Pathways to Deviance: Exploring the Relationship between Peer Affiliation, Gang Membership and Youth Misconduct

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Abstract

Deviant peer affiliation and gang membership often act as a catalyst for maladaptive behaviour, as individuals in the late adolescent phase of lifespan development typically share stronger attachment to their peers than to their caregivers. An interrelationship also exists between delinquency and factors such as peer approval of deviance and peer pressure to transgress. This is particularly prevalent when exposed to challenges in the family or school, which typically perpetuate feelings of rejection, leading to a greater likelihood to seek out peers to gain a sense of belonging, support and camaraderie. Despite the importance of these interactions, exposure to antisocial peers or gangs exponentially increase the propensity to transgress, as maladaptive behaviour would be reinforced, thereby decreasing the efficacy of primary and secondary socialisation agents. Moreover, youths may become desensitised to violence, learn to rationalise unlawful behaviour and gain opportunities for crime. Accordingly, a qualitative study was conducted in South Africa to explore peer affiliation and gang membership as a pathway to deviance, based on the unique experiences of 20 detained male youths. The data were obtained through purposive sampling and analysed by frequency or percentage distributions, and also through narrative accounts from the participants. The findings identified deviant peer affiliation (75%) and gang involvement (65%) as key factors which motivated the participants to transgress. Furthermore, the association between peer affiliation, substance abuse, academic failure and truancy was apparent. It is thus envisaged that these findings will stimulate further research, contribute to the existing literature and aid in the development of strategies to manage deviant peer association and gang membership.

Keywords: youth misconduct, criminogenic risk factor, peer affiliation, gang membership

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Introduction

With reference to large-scale social disorganisation, unemployment and poverty in contemporary South Africa, it is essential to understand the factors that perpetuate youth misconduct (Khan and Singh 2014, 109). In this regard, there is typically an upsurge in the number of displaced youths seeking alternative means of survival, especially in the surrogate-group context (Phillips and Maritz 2015, 53). Phenomena such as rapid urbanisation, family conflict, relative deprivation, the ostracism of minority groups and the immediate need to adapt to social change also increase the propensity for antisocial peer affiliation, thereby exacerbating the gang problem (Petrus 2013, 74; Phillips and Maritz 2015, 53; Shelden, Tracy, and Brown 2012).

Criminologists and developmental psychologists also consistently highlight interaction with delinquent peers and the involvement in gang-related activities as a key aetiological concern with regard to the development of maladaptive behaviour as youths typically share a stronger attachment to their peers than to their caregivers (Harris 2009, 54). Their proclivity to transgress is therefore amplified when the majority of leisure time is spent with their peers, when associating with their peers who approve of unlawful behaviour or when frequently exposed to peer pressure for deviance (Harris 2009, 54; Phillips 2019, 118). Moreover, antisocial peer association provides an optimal learning environment for antisocial behaviour, particularly for youths who experience conflict or strain in the school and community context (Keijsers et al. 2012, 651).

To further compound the risk for offending, deviant peer groups and gangs create access to a plethora of illegitimate avenues for goal attainment, facilitate the exposure to antisocial norms, desensitise youths to acts of crime and violence, and decrease the efficacy of the family and school to advance socially acceptable behaviour (Pacheco 2010, 20; Phillips 2019, 50; Phillips and Maritz 2015, 53; Shader 2001, 6; Siegel 2002, 187). Harris (2009, 55) furthers this by noting the importance of recognising the multidimensional nature of peer relationships, and understanding the processes inherent in peer socialisation which sustain and enhance the development of socially unacceptable and unlawful conduct. Arguably, youths tend to seek out peers who exhibit behavioural patterns similar to their own and there is general uniformity among peers regarding aggression, sexual promiscuity and substance use (Phillips 2019, 119). It is thus apparent that "once the friendship network is established, a context is provided in which peers can influence each other" (Harris 2009, 55).

Bartol and Bartol (2017, 56) support this premise and affirm that peer acceptance and approval is an essential developmental task during adolescence, often guiding healthy psychological functioning and moral growth. Inversely, the experience of social rejection by peers or exposure to deviant peers during adolescence may be a crucial risk factor for misconduct during puberty, and for antisocial behaviour throughout one's life course (Phillips 2019, 120). The significance of research pertaining to the peer group context thus cannot be overlooked, as peer affiliations present with the potential to make an inimitable and vital contribution to the social, emotional and moral development of

youths, and also to function as a pertinent predictor for youth misconduct (Burton, Leoschut, and Bonora 2009, xiii; Clark 2012, 77; Khan and Singh 2014, 105; Phillips 2019, 1).

Despite the importance of peer interactions, a paucity of contemporary local research exists which explores this relationship from the unique perspectives of the youths themselves. The aim of the study is therefore to examine antisocial peer relationships and gang membership as a pathway to youth misconduct, by delineating the perceptions in a sample of incarcerated youths concerning their own unlawful behaviour. More specific objectives are related to exploring the samples' experiences concerning their association with deviant peers, the activities they perform while in the company of their peers as well as their views regarding gang membership as a pertinent risk factor for youth misconduct.

Review of Existing Literature and Prior Empirical Evidence

As highlighted in the foregoing section, a robust social component exists between adolescent law-violating behaviour, as misconduct is most likely to occur in groups (Monahan, Steinberg, and Cauffman 2009, 1520). Wasserman et al. (2003, 7) substantiate this by asserting that deviant peer affiliation is frequently linked to increased rates of co-offending and gang membership. A pioneering report exploring the influence of deviant peer association published by Shaw and McKay in the early 1930s, also indicated that 80 per cent of youthful transgressors in Chicago were arrested with co-perpetrators and that 90 per cent of the offences recorded in juvenile court records involved two or more accomplices (Burfeind and Bartusch 2006, 425). Data collected from a National Youth Survey conducted with a representative sample of youths between 11 and 17 years in the United States in 1995 yielded similar findings. The most persistent pattern identified was "a child moving from association with non-delinquent peers to association with slightly deviant peers, and then on to the commission of minor offences. More frequent association with deviant peers and more serious offending followed, leading to the highest level of association with deviant peers" (Wasserman et al. 2003, 6). Adolescents who transgress in the group context, also transgress more frequently and commit more serious offences in comparison to youths who act on their own (Burfeind and Bartusch 2006, 425).

More recently, a longitudinal study conducted by Harder, Knorth and Kalverboer (2015) on detained youths in the Netherlands used a mixed-methods approach to assess the risk factors for deviant behaviour. The findings highlighted deviant peer affiliation and substance abuse as the most pertinent predictors for youth misconduct. Similarly, local research based on an identification of the psycho-social and criminogenic risk factors for detained youths, conducted by Khan and Singh (2014) in the metropolitan city of Durban in South Africa, indicated that 61 per cent of the sample had transgressed with peers. A separate study aimed at exploring the risk factors and causal pathways to youth violence in South Africa, also identified deviant peer affiliation as one of the most potent

predictors for serious violent future offending for youths between 12 and 14 years, based on an analysis of existing literature and prior research (Van der Merwe and Dawes 2007, 99). Bender (2010, 469), who confirms that youths consistently report greater involvement in crime when frequently in the company of deviant peers, further motivates this correlation as the peer group presents a platform for youths to gain respect, status and popularity.

In more extreme cases, youths may associate with a criminal gang, which differs significantly from merely associating with deviant peers, as this is often a transitory alliance established to perpetrate a specific transgression. However, gang membership denotes a prolonged institution with a distinct structure and organisation related to identifiable leadership, a division of labour, and rules and rituals (Phillips and Maritz 2015, 53). Youth gangs are typically composed of more than three members within a specific age range, generally being between 12 and 24 years. The group shares a sense of identity, symbolised by tattoos, hand gestures and clothing, with some form of permanence required and individuals proving their loyalty over time through the commission of a series of crimes within the context of the group (Pacheco 2010, 20; Peacock 2006, 49).

Factors that support youth–gang formation include the need for protection, power, respect and status, and the belief that membership equates to financial and material success. Youths also become more vulnerable when their family ties are weakened, as they then seek out gangs to fulfil their need for belonging, camaraderie and self-worth, or to explore solutions to social adjustment issues extant in the family or school context (Phillips and Maritz 2015, 53). Despite the motive for joining, youth gang membership exponentially increases the risk to contravene the law, as it requires the youths to adopt the characteristics of the group, abide by its maladaptive norms and engage in frequent acts of crime and violence (Lösel and Farrington 2012, 15; Ntshangase 2015, 47; Phillips 2019, 124; Siegel 2002, 188).

Moreover, these groups are structured based on size, age range, territory and criminal behaviour (Siegel 2002, 194). Regardless of the fluidity and diversity in gang roles or affiliation, Bartollas and Schmalleger (2013, 140) note that youth gang members frequently engage in a greater number of crimes in comparison to any other youths in the social environment, with common offence categories such as theft, aggravated assault, burglary, vandalism and malicious property damage, rape and homicide (Phillips and Maritz 2015, 61). In recent years, South African communities have been plagued by an upsurge in gang-related activities, with specific reference to learners who attend schools in which gang activity is rife. These learners frequently report intimidation and victimisation on the school premises, which in turn compromises their education and facilitate carrying weapons, avoiding school or joining rival gangs for protection (Barnert et al. 2015, 1366). Hawkins et al. (2000), who spent two years analysing existing empirical evidence related to the risk factors for youth violence, confirm this and add that gang membership at the age of 14 also triples the risk for

involvement in violence by the age of 18. It was further established that gang membership by the age of 16 more than quadrupled this risk.

Several theoretical perspectives including the Social Control and Subculture Perspective also support the correlation between youth misconduct and risk factors in the peer group. In this regard, Hirschi (1969) notes that attachment to deviant peers reduces the degree of control exerted by civic institutions, provides optimal opportunities to transgress or to achieve status through contravening the law, and facilitates exposure to negative role models who reinforce law-violating behaviour. Cloward and Ohlin (1960) concur by asserting that gang membership increases the susceptibility for youths to offend, as illegitimate activities are rationalised or justified in the peer group, further decreasing the efficacy of civic institutions to adequately socialise youths. Similarly, the Deviant Peer Contagion Perspective by Dishion and Dodge (2005, 397) affirms that interaction and allegiance to antisocial peers, particularly during early and middle adolescence, increases the likelihood of developing maladaptive behavioural traits as gender roles, norms and expectations become salient during this phase of lifespan development (McCoy et al. 2019, 60). Peer affiliation and "contagion" are thus associated with increased levels of aggression, having the most significant influence on youths who display only moderately deviant behaviour and those who have not yet developed deviant behaviour. In addition to increasing the risk for youth misconduct, antisocial peer association also has the potential to reduce and undermine crime prevention efforts (Dishion and Dodge 2005, 396).

Research Methodology

Owing to the emphasis on exploring the unique experiences of the participants in the sample concerning the relationship between peer affiliation and misconduct, a qualitative approach was used as this facilitated the collection of rich in-depth data (De Vos et al. 2011; Kvale 1996; Rubin and Babbie 2017). Furthermore, purposive theoretical sampling was used to establish an operational population constructed in such a manner that it represents the ideal. This was the preferred approach as practical limitations made it impossible to collect a random sample of all youths detained in South African correctional centres. Even if a random sample in a single centre was obtained, it would only yield randomly obtained data applicable to the youths at that centre, and would thus still not be representative to the universe of incarcerated youths in South Africa (Bless and Higson-Smith 1995, 95; Bryman et al. 2014, 186; Phillips 2019, 146; Wagner, Kawulich, and Garner 2012, 93).

Accordingly, 20 convicted males between 18 and 22 years, detained at the Kimberley Youth Development Centre in South Africa, were selected to participate in the study. This was done because this research site only made provision for male youths, the majority of existing literature and prior research pertain to males, and the majority of correctional clients constitute this demographic variable. Moreover, youths in the aforementioned age group were considered as they are regarded as part of a high-risk

age cohort for violating the law (Khan and Singh 2014, 109; Phillips 2019, 146). The participants were required to be proficient in English or Afrikaans to administer the data collection instrument, and primarily identified as African (75%) and Coloured (25%). The majority of the sample (70%) were between 20 and 21 years of age, having been incarcerated for aggressive (50%), economic (25%) and sexual (25%) offences.

Owing to the exploratory nature of the study, the data were collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews, centred on the participants' peer relationships, level of attachment to deviant peers, leisure time spent with their peers and their involvement in gang-related activities. Additional data were collected via participant observation during each interview and were added to the respective transcripts, which were recorded verbatim. The data were then analysed, interpreted and presented by frequency and percentage distributions together with narrative accounts detailing the participants' unique perceptions of the peer group as a pertinent predictor for youth misconduct. This also allowed for the initiation of discussions comparing and contrasting the findings to existing literature and prior research, as presented in the foregoing section.

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Head of the Policy Coordination and Research Division of the Department of Correctional Services and the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Free State (Ethical Clearance Number: UFS-HSD2016/0160). A feasibility study was then conducted with five participants from the sample population and two staff members at the centre to authenticate the viability of the interview schedule as a data collection tool and to affirm general themes that emerged during the data collection. The data were validated at several points throughout the interview process by reading responses back to the participants to provide them with an opportunity to reflect on the accuracy of the recorded data. This enhanced the quality and accuracy of the field notes and ensured that accurate meanings, inferences and interpretations were assigned to the responses provided (Cope 2014, 90; Creswell 2014, 251; Kornbluh 2015, 397; Lietz and Zayas 2010, 193; Shenton 2004, 68; Williams and Morrow 2009, 579).

Findings and Discussion

The data derived from the interviews were organised and sorted into themes as presented in the succeeding section.

Theme 1: Deviant Peer Affiliation

The relationship between deviant peer association and youth misconduct is supported by the findings obtained in the current study, as the majority of the sample cited peer affiliation as a key risk factor for unlawfulness. In addition, peer interactions were also linked to academic failure, substance abuse, detachment from school, and increased rates of truancy. Fifteen participants (75%) reported associating with deviant peers in comparison to five participants (25%) who reported no affiliation to antisocial peers. A significant percentage of the research participants (85%) also reported spending most

of their time with their peers and acknowledged feeling closer to their peers than to members of their family (65%). One participant explained his relationship with his peers by stating:

> When I am with my friends it's not the same as being with my family. My friends give me everything I need. I feel like smoking, I smoke. If I feel like drinking, I drink. My family don't like my friends because they are bad people and its people who also commit crime, but I don't think they are bad people. (Participant 2)

Participant 3 shared a similar experience and noted:

> The thing that make me spend time with my friends is because my family was always at work, so I didn't spend much time with them. My family dislikes my friends because they know that my friends were violent people in the community. I felt closer to my friends because they were always there for me when I wanted to fight, they were always protecting me, and everything I tell them, they did it.

Several other participants also shared a stronger level of attachment to their peers than to their family. From these, Participants 9 and 10 motivated their view by sharing:

> When I am at home, I don't like to talk to that people [family]. I don't know why – but when I am with my friends I can talk anything that I want to talk. I feel free to talk with them. My family didn't like my friends because of the things they did, the crime they committed. (Participant 9)

> My family was preaching every day 'don't make friends with that boys, that boys they come from prison' and so on. Then I will tell them 'you can't choose for me a life'. I end up thinking stupid – that if my family don't give me attention – maybe if I go with those friends I will get more attention. (Participant 10)

From the data obtained, it was also clear that numerous factors contributed to the participants spending most of their free time with their peers, despite the majority (75%) indicating that their family did not approve of the peers they chose to associate with. These factors included gaining access to alcohol and narcotics (as is evident in the response of Participant 2) and experiencing lower levels of attachment to family and stronger attachment to the peer group (as illustrated by the response of Participants 9 and 10). Participants 3 and 10 also noted a lack of parental supervision or rebelling against the authority of their families as reasons for spending most of their time in the company of their peers. This supports the research findings of Harris (2009, 55), Bartol and Bartol (2017, 55), and Higgins, Piquero, and Piquero (2011, 1278) who argue that parental influence is generally disregarded during adolescence and substituted by peer influence, as youths often feel closer to their peers than to their families. Thus spending time with peers or seeking out peers who display behaviour patterns similar to their own was preferred during this particular phase of life-course development (Dishion and Dodge 2005, 397).

The need for protection from rival gangs in the community was further highlighted as a key reason for associating with deviant peers. This was demonstrated by the response of two participants (10%) who revealed that they experienced a sense of security and respect in their peer group, a feeling that arguably may not have been experienced in other social settings such as the family or school. The aforementioned participants motivated their view by stating:

> When I was with the gang I feel protected, I feel I'm in a world where many things can go my way if I am with them. I felt the community must look at me and say 'that guy is rough' to give me respect. (Participant 8)

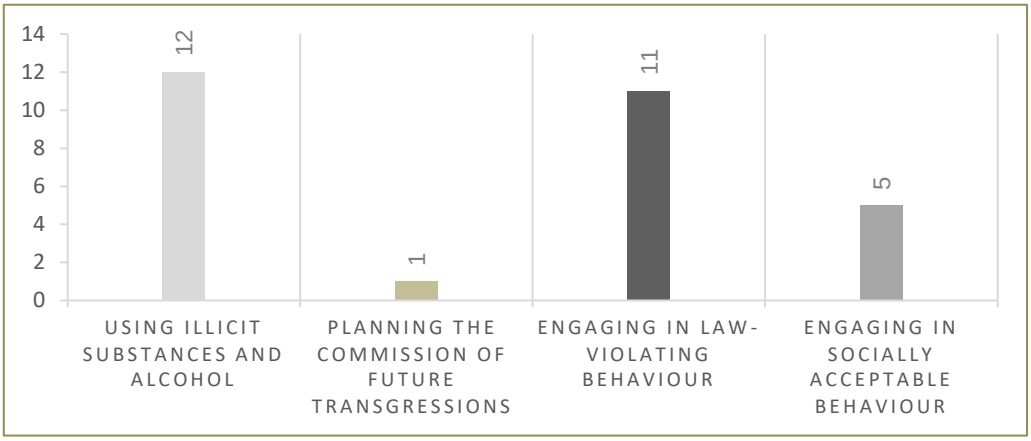
> My family didn't like my friends because they were older than me, and my family knew that they were trouble makers because always in the street you will hear about them – what it is that they have done. They have robbed people again, or they have stolen something. When I started walking around with them I also got involved in robbing people and I started enjoying these things that I am doing because no harm was happening to me because they are always there to protect me. (Participant 15)

The findings presented in this section thus support the research of Phillips and Maritz (2015, 53), Ntshangase (2015, 47), and Peacock (2006, 49), which highlights the need for protection, power and status as factors that motivate antisocial peer affiliation. Arguably, youths may then more easily succumb to the pressure to transgress in order to maintain peer relationships in an attempt to preserve the sense of belonging and camaraderie experienced in the peer context.

Theme 2: Leisure Time Spent with Peers

Ettekal and Ladd (2015, 615) assert that adolescents have a tendency to spend a significant amount of time in the presence of their peers in an unsupervised setting, and are likely to experience a social context represented by unique relational processes which potentially create multiple opportunities and pressure to engage in deviance. Accordingly, the research participants were thus requested to disclose the way in which leisure time was spent while in the company of their peers. These findings are outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Activities performed during leisure time with peers



A total of 12 participants (60%) reported consuming alcohol or illicit substances while spending time with their peers, and 11 participants (55%) reportedly engaged in law-violating behaviour during this time. With reference to the former, 11 participants (55%) indicated that any free time with their peers was spent using narcotics in addition to engaging in crime. Three participants explained this by stating that "We smoke and drink – and we commit crime together" (Participant 2), "We smoke drugs and commit crime" (Participant 9), and "Smoking dagga [cannabis], drugs and drinking alcohol. We also commit crime to get hold of these substances" (Participant 14). A similar experience was also reported by Participant 15, who shared:

> When I'm with them we spend time doing the wrong things. If not robbing people, then we go to town to steal. After that, we go back to the location and we go smoke drugs and drink. I never did anything positive with them.

The narratives above concur with the findings of Harder, Knorth and Kalverboer (2015), which highlighted deviant peer association and substance abuse as the two most prominent predictors for youth misconduct. These findings also correspond with local research findings obtained by Khan and Singh (2014, 105) who conducted a qualitative study with 77 participants, and found that 61 per cent had come into conflict with the law while in the company of their peers. Furthermore, the findings support the view of Bender (2010, 469) who maintains that youth misconduct is largely motivated by the need for peer approval and that misconduct is generally acquired through contact with social networks such as the peer group. Deviant peers thus often serve as role models to younger youths in the community and act as models from which to acquire behaviour suited to the "male role". This was apparent from the response of Participant 9 who explained, "When you grow up, you also want to be like that guy that always commits crimes. He is respected, so you also want to be respected. They become your role models."

One participant (5%) also noted that some members of his family encouraged him to commit crime on his own as his peers may turn against him if apprehended, thus denoting that the family had a bigger influence on his behaviour in comparison to the peer group. Participant 13 motivated his view by stating:

> Now and then things were bad at home, we struggled a bit. My mother took my father to court for maintenance. My family had an influence on me because they told me the things I was doing was right, but I must be careful of my friends because they will turn against me and be state witnesses. So I must commit crime alone.

Theme 3: Gang Membership

As noted previously, in its extreme form, deviant peer affiliation equates to associating with gang members and inevitably becoming a member. Subsequently, the succeeding section presents an exposition of the participants who admitted to being in a gang (Figure 2) and outlines their views regarding their involvement in gang-related activities as a pertinent factor that preceded coming into conflict with the law (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Participants who reported gang membership

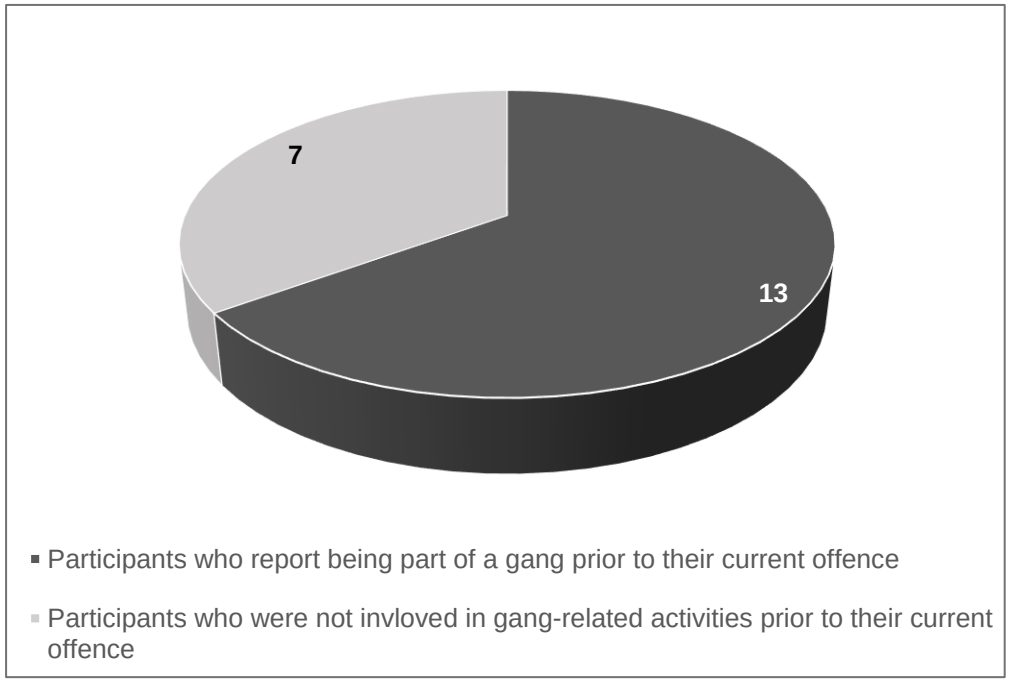
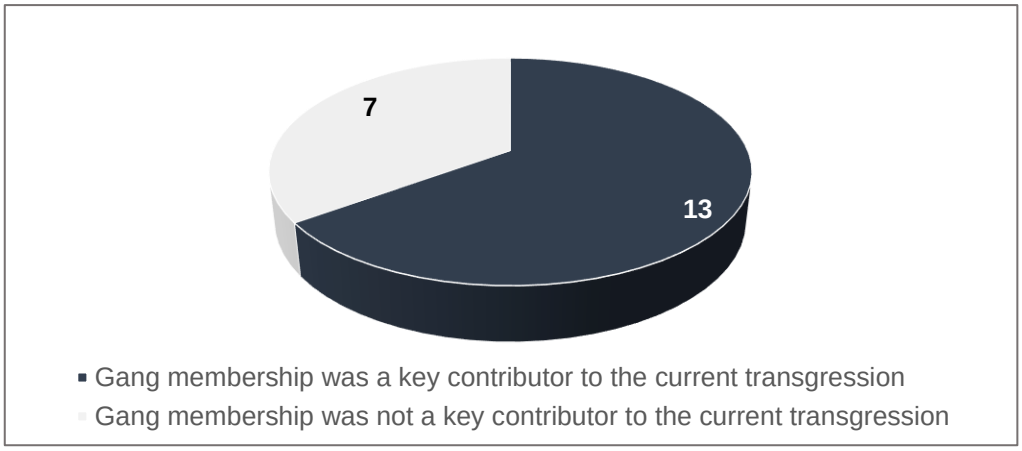


Figure 3: Participants who identified gang membership as a key risk factor



Based on the findings presented in Figures 2 and 3, 13 participants (65%) reported being part of a gang and cited their involvement in gang-related activities as a significant factor that motived them to transgress. The findings illustrated in Figures 2 and 3 are supported by Bartollas and Schmalleger (2013, 140) and Siegel (2002, 197), who assert that gang members perpetrate more transgressions in comparison to any other youths in the social environment, particularly when gang members engage in the excessive use of substances. Moreover, these findings correspond with the research of Hawkins et al. (2000, 2) which indicates that gang membership by the age of 14 triples the risk of engaging in violent transgressions by the age of 18, and that gang membership at the age of 16 more than quadruples this risk. Several participants from the sample who identified gang involvement as a fundamental element that motivated their own unlawful behaviour, justified their views by stating:

> Yes, because there was this girl, she was also part of our gang. Then two months to three months, she didn't want to talk to me, so I felt like maybe these people they are starting to ignore me. So I went and do the crime so that they can be pleased and say that 'okay this guy is following the instruction'. (Participant 1)

> Yes. The person I deceased, he didn't have an issue with me. He had an issue with my friend in the gang. He wanted to stab him and I can't just stand and watch him stabbing my friend. I also had to act. (Participant 3)

> Yes, because they are always saying let's make things that are not good. (Participant 5)

> Yes, because when I am with my friends we are making bad things and we only advise each other with bad things. (Participant 6)

Maintaining a sense of belonging and the ability to prove one's worth was also cited as a reason for the unlawful conduct that supersedes joining a gang. This is echoed by Participant 8, who stated:

> They encouraged me to stab people, I couldn't make my own decisions because I felt pressure on me. If I ignore them, I won't belong in the gang because they will think I'm scared. So I showed them what I can do, and I hurt people's children very badly to show them, and to get their respect.

A similar experience was shared by Participant 10 who noted:

> Yes, because they were always telling me 'it's now time for you to show that you are part of us'. They will tell me I must go outside and take [rob] someone so that they know they can trust me.

Another participant, Participant 14, explained the nexus between youth misconduct and gang membership by referring to gang hierarchy and to the rewards that accompany criminal or violent behaviour. In this regard, he asserted, "I did crime to get a rank in the gang, and so that they can respect me." In contrast to earning respect from the gang, one participant explained that he joined a gang and subsequently engaged in violence as a means to protect his family members from harm. He defended his view by explaining:

> The gangs wanted to hurt my cousins and rob them, so I felt that they will look to me to help them. If I don't, how will they see me in years to come. So I felt I must stand up and do something so that my younger cousins can see that I am here to protect them. So I decided I am also going to join a gang, then I am also going to hurt people to also show those guys what type of person I am. I started to change until I found that I am now a very violent person. (Participant 13)

Apart from the involvement in gang-related activities in their respective communities, several participants from the sample also noted the detrimental effect that gang involvement had on their schooling experience, and described gang violence at school as rife. Participant 3 ascribed his involvement in crime to the nature of gang activities in the school, and elucidates this view by emphasising:

> The thing that led to me commit crime is the one of a lot of gangs at school. That affected my behaviour because the school I was attending, there was a lot of Basotho's and that is where the main thing started, at school. It started at school where we have to separate in classes – Sesotho classes and Afrikaans classes – and then they would tease each other about their language and culture, and it started to become a gang thing. It started at school and then it goes outside to the community.

Four other participants described similar experiences concerning the level and nature of gang-related activities at school. These participants described their experiences by asserting:

> Yes, because in school we are fighting for territory again. When I was in the school, I should check class to class where is the other gang (rival gang members). Every day I will keep my knife or my panga [machete] in my school bag. (Participant 6)

> I learnt it [violence] there because my friends were in the gangs, and they were respected. They even fought the teachers. Then I saw I must join because I also want respect and worship. That contributed to me doing crime because I felt like the other kids could also worship me, so I can also go into gangsterism. I also wanted that feeling because I saw many guys that were violent at school got many girls. I saw that it's true, if you are violent the girls feel protected, so I got more women. (Participant 8)

> It starts at school, gang activities start at school. Things we do at school, you will fool your parents. Your parents will think 'this boy is committed because he is attending school each and every day' but behind the scenes you are corrupt. After school, you will go and lie to your parents, 'no I have some extra classes' but then you go and rob – and your parents will cover you because they know this guy at this time, he was at extra classes or at the library. (Participant 14)

> Yes, because everything started at school. This thing of fighting and gangsterism, we also used to fight at school. I joined the gang at the location, but most of my friends [fellow gang members] they were at school. (Participant 15)

It is thus clear that both the community and the school environment may be extremely conducive to gang activity, and it seems evident that in numerous instances youth–gang membership may originate in the school as opposed to the community, as is often assumed. Several inferences can also be made about the data obtained from youths in the sample. It was apparent that both deviant peer affiliation (75%) and the involvement in gang-related activities (65%) seemed to be a crucial factor that motivated youths in the sample to contravene the law. The majority of the participants reported having relationships with peers who engaged in law-violating behaviour and acknowledged coming into conflict with the law because of peer pressure or maladaptive behaviour being learnt and reinforced in the peer group. A significant number of youths in the sample also reported spending the majority of their time with their peers (85%) and indicated that they felt closer to their peers than to members of their family (65%). The abuse of illicit substances, which is regarded as a risk factor in itself, is seemingly strongly correlated with deviant peer association and gang membership. Furthermore, both gang membership and antisocial peer affiliation seem to be associated with exposure to other socio-criminogenic risks such as parental absence, socio-economic disadvantage, poor academic achievement, and dropping out of school.

These findings thus support several local and international research studies which highlight peer affiliation and gang membership as a fundamental risk factor motivating youth misconduct (Barnert et al. 2015; Harder, Knorth, and Kalverboer 2015; Harris 2009; Khan and Singh 2014; Peacock 2006). Moreover, the findings obtained concur with existing literature (Keijsers et al. 2012, 651; Siegel 2002, 185) and theoretical perspectives presented by Cloward and Ohlin (1960), Hirschi (1969) and Dishion and

Dodge (2005). In this regard, antisocial peer association and gang membership correlated with increased rates of co-offending, greater involvement in unlawful behaviour and serious transgressions such as rape and homicide (Bender 2010, 469; Burfeind and Bartusch 2006, 425; Wasserman et al. 2003, 6). Hence, deviant peer affiliation and youth gang membership as a pathway to youth misconduct is supported by the current study, which highlighted peer relationships as a key factor perpetuating misconduct in addition to other criminogenic risks such as academic failure, illicit substance use, detachment from school and increased rates of truancy.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Although the findings apply solely to the youths in the sample and may not be generalised, they promote a deeper understanding of the peer group as a predictor for youth misconduct and suggest that conflict reduction initiatives cannot succeed devoid of strategies aimed at buffering the effect of exposure to antisocial peers and gang-related activities. Moreover, deviant peer affiliation and youth–gang membership are multidimensional, progressive social phenomena that are fluid in nature. An extricable link also exists between peer affiliation and the exposure to factors such as poverty, academic failure, weak kinship bonds, substance abuse and restricted access to conventional success. This link subsequently signifies a need for intervention at multiple levels, and by key stakeholders in the family, community and school domain.

With reference to the family, caregivers must ensure the bonding process with youths and serve as models for conventional and moral behaviour. Parents should also nurture the abilities and self-esteem of youths, and make a concerted effort to adequately supervise them, especially during leisure time with their peers. In cases where caregivers are unable to do so, alternative support networks should be established which could consist of neighbours or members of the extended family. Mentorship programmes such as SAYes Transition Mentoring, Coaches and Mentors of South Africa (COMENSA) and the Bright Stars mentorship programme are crucial in this regard as they expose troubled youths to positive role models capable of advancing prosocial behaviour, in addition to assisting with academic tasks and occupying free time.

In the school domain, administrative staff and educators should ensure a secure environment that is devoid of bullying, corporal punishment and access to alcohol or narcotics. State departments should ensure that schools, particularly those located in impoverished communities, have access to the resources needed for academic success and that adequate extramural and sports activities are available. Punitive and other policies should be reviewed regularly and adapted where necessary, and educators should frequently be encouraged to maintain healthy relationships with the learners in their care. Improved school–police relationships would also prove valuable, as this would facilitate the exchange of information regarding gang-related activities in and outside of school, and also aid in creating awareness regarding the risk factors for gang

membership and its negative consequences. The Adopt-a-Cop and Captain Crime Stop initiatives may prove valuable in this regard.

In closing, it can be said that the peer group is a unique and dominant agent promoting the socially maladaptive behaviour of youths. Owing to the nature of this socio-criminogenic risk factor, it is envisaged that the findings obtained in the current study will stimulate further research conducted with an all-inclusive population-representative sample consisting of younger and older youths, females and youths who have been exposed to risk factors but have not yet come into conflict with the law. Longitudinal research and research using a control group would also help to assess the aetiology and impact of antisocial peer affiliation and gang membership, in order to develop programmes aimed at reducing conflict among the youth as both State- and NGO-driven intervention strategies aimed specifically at dealing with risk factors such as youth–gang membership are rare.

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