



Raw Down: HIV risk among adolescent gang members

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Study Summary: Opportunities for Growth (OG) is a mixed-methods formative research project designed to address gaps in knowledge regarding differences in structural characteristics among gangs the influence of these on the social context of risk behavior and individual members' sexual risk. Information from this study will be used to inform and evaluate a multi-level risk reduction intervention.

This analysis focuses on sexual risk behaviors among 58 adolescent gang members.

Background

According to the CDC

- ❖ 3 million adolescents are infected with STIs each year
- ❖ 13 to 29 year olds account for nearly 40% of all new HIV infections, although African American youth account for a significant proportion of those cases
- ❖ Heterosexually transmitted HIV is on the rise

Gang affiliation is associated with:

- ❖ higher rates of unprotected sex
- ❖ sex while under the influence of alcohol or drugs
- ❖ having multiple or concurrent sexual partners
- ❖ earlier age of sexual initiation

Objective: Explore how these risk behaviors are influenced by the social context of gangs, including gang & peer norms, attitudes, and expectations.

Methods

- ❖ Semistructured interviews between June 2012 and July 2013 with current members of 6 adolescent gangs

Recruitment strategy

- ❖ Targeted direct sampling: outreach from research assistants and referral of contacts by study participants
- ❖ Upon completion of the interview, participants received 2 referral cards to recruit additional gang members and received \$10 for referring additional eligible participants

Interview content

- ❖ History of gang involvement (why they joined, how they were initiated, and current gang activities)
- ❖ Experiences with school and family life
- ❖ Current drug and alcohol use

- ❖ Sexual practices and relationships
- ❖ Perception of HIV risk

Data Analysis

- ❖ Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded and analyzed using MAXQDA

Results

	Corporate Gangs N=17	Neighborhood Gangs N=41	Totals N=58
Males	9 (53%)	21 (56%)	32 (55%)
Females	8 (48%)	18 (44%)	26 (45%)
African American	16 (94%)	21 (51%)	37 (64%)
Latino	1 (6%)	12 (29%)	13 (22%)
Mixed, African American & Latino	0	8 (20%)	8 (14%)
Age (mean, range)	17.6 (15-19)	18 (14-19)	17.9 (14-19)

Understanding HIV risk among adolescent gang members

I. Sexual risk factors unique to gangs

- ❖ Sexual initiation
 - demonstrates being loyal or ‘down for the gang’
 - leads to perceptions of sexual availability and promiscuity
- ❖ Gender roles and expectations
 - girls who were sexed in vs. girls initiated in other ways
- ❖ Gender hierarchy & power dynamics; limit girls’ availability to say no
- ❖ Substance use (primarily alcohol and marijuana) prior to intercourse
- ❖ Social sex, including sex parties, train or group sex
 - increases instances of sexual victimization of intoxicated girls
 - often leads to regrets by both boys and girls

Example: 19 year-old Hispanic male

You come around, you want to be part of this clique, you got to show your devotion, and one way of showing that devotion is, getting raw down . . . meaning, there’s no condoms or nothing there. You just get raw down. You get did when they tell you to get did.

Later, when asked whether he uses a condom when sexing in female members, he says:

Oh yeah, I do, I try to protect, but nobody does. The majority, when it happens, they bring them [girls] in, like literally, straight off the street, just like going to get a job interview. They bring it in, she wants in. Okay, who is she? Boom, let’s see how down she is – right there, raw, raw down.

II. Condom use

- ❖ Not typically used with primary partners; occasionally with casual partners
- ❖ Substance use and partying regularly interfered with condom use
- ❖ Pregnancy, not STIs was most commonly cited as reason for using condoms
- ❖ The gender norms of the gang may influence girls' ability to control condom use

Example 18 year-old Hispanic male:

Participant: *Not the one I live with, you know, I stay with my head at. She more like my main chick. You know what I mean. But the other two, man, yeah, man.*

Interviewer: *Why?*

Participant: *I mean, if I can do that to them, anybody can do it to them. You know what I mean. So it's like, man. But I know my main chick, I take care of her. So I kind of trust her a little bit.*

However, he later admits to also having sex with female gang members

Participant: *Well, I sleep with gang chicks too, You know what I'm saying, after a party or being drunk all night, kicking it, and smoking and stuff "and doesn't always use condoms with them: "Most of the time. Like I said, not all the time, cause I be too drunk sometimes you know. We just, it is what it is, man.*

Example: 19 year-old African American female

Interviewer: *Can you tell me why you're not using condoms with him?*

Participant: *Just 'cause that's not what you're supposed to do with your main person. Like, if you try to bring up condoms, then then think that you like not the only person.*

Interviewer: *Have you tried to bring up condoms?*

Participant: *Like, no. I never force it upon him, no.*

III. Perceptions of HIV risk

- ❖ Mixed perceptions of HIV risk
- ❖ Many acknowledged participating in high-risk activities and recognized a high likelihood of infection given those activities
- ❖ Responsibility of safe sex is usually put on the females
 - Despite the fact that boys seemed to have more partners and higher-risk sex, they attributed their risk for HIV to 'hos' and 'dirty bitches'
 - Yet girls perceived themselves to have little authority in requesting condoms

Example: 17 year-old African American male:

Interviewer: *How likely do you think you could get HIV?*

Participant: *Uh, uh, a big chance of me catching HIV with me gangbanging and sex and drugs. It's a big chance I might catch HIV.*

Interviewer: *And how do you feel about that?*

Participant: *Bad 'cause I know it comes with this life, and I got too deep in it.*

IV. HIV testing

- ❖ Majority of adolescents had received an HIV test
 - Risk of HIV was attributed to being part of “the life”
- ❖ Despite extensive risk behaviors reported, no participants reported being HIV-positive

Example: 21 year-old African American female:

Interviewer: *Have you been tested?*

Participant: *Yes, I have. Um, I went to my regular doctor's appointment and stuff like that, because I knew what I was doing was wrong and I was afraid of catching it. But, other than that, no.*

Considerations for HIV risk-reduction interventions

- ❖ Current gang members have few options to leave the gang (and many have no desire to leave the gang)
- ❖ Need to navigate gang norms and rituals (i.e. sexing in)
- ❖ Gender norms and hierarchy make it difficult for some girls to negotiate safe sex
- ❖ Perception of risk is often under-estimated
- ❖ Risk functions as a way for gang members to prove their loyalty & dedication to the gang