that females can perceive gangs and gang life as a source of empowerment. According to Gold (2000), many females perceived the gang as a place where they could gain some power and control over their lives. Relatedly, Curry (1998) has suggested that it is important to develop a feminist perspective in order to formulate more useful observations and theories about female gang involvement that counter the initial, hegemonic, male-centered view of gang lifestyle. In other words, a feminist perspective could limit the generalizations made about factors that influence females to join gangs and facilitate a greater inclusion of relevant environmental, cultural, and social factors that promote female gang involvement.

The sections that follow describe why and how a systematic review of relevant literature was conducted and then provide a synthesis of the quantitative empirical literature on push and pull factors that influence females to join gangs and on collateral involvement in sex trafficking.

# Current Review

## Objective

As part of a project with the American Institutes for Research, a team from WestEd's Justice and Prevention Research Center conducted a systematic review of relevant literature. The team searched for empirical research with quantitative outcomes that reported at least one push factor (those that are external to the gang and that push an individual toward membership) or pull factor (those internal to the gang that draw an individual into membership) that influences female involvement in gangs. The review also examined information from these studies on sex trafficking experiences related to gang involvement.

## Research Questions

The following three research questions guided the research team's review of the literature:

1. What are the factors that push females into gang activity from influences outside the gang?
2. What are the factors that pull females into gang activity from influences inside the gang?
3. Under what circumstances is there collateral involvement in sex trafficking either as a precursor to gang involvement or a result of gang involvement?

## Methods

### Inclusion/Exclusion

To be included in this review, a research study had to meet the following criteria:

- The study was conducted between 2010 and 2021 (to ensure that the information is relevant to current policy and practice).[1]
- The research was conducted with individuals in the United States who identify as female[2] and included at least some in the range of 17–24 years old.
- The study reported on at least one outcome related to gang involvement.
- The study included one or more push or pull factors related to female gang involvement.

### Search Strategy

The review team relied on the following strategies to identify eligible studies:

- The team used available online resources and databases at WestEd, Auburn University, Salem State University, and George Mason University, including Criminal Justice Abstracts, the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS), Academic Search Premier, Sociological Abstracts, the Education Resource Information Center (ERIC), and PsycINFO.
- The team conducted a hand search of specific journals. The hand search focused on editions published between January 2020 and February 2021 in order to secure

[1] The initial search included any study conducted between 1990 and 2019; however, to ensure policy and practice relevance, the date range for studies included in the review was shifted to 2010 through 2021.

[2] The search terms were not inclusive of gender identities beyond female and therefore may have missed possible nonmale gender identities in the search.

recently published articles that had not yet been indexed in the bibliographic databases. The following specific journals were included in the hand search:

  - *Criminology*
  - *Criminal Justice and Behavior*
  - *Journal of Sexual Aggression*
  - *Violence Against Women*

- The team crafted search terms to find resources in Google Scholar and examined the first 250 records, ordered by relevance. The following search terms were used: (gender OR girl* OR female* OR women OR woman) AND (gang OR gangs OR "street group*" OR "deviant youth group*" OR "street connected" OR "street-connected").[3]

## Screening and Coding

The research team utilized a multistage screening and coding process. A flowchart with the screening process and results can be found in Figure 1. All abstracts found throughout the search were subject to an initial first screening. During this primary screening, one member of the research team reviewed the abstracts. Studies were excluded if they did not obviously meet the above criteria—for example, if the study was not conducted in the United States or if it was composed of male participants only. The remaining potentially eligible studies then moved to a second screening, during which two members of the research team reviewed the abstracts for the inclusion criteria with specific attention paid to the gang-involvement outcomes and push or pull factors. If the two researchers disagreed on whether a study should be included, they discussed the abstract and came to a consensus. During the third and final screening, the researchers reviewed the full text of the study against the inclusion criteria. All eligible studies then moved to the coding stage.

Three researchers coded the 11 studies included in this review. The coding instrument was hosted online in an automated Smartsheet form. Once a coder submitted the form, it automatically populated a spreadsheet with the other coded articles. When the coding was complete, a separate researcher served as the validator and confirmed that the coding of the article was complete and accurate.

[3] An asterisk is used in a Boolean search to expand the search to include variations of the root word. For example, the search term "girl*" would return results with "girl" or "girls."

# Results

## Search Results

The research team's initial search of the databases for articles published between 1990 and 2019 resulted in 1,290 articles to include in the first screening, and a separate search of Google Scholar led to an additional 191 articles, resulting in a total of 1,481 articles that were eligible for the screening process. The first screening of these articles used a high-level examination of the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Excluded studies were primarily international studies, studies with adult samples, studies that did not focus on gang involvement, and duplicate studies. After these studies were removed from the first screening, 459 studies remained for the second screening.

The second round of screening consisted of abstract reviews of each of the 459 studies. Of the 459 studies included in the second screening, 166 were deemed eligible and retained for the third screening.

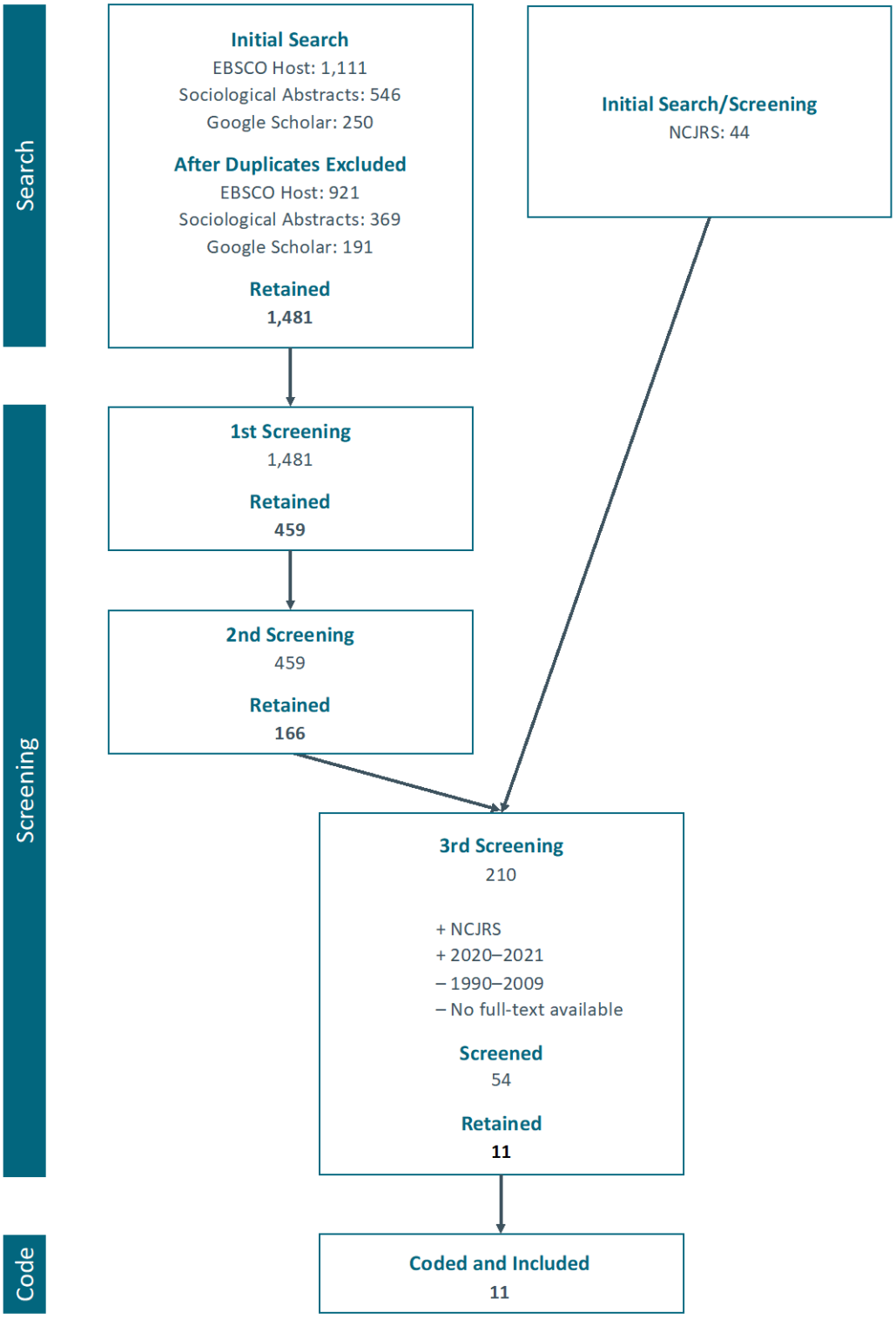
The third screening involved shifting the publishing dates for the selection of literature, adding articles from the NCJRS, and then excluding articles without available full text. Although the initial search had included empirical studies conducted between 1990 and 2019, the research team found that this earlier time frame generated too many outdated studies for the aim of this review to be relevant for current policy and practice. Accordingly, the researchers decided to shift the date span to the most recent decade, 2010–2021. After the time frame was shifted, NCJRS articles were added to the screening.[4] The NCJRS database was searched independently and, given the database's limited capacity to use advanced search strategies, the search strategy was more rigorous. Thus, the initial search of NCJRS repeated the first and second screenings, which resulted in 44 NCJRS articles that were then introduced to the article pool to be inter-rated and approved for inclusion.

From NCJRS, Google Scholar, EbscoHost, and Sociological Abstracts, 210 studies were eligible for the final inclusion/exclusion screening. The research team then further screened these based on the shifted range of publishing dates (excluding any that were not published in the 2010–2021 range) and excluded articles for which the team was unable to obtain the full text, leaving 54 articles that moved on to the final phase of screening.

The final screening consisted of a full-text review of each article to ensure the content and findings were appropriate for the review. Of the 54 articles that were included in the final screening, 11 were retained and coded for inclusion in the systematic review on push and pull factors for female involvement in gangs and collateral involvement in sex trafficking (see Figure 1).

[4] A key article eligible for the review was published during the search phase through NCJRS; thus, the research team made the decision to shift the eligibility criteria and include NCJRS in the search process.

## Figure 1 Flowchart of Screening Process



## Eligible Studies

The systematic search resulted in 11 empirical research studies published between 2014 and 2021. Of these 11 studies, 5 used longitudinal research designs, 1 was a retrospective research design, and 5 used cross-sectional research designs to examine push and pull factors of female gang involvement. Most studies examined differences between gang-involved and non–gang-involved youths among males and females, using within-group and between-group analyses such as analyses of variance, chi-square tests, and *t*-tests. Several studies used predictive analyses to examine how push factors may influence gang membership and involvement, including logistic regression and discrete-time hazard analysis. The studies are described below, followed by a table of results with key study information, and the Appendix provides a quick summary of the findings.

### The Role of School-Related Bonding Factors and Gender: Correlates of Gang Membership Among Adolescents (Bjerregaard & Cochran, 2012)

Bjerregaard and Cochran (2012) used data from the Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) program to examine the influence of school-related factors and gender on adolescent gang membership. Their multigroup logistic regression analysis found school commitment (defined as the time and energy an individual invests in school) ($\beta = -0.05$, $p < 0.05$, OR = 0.95) and school gang climate ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.01$, OR = 1.21) to be significant school-level predictors of female gang membership. They also found peer delinquency ($\beta = 0.08$, $p < 0.01$, OR = 1.09) to be a significant non–school-related predictor of gang involvement for females. Additionally, they found delinquency ($\beta = 1.35$, $p < 0.01$, OR = 3.84) and personal victimization ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$, OR = 1.18) to be significant covariates in the female model.

### Weapon Carrying, Physical Fighting, and Gang Membership Among Youth in Washington State Military Families (Reed et al., 2014)

Reed and colleagues (2014) explored patterns of gang involvement for adolescents from military families in Washington State. Specifically, they examined aggressive and risky behaviors such as school-based weapon carrying, school-based physical fighting, and gang membership for adolescents from civilian families, not deployed military families, and deployed military families. Reed and colleagues applied multivariate logistic regressions using cross-sectional data from the 2008 Washington State Healthy Youth Survey to test patterns between adolescents based on grade and gender. Results of their analysis show that for adolescent girls in grades 10 and 12, being in a military family increases the risk for gang involvement (OR = 1.90, $p < 0.01$), and being in a military family with a parent who was deployed further increases the likelihood of gang involvement (OR = 2.20, $p < 0.01$).

### Family and Abuse Characteristics of Gang-Involved, Pressured-to-Join, and Non–Gang-Involved Girls (De La Rue & Espelage, 2014)

De La Rue and Espelage (2014) examined family and abuse characteristics of girls who had never been gang involved, those who had been pressured to join a gang but had resisted, and those who reported gang involvement. Using a school-based sample of students, their multinomial logistic regression found that compared to non–gang-involved girls and those who had been pressured to join a gang but had resisted, more gang-involved girls reported a history of running away from home and having a gang-involved family member. Specifically, compared to non–gang-involved girls, those who had a history of running away from home and having gang-involved family members were 1.97 ($\beta = 0.68$, $p < 0.05$) and 17.60 ($\beta = 2.87$, $p < 0.01$) times more likely to be gang involved. Gang-involved girls were also more likely to run away from home ($\beta = 0.40$, $p < 0.05$, OR = 1.5) and to have a gang-involved family member ($\beta = 1.32$, $p < 0.01$, OR = 3.73) relative to girls who had been pressured to join a gang but had resisted.

De La Rue and Espelage (2014) also found that compared to non–gang-involved girls, gang-involved girls were more likely to have higher rates of delinquent and aggressive behaviors ($\beta = 2.15$, $p < 0.01$, OR = 8.62; $\beta = 0.92$, $p < 0.01$, OR = 2.51, respectively). Similarly, compared to girls who had been pressured but had resisted gang membership, gang-involved girls had higher rates of delinquency and aggressive behaviors ($\beta = 1.31$, $p < 0.01$, OR = 3.69; $\beta = 0.44$, $p < 0.01$, OR = 1.54, respectively). Furthermore, sexual abuse and family conflict were more likely for gang-involved girls ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < 0.05$, OR = 2.11; $\beta = 0.36$, $p < 0.05$, OR = 1.43, respectively) than for girls pressured to join a gang who resisted.

### The Developmental Dynamics of Joining a Gang in Adolescence: Patterns and Predictors of Gang Membership (Gilman et al., 2014)

Gilman and colleagues (2014) examined longitudinal patterns and predictors of gang membership for youths in Washington State, using the Seattle Social Development Project. This study modeled the timing of joining a gang for youths by using event history analysis predicted by risk and protective factors and further examined patterns of gang joining by adding gender as a moderator. In the overall sample, the study found that neighborhood and peer antisocial environments predicted gang involvement, and youths who lived with a gang member were likely to be gang involved. These effects, however, were not significant when gender was used as a moderator, suggesting that the effect of the risk factors for gang involvement did not vary between girls and boys. Gender only had a significant interaction with time in this study; this interaction found that girls were more likely to join gangs at a younger age than boys (before age 15; $\beta = 1.43$, $p < 0.01$).

### Targeting Youth at Risk for Gang Involvement: Validation of a Gang Risk Assessment to Support Individualized Secondary Prevention (Hennigan et al., 2015)

In a 2015 study, Hennigan and colleagues aimed to validate a risk-assessment tool to identify youths who are most likely to join a gang. The assessment measured several personal, family, peer, and behavioral factors that may influence gang involvement and was conducted at two different times in this study. The study examined group differences between youths who had any gang involvement and those who had none and included a sample of youths in California who were at high risk for gang involvement. The sample included 428 youths at Time 1 and 391 youths at Time 2, between 12 and 21 months later (91% retention rate). Those interviewed were 11–16 years old at Time 1 and 12–17 years old at Time 2. In a multigroup chi-square analysis with just girls in the sample ($n$ = 128), the study found that girls with a history of any gang involvement reported a greater level of risk (i.e., higher percentage of girls above the high-risk cutpoint), including less parental monitoring ($\chi2(1, 128) = 9.17$, $p < 0.005$), greater family gang influence ($\chi2(1, 128) = 7.18$, $p < 0.007$), more delinquent friends ($\chi2(1, 128) = 6.49$, $p = 0.011$), greater negative peer influence ($\chi2(1, 128) = 15.59$, $p < 0.001$), and higher self-reported delinquent behaviors ($\chi2(1, 128) = 17.15$, $p < 0.001$).

### "Harm as Harm": Gang Membership, Perpetration Trauma, and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms Among Youth in the Juvenile Justice System (Kerig et al., 2016)

Kerig and colleagues (2016) examined the relationships between trauma and gang involvement for justice-involved youths. The study used cross-sectional data from 660 youths in a short-term detention center. The results of their chi-square analysis found an interaction between gender, gang membership, and traumatic experiences. Specifically, this study found that girls in gangs were more likely to report unwanted sexual experiences ($\chi2(1, 142) = 4.74$, $p = 0.03$, OR = 0.45) and meet Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) criteria ($\chi2(1, 142) = 5.24$, $p = 0.02$, OR = 0.41) than were non–gang-involved girls.

### Predicting Sexual Coercion in Early Adulthood: The Transaction Between Maltreatment, Gang Affiliation, and Adolescent Socialization of Coercive Relationship Norms (Ha et al., 2016)

Ha and colleagues (2016) examined relationships between maltreatment, gang affiliation, and coercive relationships among youths. This longitudinal study used data from a large-scale implementation of the Family Check-Up program for middle school students. Adolescents in this study were an average of 14 years old (M = 14.1, SD = 0.40), and nearly half (47.3%) were female. The study's structural equation model yielded a significant positive relationship between maltreatment and gang affiliation in the overall sample ($r[996] = .20$, $p < 0.01$). Model invariance tests found equivalency between males and females, suggesting that the association between maltreatment and gang affiliation is true across genders.

### "Curiosity and a Pimp": Exploring Sex Trafficking Victimization in Experiences of Entering Sex Trade Industry Work Among Participants in a Prostitution Diversion Program (Hickle & Roe-Sepowitz, 2017)

Hickle and Roe-Sepowitz (2017) explored sex trafficking victimization experiences among women in a prostitution diversion program. This mixed-methods study used a sample of 478 women charged with a prostitution-related crime; approximately 10 percent ($n$ = 47) reported some gang involvement, and one third reported sex trafficking experiences. This study used retrospective data to understand the experiences of women in the program. The participants reported incidents of commercial sex experiences between the ages of 4 and 56. Chi-square analysis found that women who reported sex trafficking experiences were more likely to have gang involvement ($\chi 2(1, 478) = 7.05$, $p = 0.008$).

### "Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones, But Bullying Will Get Me Bangin'": Bullying Involvement and Adolescent Gang Joining (Shelley & Peterson, 2019)

Shelley and Peterson (2019) examined the relationship between bullying and gang involvement using longitudinal data from the GREAT program. They applied a multigroup bivariate logistic regression analysis by sex to explore how bullying status (e.g., bullying others or being victimized by others) predicts gang joining 1 year later. The analysis of the female-only sample showed that bullying others and being victimized predicted gang joining 1 year later. Specifically, being a perpetrator of traditional bullying and cyberbullying increased the odds of joining a gang ($\beta = 1.56$, $p < 0.01$, OR = 4.75; $\beta = 0.51$, $p < 0.05$, OR = 1.66, respectively). Furthermore, adolescent girls who had been attacked or threatened at school ($\beta = 1.45$, $p < 0.01$, OR = 4.28), had rumors or lies spread about them ($\beta = 1.52$, $p < 0.01$, OR = 4.55), been teased or made fun of ($\beta = 0.53$, $p < 0.05$, OR = 1.70), and been generally bullied ($\beta = 0.77$, $p < 0.05$, OR = 2.15) were more likely 1 year later to report having joined a gang.

### Adversity and Intervention Needs Among Girls in Residential Care With Experiences of Commercial Sexual Exploitation (Hickle & Roe-Sepowitz, 2018)

Hickle and Roe-Sepowitz (2018) aimed to understand the commercialized sex experiences of young women in a residential care facility by measuring their unique adverse experiences. They compared case files of 135 young women aged 11–17; 73 had commercial sexual exploitation experiences, and 62 reported no sexual exploitation. The study compared the groups on various risk factors and adverse experiences. Chi-square analysis showed that young women who had a history of sexual exploitation were more likely to report gang involvement ($\chi 2(1, 132) = 5.68$, $p < 0.017$).

### Sibling Transmission of Gang Involvement (Hashimi et al., 2021)

Hashimi and colleagues (2021) recently examined the influence of siblings on gang membership. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997, they examined

the transmission of gang membership among siblings who are close in age. The sample was from 1,865 households. The researchers applied discrete-time hazard models to examine various patterns of sibling gang membership status and gang joining. The study found that for female same-sex sibling pairs, having a sister who is currently gang involved ($\beta = 2.08$, $SE = 0.84$, $p < 0.05$) and the presence of neighborhood gangs ($\beta = 1.42$, $SE = 0.67$, $p < 0.05$) increased the risk of gang joining for girls.

## Table 1. Key Information From Eligible Studies

Table Note: *N* = the number of participants in the full study sample; *n* = the number of girls in the sample (if reported); "+" and "++" indicate the strength of the relationship (p-value < 0.05 and p-value < 0.01, respectively) between the factor and gang membership.

| Survey title | Year | Authors | Design | Findings Push/pull factors |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| The Role of School-Related Bonding Factors and Gender: Correlates of Gang Membership Among Adolescents | 2012 | Bjerregaard, B., & Cochran, J. A. | Cross-sectional<br><br>*N* = 5,935<br>*n* = 2,943<br><br>Age: 11–18<br><br>Logistic regression | **Externalizing behaviors:**<br>• Delinquency ++<br><br>**Victimization:**<br>• Personal victimization +<br><br>**Peer and family environment:**<br>• Peer delinquency +<br><br>**School:**<br>• School commitment -<br>• School gang climate + |

| Survey title | Year | Authors | Design | Findings Push/pull factors |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Weapon Carrying, Physical Fighting, and Gang Membership Among Youth in Washington State Military Families | 2014 | Reed, S. C., Bell, J. F., & Edwards, T. C. | Cross-sectional<br><br>*N* = 9,987<br>*n* = 3,134<br><br>Age: grades 10 and 12<br><br>One-way ANOVA<br><br>Multivariable logistic regression | **Peer and family environment:**<br>• Military, no deployed parent +<br>• Military, deployed parent ++ |
| Family and Abuse Characteristics of Gang-Involved, Pressured-to-Join, and Non–Gang-Involved Girls | 2014 | De La Rue, L., & Espelage, D. L. | Cross-sectional<br><br>*N* = 7,513<br><br>Age: grades 7 –12<br><br>Cross-tabulation analysis<br><br>Multinomial logistic regression | **Peer and family environment:**<br>• Family conflict +<br>• Kicked out of home +<br>• Ran away from home +<br>• Gang-involved family member ++<br><br>**Externalizing behaviors:**<br>• Delinquency ++<br>• Aggression +<br><br>**Victimization:**<br>• Sexual abuse + |

| Survey title | Year | Authors | Design | Findings Push/pull factors |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| The Developmental Dynamics of Joining a Gang in Adolescence: Patterns and Predictors of Gang Membership | 2014 | Gilman, A. B., Hill, K. G., Hawkins, J. D., Howell, J. C., & Kosterman, R. | Longitudinal<br><br>*N* = 808<br>*n* = 396<br><br>Age: 10–19<br><br>Event history analysis | **Peer and family environment:**<br>• Living with a gang member ++<br>• Peer antisocial environment ++<br><br>**Neighborhood:**<br>• Neighborhood antisocial environment ++<br><br>**Other:**<br>• Younger age + |
| Targeting Youth at Risk for Gang Involvement: Validation of a Gang Risk Assessment to Support Individualized Secondary Prevention | 2015 | Hennigan, K., Kolnick, K., Vindel, F., & Maxson, C. | Longitudinal<br><br>*N* = 391<br>*n* = 128<br><br>Age: 11–17<br><br>Cross-tabulation analysis<br><br>Chi-square analysis | **Externalizing behaviors:**<br>• Delinquency ++<br><br>**Peer and family environment:**<br>• Parental monitoring +<br>• Family gang influence +<br>• Negative peer influence ++ |

| Survey title | Year | Authors | Design | Findings Push/pull factors |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| "Harm as Harm": Gang Membership, Perpetration Trauma, and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms Among Youth in the Juvenile Justice System | 2016 | Kerig, P. K., Chaplo, S. D., Bennett, D. C., & Modrowski, C. A. | Cross-sectional<br><br>*N* = 660<br>*n* = 176<br><br>Age: grades 6–12<br><br>Chi-square analysis<br><br>ANOVA and MANOVA<br><br>Mediation analysis | **Victimization:**<br>• Unwanted sexual experiences +<br><br>**Other:**<br>• Meet criteria for PTSD + |
| Predicting Sexual Coercion in Early Adulthood: The Transaction Between Maltreatment, Gang Affiliation, and Adolescent Socialization of Coercive Relationship Norms | 2016 | Ha, T., Kim, H., Christopher, C., Caruthers, A., & Dishion, T. J. | Longitudinal<br><br>*N* = 998<br>*n* = 472<br><br>Age: 11–24<br><br>Chi-square analysis<br><br>Mediation analysis | **Victimization:**<br>• Maltreatment + |
| "Curiosity and a Pimp": Exploring Sex Trafficking Victimization in Experiences of Entering Sex Trade Industry Work Among Participants in a Prostitution Diversion Program | 2017 | Hickle, K., & Roe-Sepowitz, D. | Retrospective<br><br>*N* = 478<br><br>Age: 4–56 | **Sex trafficking involvement:**<br>• Sex trafficking experiences + |

| Survey title | Year | Authors | Design | Findings Push/pull factors |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Chi-square analysis | |
| "Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones, But Bullying Will Get Me Bangin'": Bullying Involvement and Adolescent Gang Joining | 2019 | Shelley, W. W., & Peterson, D. | Longitudinal<br><br>*N* = 1,730<br>*n* = 955<br><br>Age: grades 6–12<br><br>*t*-test<br><br>ANOVA<br><br>Bivariate/multivariate logistic regressions<br><br>Mediation | **Externalizing behaviors:**<br>• Traditional bullying ++<br>• Cyberbullying +<br><br>**Victimization:**<br>• Threatened/attacked at school ++<br>• Rumors/lies spread ++<br>• Teased/made fun of +<br>• General bully victimization + |

| Survey title | Year | Authors | Design | Findings<br>Push/pull factors |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Adversity and Intervention Needs Among Girls in Residential Care With Experiences of Commercial Sexual Exploitation | 2018 | Hickle, K., & Roe-Sepowitz, D. | Cross-sectional<br><br>*N* = 135<br><br>Age: 11–17<br><br>Chi-square analysis | **Sex trafficking involvement:**<br>• Sexual exploitation + |
| Sibling Transmission of Gang Involvement | 2021 | Hashimi, S., Wakefield, S., & Apel, R. | Longitudinal<br><br>*N* = 7,760<br>*n* = 1,154<br><br>Age: 12–26<br><br>Discrete-time hazard model | **Neighborhood:**<br>• Presence of neighborhood gangs +<br><br>**Peer and family environment:**<br>• Same-sex sibling (sister) gang affiliation + |

# Discussion

## Findings Regarding Push and Pull Factors

From reviewing the studies above, the research team identified the following factors as being relevant in pushing or pulling females toward gang involvement.

### Externalizing Behaviors

Four of the studies included in this review found that a youth's outward or externalizing behaviors influenced their joining a gang. Three of those four studies found some form of delinquency to be a significant factor. Bjerregaard and Cochran (2012) measured delinquency using an index based on the frequency of engaging in 11 delinquent activities (such as not paying for things, theft, and armed robbery). De La Rue and Espelage (2014) measured delinquency using two items; one included the frequency with which youths had tagged or vandalized public or private property, and the second measured the number of days they had carried a weapon onto school property. The researchers also used seven items to measure aggression perpetration—both verbal and physical. These items measured the frequency of aggressiveness and included statements such as "I started arguments or conflicts" and "I threatened to hurt or hit another student." Hennigan and colleagues (2015) also found delinquency to be significantly related to gang involvement. They used a scale based on 17 questions to assess participants' delinquent activities and substance use in the past year.

Shelley and Peterson (2019) utilized bullying as the main independent variable for their study. Their survey included items assessing both bully offending and victimization. For perpetration, the survey included frequency questions asking respondents whether they had bullied other students at school or said any mean or threatening things through text messages, phone calls, emails, or websites in the previous 6 months. They found that for females, being a perpetrator of traditional bullying and cyberbullying increases the odds of joining a gang.

### Victimization

Five studies included in this review found a history of victimization as a push factor for females joining a gang. These forms of victimization ranged from personal victimization to sexual or emotional abuse. Bjerregaard and Cochran (2012) measured personal victimization using an

item that asked respondents to report the number of times in the previous year they had been attacked and/or robbed. The study found this factor to be a significant predictor for females specifically.

De La Rue and Espelage (2014) measured a respondent's history of abuse with two items that asked about the last time their parent had kicked or hit them and left bruises or bumps and about the last time any adult had touched them in a sexual way. They found that sexual abuse was a significant predictor of female gang involvement. Similarly, Ha and colleagues (2016) asked participants at age 19 to recall their history of maltreatment from family or other sources throughout childhood. This measure included items assessing physical abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse. This study found a positive relationship between a history of maltreatment and gang affiliation for males and females. Additionally, Kerig and colleagues (2016) utilized a screening measure to determine if youths had experienced 17 specific "very scary, violent, or dangerous events," such as being physically or sexually abused, witnessing violence, experiencing accidents, and more. Girls in gangs were more likely than girls who were not gang members to report unwanted sexual experiences.

Shelley and Peterson (2019) examined seven items to assess bully-victimization, which was split into three types: direct victimization, indirect victimization, and cyberbullying victimization. This study found that female participants who had been attacked or threatened at school, had had rumors or lies spread about them, had been teased or made fun of, or had been bullied were generally more likely to report joining a gang.

## Peer and Family Environment

Several of the studies included in this review noted that factors related to an individual's peer or family environment influenced their gang involvement. The most notable factors in this category are related to family gang involvement and association with delinquent peers. For example, Gilman and colleagues (2014) found living with a gang member to be a significant predictor of gang involvement. Participants in their study were asked if they had ever lived with a gang member, how old they had been when they first started living with that person, and how long they had lived with them. This result was the same for both males and females in the study. The main independent variable in Hashimi and colleagues' 2021 study was sibling gang affiliation. They were able to directly measure sibling gang affiliation rather than relying on indirect reporting from survey respondents. In this study, they used household identifiers to link siblings with one another and attach sibling information to each respondent. Their results found that for females, having a sister involved in a gang increased their own risk of joining a gang. Hennigan and colleagues (2015) also found that among the females in their sample, those with a history of gang involvement reported more family gang influence. They defined family gang influence as having two or more family members who were themselves currently involved in a gang or having family members who had communicated their expectations that the youths join the gang. Additionally, Hennigan and colleagues found that participants with gang

involvement had less parental monitoring (i.e., greater risk) than those with no gang involvement (2015).

Other studies reported some broader family factors, such as De La Rue and Espelage (2014) who found that gang-involved girls were more likely to report family conflict. Family conflict was measured using four survey items that asked youths to indicate the extent to which they agreed with statements about wanting to run away from home, if their parents get drunk or use illegal drugs at home, and if their parents physically fight with each other. Youths were asked if they had ever run away from home or been kicked out of their house by their parents. The study measured family gang involvement by asking if one or more of their family members (excluding themselves) were involved in a street gang. Some studies measured very specific factors. For example, Reed and colleagues (2014) utilized parental military service during the 6 years prior to administering the survey as the primary independent variable in their study. Youths were asked, "In the past 6 years, was your military parent or guardian sent to Iraq, Afghanistan, or other combat zone?" The response options were "no" (categorized as military service without combat zone deployment), "yes" (categorized as military service deployed to a combat zone), or "I do not have a parent in the military" (categorized as a civilian). The results from their analysis show that being in a military family generally increased the risk for gang involvement and being in a military family with a parent who was deployed further increased that likelihood.

Several studies included in this review found that factors related to an individual's peer group can influence their gang involvement. These measures varied and included risk factors such as peer delinquency, an antisocial peer environment, and negative peer influence. Bjerregaard and Cochran (2012) measured peer delinquency using an index of eight variables to determine the number of friends who engage in delinquent activities (such as destroying property, stealing, or attacking someone with a weapon). Gilman and colleagues (2014) defined an antisocial peer environment as the extent to which a respondent's three closest friends, as well as other peers, provided antisocial influences. This measure had an average of 12 items during each wave of the survey and included questions such as "Does this person do things that get them into trouble with the teacher?" and "How many kids do you know personally who in the past year have done something that could have gotten them in trouble with the police?" Hennigan and colleagues (2015) included items to measure negative peer influence. Prior studies, as well as this one, have found that youths who are committed to a negative peer group are more likely to join a gang. Each of these three studies found that these negative peer associations were significantly related to an increased risk of gang involvement for females.

## Neighborhood and School

Three studies included in this review emphasized that an individual's neighborhood and school environment can have an influence on their gang involvement. Gilman and colleagues (2014) found that living in an antisocial neighborhood environment was a significant predictor of gang

involvement for study participants. They measured this factor as a composite variable, and the index included an average of 10 items during each wave of the survey. Questions included "Tell me how much the following describe your neighborhood: Crime? Drug selling? Abandoned buildings?" Hashimi and colleagues (2021) also measured the presence of gangs in the neighborhood. This factor was assessed by asking respondents to report whether there are gangs in the neighborhood or where they go to school. The study found that the presence of gangs in the neighborhood increased the risk of gang joining for girls.

Bjerregaard and Cochran (2012) examined school commitment, defined as the time and energy an individual invests in school; and school gang climate, defined as school gang activity, gang fights, and pressure to join gangs. They found both measures to be significant school-level predictors of gang involvement for females.

## Sex Trafficking Involvement

Sex trafficking involvement as it relates to gang involvement was only measured in two studies included in this review, but the findings show a significant relationship between adverse sexual experiences and gang involvement. In 2017, Hickle and Roe-Sepowitz explored involvement in the sex trade and gang involvement using questions about a participant's age at entry into the sex trade, involvement in specific types of work (such as internet call girl work, street prostitution, and pornographic films or photos), and any experience working with or for a pimp. Participants who reported sex trafficking experiences were more likely to report gang involvement.

In 2018, Hickle and Roe-Sepowitz surveyed young females who were at high risk of becoming commercially sexually exploited children (CSEC). Those who reported CSEC-related victimization were more likely to report being gang involved than were their peers with no identified CSEC-related victimization.

## Other Factors

There were a few additional factors related to gang joining that did not fit into the other categories. These include age and PTSD diagnosis. Gilman and colleagues (2014) found that a participant's age had a significant interaction effect with joining a gang. The authors found that most females in the study who joined a gang did so by age 15—very few females joined a gang after age 15, whereas males continued to join gangs through the age of 19. Lastly, Kerig and colleagues (2016) asked specific items to assess whether participants met the criteria for a diagnosis of PTSD (either fully or partially). Their study found that girls in gangs were more likely to meet the full PTSD criteria than girls who were not gang members.

## Limitations

This review met with a few limitations. First, the search terms were not inclusive of gender identities beyond females and therefore may have missed possible nonmale gender identities in the search. Second, this review only represents the past decade of research. The research team acknowledges that some seminal work on females in gangs falls beyond the date range of this review. Additionally, there were limitations related to the studies included in this review. The research team noted a lack of rigorous empirical literature specific to females. More research is needed on factors that push or pull females specifically into gang involvement and gender-specific interventions to prevent involvement or intervene and encourage desistance. Also, a few of the studies in this review included males and females in their samples but grouped them together or did not differentiate between males and females in the study results (Gilman et al., 2014; Ha et al., 2016). Lastly, several studies included in this review are cross-sectional in nature, and therefore the review is unable to determine the causal nature of these factors and whether to consider them as a push or pull factor for female gang involvement. For example, family gang involvement could be categorized as a pull factor. The internal membership of the gang is pulling in the non–gang members because of the familial association. One could also argue that it is a push factor in that non–gang members are encouraged—pushed—by their gang-involved siblings to join the gangs. It is not possible to make this distinction from cross-sectional data, so qualitative methods would be beneficial for understanding whether the young person experiences a *push* or a *pull* from their gang-involved family member. Also, a causal model is needed for a better understanding of the push/pull dynamic, but a causal study was not available for this factor. That is, the temporal order of the risk factor relative to gang involvement is unknown, so within these studies, it is not possible to say whether the risk led to gang involvement or gang involvement led to the risk.

## Considerations for Practice

The findings surfaced in this review suggest that the empirical literature on factors that lead females to join gangs is currently in a nascent state and lags the literature base focused on males and the research literature that does not disaggregate by gender. While seminal articles exist that provide a foundation for rigorous quantitative studies, such studies have generally proven elusive over the past decade. Several studies provide a qualitative investigation into factors that influence females to join gangs; however, these studies are generally limited in sample and generalizability. In addition to suggesting the need for further research, particularly longitudinal studies involving nonmale participants, the findings described above suggest that there is preliminary evidence—despite being limited in volume—of female-specific factors that influence gang involvement, and practitioners in the field might consider this evidence when

pursuing program development and implementation. These considerations for practice include the following:

- Although the recent quantitative literature is limited, the studies reviewed, as well as other qualitative studies, suggest a relationship between prior sexual abuse and sex trafficking and future gang involvement. Given this possible relationship, program developers and implementation staff should coordinate closely with community providers who support victims of these crimes to identify other risks and needs early on that might exacerbate the propensity of these victims to join gangs.
- Consistent with the literature on males, recent evidence suggests that there is a greater likelihood of future gang involvement among females with older female siblings who are current gang members. Close coordination between secondary and tertiary prevention efforts may help identify and divert younger siblings from subsequent gang involvement.
- Although neighborhood and peer factors associated with future gang involvement appear consistent across males and females, age varies, and the evidence suggests that females join gangs earlier than do males—before 15 years old on average. It may be beneficial to consider expanding the age range for female-specific intervention models to include 14–24-year-olds in order to capture early gang involvement among some females.
- Given the confluence of school-related factors associated with future gang involvement and the early age of gang involvement among females relative to males, community prevention strategies should consider a strong collaboration with schools to identify and intervene with current gang members and to prevent younger siblings from future involvement.

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# Appendix. Brief Table of Findings

Table A1 summarizes findings from a systematic review of empirical research with quantitative outcomes that reported on push or pull factors that influence female involvement in gangs and concern sex trafficking experiences related to gang involvement. These findings are drawn from 11 studies conducted since 2010. The complete report provides fuller details of the review and findings, including limitations.

### Table A1. Summary of Findings

| Category | Number of Studies | Females are at an increased likelihood of gang involvement if they… |
|---|---|---|
| Peer and family environment | 6 | • have friends who are delinquent or involved in antisocial behaviors<br>• have parents with a history of military involvement<br>• experience conflict at home<br>• have a history of running away or being kicked out of their homes<br>• have family members who are gang involved either in or out of the home<br>• lack adequate parental supervision |
| Victimization | 5 | • have a history of…<br>  ○ personal victimization and maltreatment<br>  ○ sexual abuse and unwanted sexual experiences<br>  ○ school-based victimization (verbal, physical, and threat-based) |
| Externalizing behaviors | 4 | • engage in delinquent acts or aggressive behavior, including traditional bullying and cyberbullying perpetration |
| Neighborhood and school | 3 | • live in a neighborhood that experiences gang violence or other issues of disorder (e.g., high crime or environmental disrepair)<br>• show a lack of commitment to school<br>• attend a school where gangs are present and there is peer pressure to join |
| Sex trafficking involvement | 2 | • have experienced sexual exploitation or sex trafficking |
| Other | 2 | • are younger in age<br>• meet criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder |

## Considerations for Practice

- Program developers and implementation staff should coordinate closely with community providers who support victims of sexual crimes to identify other risks and needs early on that increase gang exposure.
- Close coordination between secondary and tertiary violence prevention efforts may help identify and divert younger siblings of gang-involved family members from future gang involvement.
- The evidence suggests that females join gangs earlier than do males. It may be beneficial to include younger females (e.g., 14–24) in violence prevention models to capture early gang involvement among some females.
- Community prevention strategies should consider a strong collaboration with schools to identify and intervene with current gang members and prevent younger siblings from future involvement.