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Gangs, Terrorism, and Radicalization

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Abstract

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Abstract

What can street gangs tell us about radicalization and extremist groups? At first glance, these two groups seem to push the boundaries of comparison. In this article, we examine the important similarities and differences across criminal, deviant, and extremist groups. Drawing from research on street gangs, this article explores issues such as levels of explanation, organizational structure, group process, and the increasingly important role of technology and the Internet in the context of radicalization. There are points of convergence across these groups, but it is important to understand the differences between these groups. This review finds little evidence to support the contention that American street gangs are becoming increasingly radicalized. This conclusion is based largely on organizational differences between gangs and terror groups.

Introduction

Concern over radicalization has increased over the past decade. Indeed, radicalization is seen as a core motivating force behind involvement in terror, and in some cases de-radicalization is seen as an effective strategy against groups involved in terrorism.[1, 2] The presence of radicalized beliefs is problematic to the extent that such beliefs result in action, a distinction made by Atran.[3] Examples of such action vary from the attacks on youth and government employees in Oslo, Norway by a right-wing extremist in opposition to multiculturalism, to the bombings of military

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training centers in Charsadda, Pakistan, and to the Taliban avenging the death of Usama bin Ladin. That said, there is an important difference between holding radicalized beliefs and engaging in radicalized actions.

To date, however, concern over radicalization has focused overwhelmingly on Islamic terrorist groups. Right-wing extremism, religious cults, and gangs have been omitted from serious study of the process of radicalization. As Schmid and Pierce noted: "Surprisingly few studies compare radicalization to terrorism to the joining of organized crime groups or religious sects."[4] One important exception to this trend is the recent conference and activities jointly sponsored by *Google Ideas*, The Tribeca Film Festival, and the Council of Foreign Relations. The Summit Against Violent Extremism (SAVE) held in Dublin, Ireland in June 2011, examined the role of the Internet—specifically chat rooms, video posts, and social networking—in recruitment to extremist groups and in separating from such groups.[5] Radicalization may be facilitated through technology, and web-based recruitment poses a considerable problem for the spread of radicalized beliefs that can be mobilized for terror activity. Chat rooms have become a source of radicalization among some groups.[6]

The article examines the issue of radicalization in the context of street gangs. Our main objective is to consider what research on gangs can tell us about radicalization and violent extremism, primarily in the United States. We begin by discussing radicalization in relation to what Jim Short, gang researcher and sociologist, referred to as the "level of explanation problem" that exists within criminology in general and gang research in particular. Next, we provide a basis to compare gangs to other types of criminal and/or extremist groups. In doing so, we consider the organizational structure of groups that organize themselves for criminal behavior, including terror groups, drug smugglers, organized crime, religious cults, and right-wing hate groups. This is followed by a discussion of the increasingly important role of technology and the Internet in the structure and processes of criminal and extremist groups. We conclude by offering what gangs can and cannot tell us about extremist studies. Our central thesis is that there is no evidence of a direct or even indirect link between terrorist groups and street gangs, and that very few gang members experience radicalization towards terrorism, or political or religious extremism, even while in prison. We believe that the differences in organizational structure and a generalized lack of political or religious belief systems among gang members accounts for this conclusion.

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Radicalization, Levels of Explanation, and Gang Research

Borum defines radicalization as "the process of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs."[7] He places an emphasis on the role of "action pathways" or "action scripts" as critical to understanding how extremist ideologies and beliefs are translated into "terrorism or violent extremist actions." Radicalization processes and extremist ideologies and actions are multilayered. Peeling back these layers reveals a host of important issues involving public policy, social and economic factors, group processes, belief systems, and individual motivations and predispositions. Researchers of youth and street gangs have been disentangling this web of complexity for nearly a century and may lend conceptual clarity to several of these issues. Gangs and gang violence are found throughout the world, much like radical and extremist groups.[8] Our central argument is that there is more convergence across criminal and extremist groups than divergence, such that knowledge about the structure and processes of street gangs can inform our understanding of extremist groups and vice-versa.

Short maintains that the field of criminology suffers from a level of explanation problem in understanding its key dependent variable—handicapping theory and policy development—and that this problem is most identifiable in the context of gangs.[9] Short argues that we know very little about how levels of explanation "cross paths" and relate to one another. Implicit in this discussion are clearly defined units of analysis: macro-, group-, and individual-level—in other words, communities (or cities), gangs, and gang members. From this perspective, it is important to link explanations of behavior in accounting for outcomes. For example, it is important to understand individual risk factors, group characteristics, and structural variables when explaining gang behavior. Theories explaining gang emergence do not translate fluidly to explaining gang membership. This logic naturally extends to radicalization processes and extremist groups and has implications for how theories are developed and policies are crafted. For example, the radicalization process for individuals entering extremist groups may differ from the forces influencing the emergence of such groups. Similarly, the forces influencing the emergence of extremist groups may differ from the processes influencing terrorist or extremist actions. It is important to distinguish between explanatory variables and outcomes to avoid muddying the waters, but it is even more important to understand the relationships between levels of explanation.

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At the risk of ignoring our own advice, this article concentrates on gangs as groups because understanding how individuals organize themselves is a key issue in the study of radicalization. Organizational structure affects the three key processes in the criminal activities of such groups: recruitment and joining, group process, and desistance. A key point in this article is that while there is some degree of convergence among groups that commit crime, there are important differences, particularly in the degree of radicalization. We argue that radicalization is important to understand in the context of its ability to encourage the behavior of members and enhance group activity. Building on this, we offer lessons in responding to gangs.

The Organizational Structure of Gangs

Understanding the organizational structure of a gang is an important basis for comparing gangs with other groups involved in crime. Gang structure has implications for understanding the influence of the group on the behavior of individual members.[10] In other words, we need to understand what motivates individuals to do in a group what they would not do as an individual, a phenomenon referred to as group process and one that is present across a variety of different groups. The group process is a powerful force in motivating individuals to join terrorist groups and engage in terrorist acts. In addition, a radicalized belief system plays a key role in such motivation.

Gang organization shows considerable variation and can best be seen on a continuum. At one extreme, gangs are described as highly organized groups, while at the other they are described as ineffective social mechanisms, which lack key features of organizational structure.[11] The former may be thought of as *instrumental-rational* (organized) and the latter as *informal-diffuse* (disorganized) models of gang organization. These ideal types were developed during the debate over the extent to which gangs controlled the increasingly violent U.S. street-drug markets in the 1990s. Hagedorn contrasted organized drug distributors with "freelance" drug dealers, concluding that the latter was a description more consistent with the data.[12] Importantly, Morselli discovered that gang members participate in a number of different crimes and groups, in addition to those committed with their own gang.[13] He notes that while some of their crimes are linked to their membership in the gang, others clearly are not. The research on gang organization has expanded beyond drug selling to areas such as the penetration of gangs into community organization and the ability of gangs to organize homicide.[14, 15]

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The Instrumental-Rational Perspective

The instrumental-rational perspective identifies a vertical structure to gangs that enables them to enforce discipline among their members and effectively define and achieve group ends. Additional measures of instrumental-rational depictions of gang organization include age-graded levels of membership, leadership roles, regularly attended meetings, coordinated drug sales, written rules and codes of conduct, expansion into legitimate business operations, and ties and influence in the political process.[16] This description finds support in research from Detroit, Chicago, and some California prison gangs.[17] The "Black Kings" of Chicago possessed extensive power in the community, enough to influence community affairs.[18] The gang was able to "convince" the neighborhood "Council" (nominated leaders of buildings) that the gang could provide security to the neighborhood. In turn, this strengthened the operations of the gang's hierarchically-structured drug distribution ring. The gang was so well organized that each "constituent [gang] set was tied to the overall organization through trademark and fiduciary responsibilities."[19] To date, however, additional evidence in support of this perspective is sparse. Interestingly, none of this research suggests that the instrumental-rational perspective is associated with a differentiated belief system, much less radicalization.

The Informal-Diffuse Perspective

The informal-diffuse perspective characterizes gangs as self-interested groups who mostly sell drugs to profit themselves, not their gang. Leadership is functional and situational, membership is generally short-lived, formal gang practices are rare, and well-known and regulated codes of conduct are limited to secrecy and loyalty. Perhaps most tellingly, gang members distribute drugs for individual, not collective, ends. It is far more common for gang members to "freelance" as drug dealers.[20] While gang members are involved in a considerable amount of crime, their criminality is adaptive and does not reflect loyalty to the gang. Further, gang membership is transitory, lasting roughly two years.[21] Examples of these descriptions are widespread in the literature.[22] From this perspective, gangs seem to be quite effective at fulfilling a variety of symbolic functions—including friendship, revenge, and peer affiliation—that are largely independent of instrumental concerns such as making money or achieving concrete political or religious ends. In this regard, gangs resemble terrorist groups, whose members are often attracted by the opportunities for peer affiliation. Nevertheless, most gangs, and some gang activity, display a certain level and type of organization, despite Bovenkerk's observation

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that gangs are largely flat and without prominent leadership.[23] After all, the necessary properties must be intact for a gang to be a group. As they lack effective mechanisms for controlling the behavior of their members in an effective fashion, gangs have not evolved into more formal organizations that could foster terrorism or be targets for increased radicalization. Indeed, most gang members are characterized by the lack of a political or religious orientation. This is most pronounced among the modal age categories of street gang members—teenagers—as well as older gang members, many of whom have been to prison.

More organized gangs produce more crime and victimization. Membership in more organized gangs is associated with higher levels of serious crime and delinquency.[24] Support for this hypothesis has been found for offenses such as drug sales, robberies, and gun carrying.[25] Decker et al. found that members of more organized gangs were more likely to experience violent victimizations, and that those members of more organized gangs engaged in higher levels of violent offending and drug selling.[26] In a cross-national analysis, based on youth gang members from twelve U.S. cities and several cities in Trinidad and Tobago, Pyrooz et al. found a modest relationship between gang organization, offending, and victimization. Though these gangs were not well-organized, even a modest level of organization produced higher levels of crime and victimization.[27] Because higher levels of organization among gangs produce higher levels of criminal involvement, it is useful to compare gangs with other criminal groups.

Gangs and Other Criminal Groups

Street gangs are but one form of criminal organization. Street gangs are generally defined as street-oriented groups, whose membership is youthful, that exhibit persistence across time and for whom illegal activity constitutes a part of group identity.[28] Interestingly, a belief system is not generally found as a defining feature of gangs. Scholars have attempted to understand gangs in the broader context of other groups, particularly groups involved in crime. As Morselli has noted, however, an association of criminals is not the same as a criminal association, and gangs more commonly represent the former.[29] It is important to compare gangs to other groups involved in crime, including organized crime, terrorism, drug smuggling, human trafficking, and groups involved in political extremism. Such a comparison highlights the similarities and differences between the groups and increases our ability to develop effective responses. It is useful to compare gangs to other groups and networks on the basis of their structure, processes, cultural orientations, and activities.

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These concepts play a role in the understanding of other crime groups, particularly more organized forms of crime groups, thus their relevance to our work. We contrast gangs to such groups to highlight the differences.

Five key points serve to distinguish gangs from other criminal associations:

1. *goals* with symbolic ends, as opposed to economic, political, or religious ends are more important to street gangs

2. *organizational structure* that is looser, reflecting the age structure of gangs

3. *short-lived cooperation*, in combination with diminished levels of leadership and structure in contrast to groups that require more organization in the pursuit of goals

4. *membership patterns* that are transitory, with members staying in the group on average less than two years and being weakly tied to the group

5. *turf, territory, or place* that holds identifiable and defendable significance to gangs, going well beyond residential or community purposes

In one of the few pieces to consider the topic, Curry examined the relationships between gangs and terrorist groups.[30] While he found a number of similarities, the differences were substantial. The members of both groups are primarily male, violence is common in both groups, solidarity and elements of collective behavior operate in both groups, and the violence used by both groups often represents a form of "self-help," or attempts to redress wrongs. The differences included a profit motive for gangs that is largely absent for terrorist groups, cross-national connections maintained by terror groups, the diversity in different types of crime that typifies gang crime, and an ideological belief among members of terror groups that is not present among gang members. Most of the similarities between the groups reflect the fact that terrorist groups are less structured than is publicly believed.[31]

A key differentiation between gangs and organized crime groups is that organized crime groups typically reinvest the profits from their crimes to further the group. There is a growing divide among those who study organized crime, as many observers see organized crime groups in ways that are consistent with networking theory while others describe them in terms consistent with a hierarchical structure.[32] Gangs exhibit a great

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deal more fluidity and a far more dynamic structure than that of the descriptions of organized crime, and the ties between gang members and their gang are considerably weaker. Felson identified this as the "Big Gang Theory"—an approach that describes gangs as having the capacity to exact revenge and retaliation in a manner similar to mafia-like organizations.[33] Howell held this as one of the key myths about gangs:

> "The myth of formal organization, that gangs were becoming large, powerful criminal organizations—much like highly structured corporations—became widely accepted... Very few youth gangs, [however,] meet the essential criteria for classification as 'organized crime.'"[34]

There is growing evidence from European scholars that organized crime groups may lack much of the organizational structure attributed to them as well.[35] Organized crime groups lack the political motivation that drives terror groups, seek to avoid public scrutiny, and engage in highly targeted, instrumentally focused activities.[36] Terror groups seek publicity for their cause and act largely from expressive motivations. Sageman argued that terror groups are far less organized than is the popular—or government—view.[37] He described Middle Eastern terror groups as "leaderless jihad," and characterized them as groups whose members typically belong for a couple of years, who engage in other crimes along with terror, and who are, in the main, not strongly bonded to their group. Much of the recent analysis of groups involved in terrorism suggests that their organizational structure is less vertical and that membership is less permanent than many had suggested earlier, resembling the informal-diffuse descriptions of gang organization.[38]

The organizational structure of offending groups such as drug smugglers is also of interest in the comparison to gangs. With the great profits to be reaped, it is often assumed that drug smuggling must be a highly organized activity. As with gangs, however, drug smuggling generally lacks the corporate organizational structure often ascribed to it. Williams held that international drug smuggling was horizontally organized, with small groups of individuals well-known to each other responsible for most of its functions.[39] Zaitch's study of cocaine smuggling from Columbia to the Netherlands documented the role of ethnicity and kinship relations in a business that depended on informal trust and established relationships more than on formal agreements or structures.[40] Similarly, Decker and Chapman identified discrete cells of smugglers largely disconnected from each other in the chain from coca processing to delivery.[41] Morselli's work

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reflected a similar picture of organizational structure.[42] These groups are flatter, more informal, and less hierarchical than has been described previously. In these regards, they resemble gangs.

The organizational structure of groups involved in human trafficking and smuggling has been described in similar terms. Aronowitz, Zhang, and Turner and Kelly identified such groups as small networks of individuals that function largely without a hierarchy or system of internal discipline.[43] Aronowitz and Turner and Kelly each underscore the role of local culture and historical practices as key characteristics that affect how such groups organize themselves. Zhang offered a similar description of flattened organizations, with little role differentiation, and few recognized leaders. In spite of the large profits and international range, such groups depend largely on "trust" and personal relationships more than on formal role definitions. Such groups function as "temporary business alliances" that include individuals who also engage in other business activities—legitimate and illegal. In his review of the organizational structure of drug distribution networks, organized crime groups, and street gangs, Morselli argued that these groups were de-centralized and had flat structures that reflected a "flexible order" with an adaptable set of relations.[44] This structure enabled the group to more effectively complete tasks while avoiding detection by the criminal justice system. These loosely confederated networks are the antithesis of vertically structured hierarchical crime groups. They are also the antithesis of gangs, which are characterized by undisciplined behavior, diverse offending patterns, and lack of discipline among their members.

The Emerging Role of Technology in Criminal Groups

Many organized crime groups, drug smugglers, human traffickers and smugglers, and terrorists have access to information and technology that allows them to operate independently of larger organizational structures. Small, loosely organized self-contained groups can better avoid detection by law enforcement. Indeed, some argue that the availability of technology and web-based information creates opportunities for such groups.[45] These groups form networks as described by Varese.[46] The organized crime group he describes acts as a series of loosely connected nodes (individuals, organizations, firms, and information-sharing tools), which depend on expertise and information rather than hierarchy and function. Some have identified a transformation in the nature of many of these forms of crime made possible by technology.[47] The "leaderless nexus" he describes is a consequence of the decentralization that characterizes activ-

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ities in the information age, where access to data, not labor, is the key to achieving instrumental goals. As a consequence, much crime no longer requires large numbers of more-or-less well-controlled individuals. Now, a small number of individuals can execute criminal acts through the use of technology in small groups.

We have yet to see the emergence of such processes among gangs. Gangs, however, engage in considerable use of the Internet, employing social networking sites and using YouTube to post videos of fights that often spark retaliation. The Internet plays a central role in the evolution of gangs and radicalization because of the ability to broadcast key symbols, images, and rhetoric worldwide in a matter of minutes. For example, someone can query "gang fight" or "gang shooting" or "gang initiation" on YouTube and view (literally) thousands of videos displaying gang-related activities. The same channels of information are available to hate groups, or any extremist group, to spread ideological beliefs and messages. The difference for gangs, however, is that the message typically does not involve increasing membership rates or encouraging violence against political or racial counterparts. To the contrary, the goal for gangs is to represent, demonstrate toughness, and exhibit bravado. Nevertheless, just like other aspects of youth culture, gang culture spreads through music, video, and other sources of media. As one former Phoenix gang member told us, "while there was gang activity out here before, [the Los Angeles-based movie *Colors*] really taught us how to gangbang [engage in violent attacks on other gang members]." It appears that YouTube and related websites have eclipsed mainstream media sources—news, television, movies—as the source of new information that was not available to gang members two decades ago.[48] How this information impacts gangs, extremist groups, and the transfer of radicalized beliefs and images across the globe should be a high priority for future research.

Conclusion

We have learned many lessons from this discussion of gangs and radicalization. First, it is important not to be guided by media or popular images in identifying new trends and patterns of behaviors. There is some degree of convergence in the organizational structures and processes of groups that organize to commit crime. Currently the differences remain more important than the similarities. Our goal is to better understand these groups' similarities and differences. Based on our review, however, we urge caution in conflating gangs with other types of extremist groups.

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Second, the organizational structure of the group matters. More highly structured groups include certain efficiencies and scope of tasks. Many organized crime groups (terrorists, gang members, and drug and human smugglers), however, appear to have a flatter organizational structure than traditionally believed. Street gangs appear to be less formal and more diffuse than these other groups. This may account for the generalized lack of radicalization within their ranks.

Third, groups do not have to be radicalized to be dangerous. Gang members appear to lack the characteristics of radicalization that characterize many terror or right-wing hate groups, but that does not make them less violent or less involved in crime. Indeed, among crime groups, gangs may be more involved in crime on a per capita basis than any of the other groups. As marginalized individuals and groups, there is concern about the potential for radicalization among gangs and gang members. Concern over the potential for radicalization exists because many gang members go to prison each year, where they come into contact with radicalized individuals and groups and are subject to recruitment and influence.

Fourth, the Internet is of growing importance to the function of gangs but does not yet appear to be a direct primary means of recruitment. That said, Internet-based forms of communication play a key role in the transmission of gang symbols, practice, and images. As Decker and Pyrooz document, the cultural transmission of gang images plays an important role in the emergence of gang forms in new countries and cultures.[49] There is less evidence, however that chat rooms play a role comparable in gang recruitment to the one they play for terror groups or right-wing extremists. What is unclear at this point is whether technology is facilitating new kinds of criminal activity or supporting traditional forms of criminal activity among gang members. That said, this remains an unexplored topic for offenders in general, one that needs considerable empirical and conceptual work.

We conclude by noting that radicalization is an extremely fluid state, one in which change is the norm. Modern technology advances the motives and accelerates the methods of radicalization. Developing fixed images of groups, their activities, structures, and processes will likely lead to errors in assessing their danger. There is an axis of continuity across criminal, deviant, and extremist groups that, when explored, will bring a better understanding to radicalization processes. We encourage both conceptual and empirical comparative approaches as fruitful avenues of future inquiry.

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