ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:	DEATH ATTITUDES AMONG NON-GANG, AT-RISK, AND GANG-INVOLVED YOUTH
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Youth gang members commit a high proportion of crimes in the United States despite their relatively small population (The United States Department of Justice, 2020). In the literature, the socialization process that some youth in urban areas go through leads to individual-level characteristics that make them especially vulnerable to joining gangs (Vigil, 2019). This socialization process is impacted by the neighborhood context it takes place in and is intertwined with both violence and death. Individual-level mental health outcomes (Watkins & Melde, 2016) indicate that these exposures and interactions with violence and death impact these youth in a multitude of ways.

Despite these indications, little to no research has sought to quantify how these youth perceive death and whether these attitudes differ among at-risk, gang-involved, and non-gang youth. This is important because if at-risk and gang-involved youth share similar death attitudes, death attitudes could be included to screen for the risk of entry into gangs. In exploring this avenue of research, multiple marginality theory (Vigil, 2003) will be utilized as a framework to demonstrate the socialization process and identify key risk factors. The proposed study will then

use the Death Attitude Profile-Revised (Wong et al., 1994) to determine the death attitudes among non-gang, at-risk, and gang-involved youth, and the Gang Risk of Entry Factors tool (Hennigan et al., 2014) will be used to categorize respondents based on their level of gang-entry risk.

Keywords: Youth gangs; Death attitudes; Risk factors; Multiple marginality theory; Socialization

DEATH ATTITUDES AMONG NON-GANG, AT-RISK, AND GANG-INVOLVED YOUTH

by

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Youth gangs as they exist in the United States today have been present since the 19th century (Shelden et al., 2013) and continue to flourish in many cities. According to the National Youth Gang Survey, over the past couple of decades, there has been an average of 27,000 youth gangs across the country with around 770,000 members in total ("National Youth Gang Survey Analysis," n.d.). Although gang members make up a relatively small fraction of the United States population—around .2%—they commit 11% of total crimes (The United States Department of Justice, 2020). Additionally, gang-involved youth have a violent crime rate that is three times higher than non-gang-involved youth (The United States Department of Justice, 2020). The rate of violent crime stands out as especially troubling and mirrors research findings that closely link youth gang involvement to higher rates of both violent behavior (Gordon et al., 2004) and violent victimization (Taylor et al., 2007).

Youth gangs detrimentally impact their communities and the youth who participate in them. For the community, these harms center around the elevated level of offending that gang-involved youth commit. For the individual youth, harm comes from their close proximity to violence and death. This exposure can have a variety of negative impacts on their mental health (Singer et al., 1995), physical health (Wright et al., 2017), and behavioral outcomes (Benhorin & McMahon, 2008). With these negative outcomes in mind, it is crucial that risk factors behind gang involvement are identified and better understood to create effective prevention and intervention strategies. Specifically, these unique experiences with violence and death need to be

researched to understand how youth perceive them and how these perceptions might impact their risk for gang involvement.

Violence is tightly interwoven with youth gangs from the motivations to join gangs to the behaviors and experiences seen before, during, and after gang involvement (Peterson et al., 2004; Gordon et al., 2004; Bolden, 2013). Initiation into the gang often involves being beaten (Bolden, 2013), and this violent introduction sets the expectations of behavior for the rest of the time youth spend in the gang. A similarly violent process happens when a member seeks to leave the gang. They may be threatened with death due to their knowledge of the gang's inner workings (Bolden, 2013). Along with entry and exit being characterized by violence, members typically exhibit more violent behavior after joining a gang than they had exhibited before joining (Gordon et al., 2004). Intergang violence is also a common phenomenon where rivalries between gangs have the potential of quickly turning into bloody conflicts in urban neighborhoods (Gravel et al., 2023). This kind of gang violence is on the extreme end of the experiences that gang-involved and at-risk youth may be exposed to, but many of these youth grow up witnessing some forms of violence and death (Finkelhor et al., 2015).

Exposure to violence has already been identified as a risk factor for gang involvement (Merrin et al., 2020), but the mechanisms behind this connection have not been fully explored. Death perceptions present one way to further investigate this relationship. People view death in various ways depending on their experiences and other factors (Wong et al., 1994). Youth are not often forced to reconcile with their own mortality, but when exposed to violence, thoughts of death may be more salient.

Different death attitudes could play a protective or exacerbating role in youth risk for gang entry as some are associated with more positive outcomes and others with more negative outcomes (Wong et al., 1994). Identifying whether there are trends among at-risk and gang-involved youth in comparison to non-gang involved youth would shed light on their role. If trends are identified among at-risk youth in comparison to non-gang-involved and gang-involved youth, then further research would be needed to investigate why there are differences and how these differences influence risk for entry.

Multiple marginality theory (Vigil, 2003) will be used to frame where this research fits into the ongoing efforts by others. This framework integrates macro-, meso-, and individual-level factors that demonstrate the socialization process and identify how certain youth in society become vulnerable to joining gangs (Vigil, 2019). Some of the common risk factors for gang involvement include delinquent beliefs, violent victimization, experiencing poverty, low achievement in school, having delinquent friends, and living in high-crime neighborhoods (Howell & Egley, 2005). These risk factors are used to develop screening tools that identify at-risk youth (Howell & Egley, 2005) and ensure that prevention efforts are aimed at those most vulnerable for future gang-involvement. The proposed study aims to explore the mechanisms behind exposure to violence as a risk factor for gang-involvement. In doing so, this research also aims to introduce another potential risk factor for gang involvement in the death attitudes that at-risk, gang-involved, and non-gang-involved youth hold.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

GANG DEFINITIONS

A major issue in gang research is finding a clear definition of "gang" to utilize. Dozens of definitions exist which either narrow or broaden the scope of what kinds of groups are included as a "gang". On the broader end, one definition from the Merriam-Webster (n.d.) dictionary describes a gang as "a group of persons having informal and usually close social relations," which could include a wide spectrum of entities from a normal friend group to a violent gang like MS-13.

One vein of definitions focuses on "street gangs" or "youth gangs". The definition that is the most accepted by researchers is the one given by Klein (1971) who defines a street gang as:

> any denotable adolescent group of youngsters who (a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in the neighborhood, (b) recognize themselves as a denotable group (almost invariably with a group name), and (c) have been involved in a sufficient number of incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighborhood residents and/or enforcement agencies. (p. 111)

"Street gang" and "youth gang" are two terms that are used interchangeably and are defined similarly (National Gang Center, n.d.). The proposed study utilizes the National Gang Center (n.d.) definition for youth gangs which incorporates similar characteristics as Klein's definition. The main difference between the two definitions is that the National Gang Center (n.d.) definition specifies an age range. It presents five separate criteria including that:

- The group has three or more members, generally aged 12-24.
- Members share an identity, typically linked to a name, and often other symbols.
- Members view themselves as a gang, and they are recognized by others as a gang.

- The group has some permanence and a degree of organization.
- The group is involved in an elevated level of criminal activity (National Gang Center, n.d.).

This age range helps quantify who is included in youth gangs and separates youth gangs from adult gangs. Other groups such as motorcycle gangs and prison gangs typically have an older age range which excludes them from this definition (Shelden et al., 2013).

Youth gangs are the focus of the proposed research due to their prevalence in urban areas and their unique socialization process. The socialization process is deeply embedded in many communities and helps form the thoughts, perceptions, and behaviors of the youth living there (Oliver, 2006). This process also leads to various factors that influence youth risk levels for gang-involvement (Vigil, 2019). One useful model of this process is found in Vigil's multiple marginality theory (Vigil, 2003).

MULTIPLE MARGINALITY THEORY

Criminologists have applied various traditional theories of delinquency and crime to the phenomenon of gangs to find out why youth join gangs, but many of the previous criminological theories fail to integrate factors across different levels. According to McGloin and Decker (2010), gang theories fall on a spectrum that extends "from *macro-level* sociological factors (e.g., social disorganization, poverty, subcultural norms), to *micro-level* explanations focused on social interactions and processes (e.g., differential association)" (p.150). Additionally, some theories look at individual factors which include self-control and social control (McGloin & Decker, 2010). With separate theories focusing on a single level, they fail to capture the full

process of why youth join gangs (McGloin & Decker, 2010). In the same book, McGloin and Decker (2010) mention James Vigil's multiple marginality theory as reflecting the need for theories that integrate these different levels of factors.

Multiple marginality theory models the "street socialization" process that happens in "barrios" and "ghettos" in the United States (Vigil, 2003; 2019). In the broadest terms, the theory looks to answer the question as to why only 10% of youth living in marginalized areas join gangs (Vigil, 2003). Since not all youth living in these areas join gangs, there must be factors that make some youth especially vulnerable (Vigil, 2003). The theory begins with macro-historical and macro-structural factors which then leads to meso-level issues with family, school, and the neighborhood (Vigil, 2019). These meso-level factors then facilitate the street socialization process which eventually leads to micro-level and individual-level factors. The whole process depicts how gangs are formed, how they contribute to the socialization of youth, and how that socialization then leads some youth to join gangs (Vigil, 2019). The full model is shown in Figure 1 which was pulled from one of Vigil's more recent publications (Vigil, 2010).

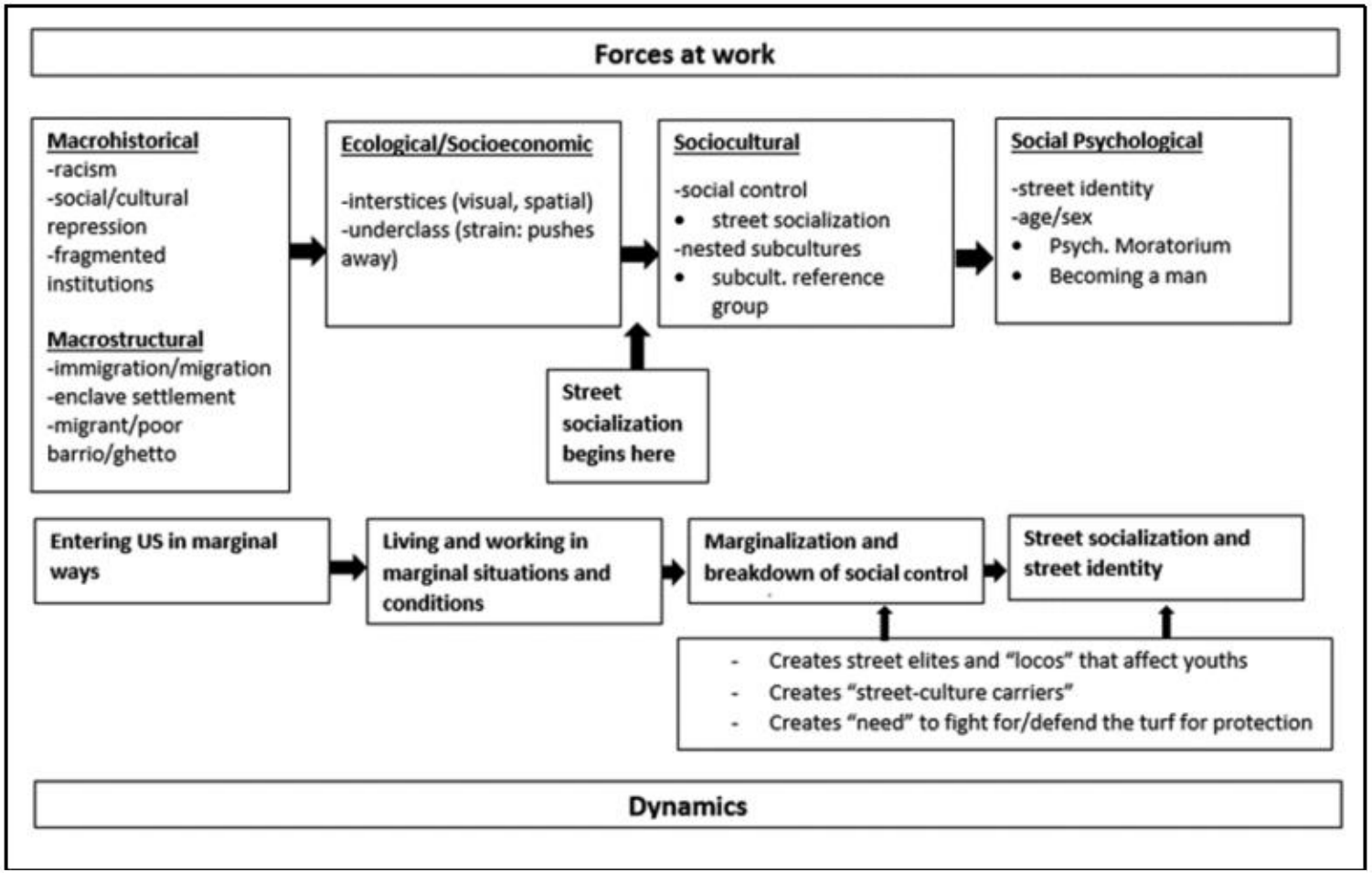

Figure 1: Multiple Marginality Theory Model

Vigil, J. D. (2010). Gang redux: A balanced anti-gang strategy. Waveland Press.

The macro-historical and macro-structural context explains how these youth became isolated from the rest of society and subsequently marginalized (Vigil, 2019). It also explains how they were initially introduced to the street socialization process. Persistent racism, the repression of cultural and social expression, and the lack of solid institutions form the macro-historical facet of the model (Vigil, 2019). Macro-structural factors include having moved to the area via immigration or migration, the formation of an enclave, and living in a barrio or ghetto setting (Vigil, 2019).

These macro-level factors contribute to the breakdown of social institutions by introducing various kinds of strain (Vigil, 2019). The strains weaken social bonds and institutions such as family and school. This lack of strong social institutions means that social controls are largely ineffective (Vigil, 2019). Without strong institutions or strong social controls, youth living in these areas are vulnerable to gang influence (Vigil, 2019). The gangs essentially take over the role of the typical institutions and put forth their own socialization. Their form of socialization focuses on teaching behaviors that will show aggression, strength, fearlessness, and a willingness to take risks (Vigil, 2003). Additionally, in these communities, experiences with law enforcement agencies are largely negative, so youth may turn to gangs for protection (Vigil, 2019).

When the gang takes over the socialization process, the gang subculture is developed (Vigil, 2003). This subculture is centered around masculinity, violence, and respect (Vigil, 2003). Anderson's Code of the Street (1994) discusses some of the subculture that forms in these marginalized areas. In Anderson's (1994) research, he discussed how there were "street" and "decent" families. "Street" families followed

the street code and would teach those values and behaviors to their children. The "decent" families typically follow mainstream societal goals and values and teach them to their children (Anderson, 1994). Although the "decent" families would follow mainstream values in their households, their children would go out onto the street and need to fend for themselves (Anderson, 1994). In order to fend for themselves, they would also need to know the code and be able to follow it if they were met with conflict. As a result, youth from both "decent" and "street" families follow the code to protect themselves from victimization (Anderson, 1994). Respect is the centerpiece of the code, and people are expected to use violence if their respect is challenged. Vigil does not directly cite Anderson's work, but the street subculture Vigil describes in multiple marginality theory is very similar to the way Anderson characterized it in his work.

This street subculture is eventually internalized by the youth in these areas which leads to several different outcomes. They develop a "loco" persona where youth take risks and go on wild adventures (Vigil, 2003). These youth are expected to take risks and remain fearless while they do so (Vigil, 2003). Additionally, "marginality is linked to difficulties in establishing a self-identity and having low self-esteem," which leaves youth vulnerable to the pull of gangs (Krohn et al., 2011, p. 21). The gang "provides these youth with socialization and a self-identity that are absent due to their marginalization from traditional institutions" (Krohn et al., 2011, p. 21).

Although research is limited on how well the theory can be used as a predictor of gang membership in practice, there is some recent evidence that the socialization

piece of the framework shows the most significance in predicting gang membership (Johnson & Mendlein, 2022). The same study found that individual-level factors are especially important in figuring out why some youth join gangs while others do not (Johnson & Mendlein, 2022). Additionally, they point to the importance that neighborhood contexts play in how likely the youth is to join a gang.

For the purposes of the proposed research, multiple marginality theory is useful for a couple reasons. First, the theory outlines the street socialization process which is a key factor in how death attitudes may be developed or influenced by the way that the youth are taught (Vigil, 2003). Research has shown that the socialization process teaches youth how to comport themselves in the face of different circumstances (Oliver, 2006). This same process could influence the way youth perceive death and other negative experiences. Secondly, the model outlined by multiple marginality theory provides a space where death attitudes could fit. Death attitudes are considered individual factors which could either act as a risk or protective factor for gang membership. Each death attitude is associated with different mental health and behavioral outcomes which could influence risk levels (Wong et al., 1994).

IDENTIFIED MACRO-, MESO-, AND MICRO-LEVEL RISK FACTORS

Within the multiple marginality framework, macro-, meso-, and micro-level risk factors have been identified through research that are especially important for the gang socialization model. On the macro-level side of the process, the focus is on city, community, and neighborhood factors (Pyrooz et al., 2010). Some of the important

factors identified include economic disadvantage and ethnic heterogeneity (Pyrooz et al., 2010), the presence of drugs such as marijuana in the community, the number of youths in trouble in the community (Hill et al., 1999), and high levels of arrests (Howell & Egley, 2005). These findings suggest that neighborhoods that are disorganized and dysfunctional are more likely to have higher rates of gang membership among the youth living there.

In these communities, meso-level factors bridge the gap between the macro-level community risk factors and the micro-level factors seen among at-risk youth. Family, peer and school factors have specifically been shown to impact risk levels (Lenzi et al., 2015; Howell & Egley, 2005). High perceptions of family support were found to be a protective factor for gang involvement (Lenzi et al., 2015) which suggests that strong family structure and relationships can steer youth away from gang influence. It also suggests that when the institution of the family is weak or broken, youth may be more likely to join gangs. Delinquent peer associations (Howell & Egley, 2005) and perceiving school as unsafe were both found to be risk factors for gang membership as well (Lenzi et al., 2015).

These findings indicate that the interactions youth have with other social institutions such as their friend group and their school greatly influence their risk levels. Associating with delinquent peers means that the socialization received is more in line with anti-social behaviors. Additionally, perceiving school as unsafe may lead youth to avoid or have weak bonds with the institution. In general, when socializing institutions such as the family or the school are weak, it leaves youth vulnerable to the influences of secondary socialization vehicles such as youth gangs

and delinquent peers (Vigil, 2019). When the gang replaces other institutions in the socialization process, youth learn the traits that fit the subculture which are mostly anti-social.

In the research, some common micro-level, risk characteristics include being male, being a member of an ethnic minority, having disciplinary action taken against you in school, and "having a parent or close family member die within the last year" (Farmer & Hairston, 2013, p. 530). Other factors for gang involvement include holding favorable beliefs towards deviant behavior, violent victimization (Howell & Egley, 2005), having a history of delinquency, having a higher tolerance for delinquent behavior, and holding attitudes that go against the norm of society (Esbensen et al., 1993). Additionally, youth are more at-risk for gang-involvement if they try to justify delinquent and deviant behavior with victim-blaming, euphemisms when discussing their behavior, and blaming authority figures (Alleyne & Wood, 2010). Lastly, some research has shown that low self-esteem can increase anti-social behavior and in turn lead to vulnerability to gang-involvement (Donnellan et al., 2005). The findings for self-esteem are mixed. Lastly, exposure to violence is identified as an individual level risk factor for gang-involvement (Merrin et al., 2020), and relatedly, death attitudes could constitute another set of factors that play either a protective or risk-increasing role in the process.

EXPERIENCES WITH DEATH AND VIOLENCE

Youth do not typically have to reconcile with their own mortality until later in life, but many youth living in urban communities around the United States are forced

to deal with these difficult thoughts earlier on. In a recent study, youth living in urban neighborhoods were found to be highly likely to witness or experience violence (Finkelhor et al., 2015). Over one-third of youth experienced assault, almost one-fourth had witnessed violence in the family or community in the past year, and over half had witnessed violence in the community in their lifetime (Finkelhor et al., 2015). Black youth are particularly vulnerable to loss and death in their lifetimes (Alegría et al., 2013), and their experiences with violence are often compared to that of youth who have grown up in war zones (Bell & Jenkins, 1991). Lastly, delinquent youth including gang-involved youth are more likely to die early due to gun violence (Teplin et al., 2005). With these experiences, their mortality is something that they are forced to confront and find ways to cope with. The ways that these youth perceive death have the potential to impact their behaviors and life outcomes. Experiences with victimization and death may be a risk factor by itself, but the way they perceive death may be an added factor that may mitigate or exacerbate that risk.

Along with youth just generally living in urban communities, youth involved with gangs are also exposed to a lot of violence. Youth gang violence begins with initiation where new members typically endure a beating from one or more current members for a specified length of time (Bolden, 2013). This process is called getting "jumped" into a gang, and it is the most common initiation that gang members go through (Bolden, 2013). In one qualitative study on gang initiations, a gang member described his initiation process saying that, "it was about 8 guys, they all just ganged up on me and started pounding down and if I made it through I was alright, if I died, I died" (Bolden, 2013, p. 478).

A similar process happens when a member seeks to leave the gang. They may be threatened with death or eventually killed because they know too much about the gang's past crimes and current operations (Bolden, 2013). According to one former gang member, when you try to leave the gang, "nine times out of ten you are either dying or leaving the state or the city of where your group is at" (Bolden, 2013, p. 484).

In addition to violence within one's gang, they must also deal with the constant threat of violence from other gangs in the neighboring communities or areas (Gravel et al., 2023). In some Chicago neighborhoods for example, the violence has gotten to the point that youth call the city "Chiraq" which is a combination of "Chicago" and "Iraq" to signify that they see their neighborhoods as warzones (Bowean, 2019). O Block, a neighborhood in Chicago, is especially notorious for its level of gang violence (Main, 2014). One man, named Boss Top, who grew up in the neighborhood describes his experiences there by saying that "everybody around this bitch got PTSD. Everybody around this bitch seen somebody die…We had a brotherhood that couldn't nobody come between. We not letting nothing happen to none of us" (Channel 25, 2022, 3:46). Boss Top is a member of the Gangster Disciples, a prominent gang in Chicago, and he has lost many friends to gang violence (Channel 25, 2022).

In general, gang members are overrepresented in violent offending (The United States Department of Justice, 2020) and victimization (Curry et al., 2002; Peterson et al., 2004; Taylor et al., 2007). Peterson et al. (2004), also found that gang members had higher rates of violent victimization than non-gang members not only

during their membership in the gang but also before joining and after leaving the gang. This suggests that victimization is common for those that are at-risk for joining gangs as well as those who have already joined. As a reflection of these findings, many youth who join gangs cite protection as a major factor which speaks to the violence that they fear in their communities (Peterson et al., 2004). This motivation for protection also shows the salience of the threat of violence and death that they must reconcile with. Seeking out protection indicates that these youth are aware of and concerned with their own mortality. Understanding exactly how they perceive these thoughts of death is an important step in determining whether these perceptions can be used for risk screening.

As a result of repetitive exposures to trauma, both friends of gang-members and gang-involved youth are more likely than non-gang involved youth to have symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Harris et al., 2013). Additionally, research suggests that youth who later report being gang-involved have higher levels of both depression and suicidal ideation than non-gang-involved youth (Watkins & Melde, 2016). The same study also found that gang membership increases the rate of both outcomes in youth (Watkins & Melde, 2016). These mental health outcomes indicate that youth are not dealing with their trauma in healthy ways, and it could exacerbate their propensity to join or continue their involvement with gangs.

In marginalized areas where family units are often fragmented and social institutions are weak, youth may turn to gangs and other youth to cope. Gangs tend to encourage fearlessness, risk taking, toughness, and a live fast, die young mentality which may help lessen anxiety (Vigil, 2003), but also give youth an avenue to avoid

instead of work through their experiences. When the gang takes over as the primary facilitator of the socialization process, they may play a role in the formation of the perceptions youth have of death. The combination of at-risk and gang-involved youth having a unique proximity to death and violence, and the shared socialization process that they go through in their communities could lead to shared death attitudes that are different from low-risk, non-gang youth.

Some qualitative research has also hinted at some of the ways that at-risk and gang-involved youth perceive the death of others and their own mortality. One study looked at how death and violence could play a role in transforming death anxiety into something less negative (Tolleson, 1997). In that study, a 15-year-old explained how he watched one of his friends get caught in the crossfire of a gang war (Tolleson, 1997). His friend was shot in the back and killed. In response, the 15-year-old mentioned that he felt nothing and tried not to think about what happened (Tolleson, 1997). He went on to say that "if it's the time, it's the time. I just can't say I don't want to get killed when I know I'm gonna get killed" (Tolleson, 1997, p. 420). His minimization and avoidance of death is indicative of a death avoidant attitude which is one of the five separate death attitudes conceptualized within the Death Attitude Profile-Revised (DAP-R) (Wong et al., 1994). The DAP-R is a tool created to operationalize the five identified death attitudes and measure which death attitude respondents most closely associate with.

DEATH ATTITUDES EXPLAINED

The original Death Attitude Profile was developed by Gesser et al. (1988), but only consisted of four dimensions. These dimensions were fear of death/dying, approach acceptance, escape acceptance, and neutral acceptance. Later research conducted with college students and adults who were middle-aged found that many younger people tended to want to avoid death thoughts instead of confronting them through fear or acceptance (Wong et al., 1994). This led to the addition of death avoidance to the Death Attitude Profile by Wong et al. (1994) and marked the creation of the Death Attitude Profile-Revised (DAP-R).

Each death attitude signifies an entirely different way to perceive death. There are two general viewpoints surrounding death. Either it marks the loss of oneself and identity, or people perceive it as the beginning of a new existence (Wong et al., 1994). People who see death as the end of their identity tend to live in the moment whereas those who see death as the beginning of a new existence try to live their current life with the next one in mind (Wong et al., 1994). Within these two viewpoints, five separate death attitudes have been identified. Two of the attitudes are associated with positive thoughts and the other three are associated with negative thoughts. The positive death attitudes are approach acceptance and neutral acceptance (Wong et al., 1994). The negative death attitudes are fear of death, death avoidance, and escape acceptance (Wong et al., 1994). Each has nuances within the negative or positive designations, and these nuances could be used by mental health and criminal justice practitioners to develop effective strategies at addressing the commonly held death attitudes of at-risk and gang-involved youth.

Starting with the more positive death attitudes, the first one is approach acceptance which is the belief in a happy afterlife (Wong et al., 1994). People who have this attitude see death as the beginning of a new and better existence. This attitude is highly related to religious belief and practice (Wong et al., 1994). Research has found that people with strong religious commitments were more likely to believe in the afterlife and hold this attitude (Jeffers et al., 1961). Gang members have been found to be less religious than non-gang youth which suggests that they may be less likely to have this death attitude (Lauger & Rivera, 2022). Older people were also more likely to hold this attitude (Wong et al., 1994). Youth may also hold this view as a result of maintaining optimistic views of the afterlife from childhood (Wong et al., 1994). With regards to well-being, this attitude is associated with positive outcomes including subjective wellbeing especially for older adults (Wong et al., 1994).

A second positive death attitude is neutral acceptance where the person is largely ambivalent to death (Wong et al., 1994). People with this death attitude see death as a normal aspect of life and do not welcome or fear it. This attitude is positively correlated with both psychological and physical well-being and negatively correlated with depression (Wong et al., 1994). This finding was strongest for young people.

With the three negative death attitudes, the first one is called “fear of death.” This is a separate concept from “death anxiety” even though they are often used interchangeably (Wong et al., 1994). Fear of death is a specific and conscious response to death thoughts whereas death anxiety is unconscious and more general (Wong et al., 1994). People may fear death for several different reasons depending on

their outlook on life. This death attitude is correlated with psychological distress and depression, mostly for older people (Wong et al., 1994). Younger people tend to have higher rates of fear of death than older people (Wong et al., 1994). Since at-risk and gang-involved youth are likely still quite young, they may be more likely to associate with fear of death.

There is some evidence that religious involvement decreases fear of death (Jong et al., 2018). However, the exact relationship between religious involvement and fear of death is somewhat debated. The two groups most likely to experience low fear of death were those who hold very strong religious beliefs and those who have no religious belief at all. Those with the most fear of death were people in the middle (Jong et al., 2018). Gang-members have been found to be much less likely to be religious than their non-gang peers, so they may not get the protective factor that religious involvement has on fear of death (Lauger & Rivera, 2022). Lastly, the prevalence of this death attitude among at-risk youth is indicated in the popular motivation of protection for youth before they join a gang.

A second negative death attitude is death avoidance where the person keeps death off the forefront of their mind (Wong et al., 1994). They cope with death thoughts by avoiding it entirely. This attitude is also connected with youth as they typically prefer to keep death thoughts off their mind (Wong et al., 1994). Similar to fear of death, this attitude is associated with psychological distress (Wong et al., 1994). Gang members and at-risk youth may be likely to hold this view if they subscribe to the live fast, die young view. With this view, youth are expected to live in the moment without thinking much about the future or the past (Vigil, 2003).

Lastly, there is escape acceptance where life is seen to be full of suffering and death offers an alternate existence (Wong et al., 1994). This welcoming attitude toward death is not based in the perceived "goodness" of what comes after death, but in the perceived "badness" of their current situation. This attitude is associated with diminished well-being, especially for young people (Wong et al., 1994). Youth who face suffering and pain in their lives are likely to seek an escape, potentially through death. Escape acceptance is also highly related to suicidal ideation (Wong, 2007). If death presents itself as an escape from suffering, people may be more willing to take that escape on purpose. With regards to at-risk and gang-involved youth, many of them deal with suffering on multiple levels. Poverty, difficulty in school, broken homes and exposure to violence and death are all common risk factors that contribute to gang involvement (Howell & Egley, 2005). These factors also characterize an especially difficult existence which may contribute to the escape acceptance death attitude among this population. Additionally, evidence has shown higher rates of suicidal ideation among gang members (Watkins & Melde, 2016) which could suggest that many of those youth have this death attitude.

The prevalence of violence and death in communities where youth gangs are likely to emerge indicate that exposure to violence and death may lead youth to be more vulnerable to join gangs. Individual level mental health and behavioral outcomes also indicate that these exposures and interactions with violence and death impact these youth in a multitude of ways (Watkins & Melde, 2016). Despite these findings, no research has sought to determine how these youth perceive death and whether these attitudes differ among at-risk, gang-involved, and non-gang youth. This

is important because if at-risk and gang-involved youth share similar death attitudes, it may point to a possible relationship between death attitudes and one's potential for joining gangs, as well to screen for risk of entry into gangs.

Chapter 3: Proposed Research

Previous research surrounding gang entry has explored the socialization process that takes place often years before a youth formally becomes a member. Various macro-, meso-, micro-, and individual factors influence this process, but a gap in research exists in exploring how at-risk and gang-involved youth perceive death. Experiences with death and violence are common among gang-involved and at-risk youth (Shelden et al., 2013). Despite the prevalence of these negative experiences, research has not yet measured the way that this population views death. The proposed study aims to evaluate the research question:

> What death attitudes are most common among at-risk youth in comparison to non-gang and gang-involved youth?

With this question in mind, the proposed study also aims to determine whether trends in death attitudes across these three different groups are significant enough to be used to identify youth who are vulnerable to joining gangs. If trends are identified, then future research would be needed to investigate the mechanisms behind those trends. Additionally, if at-risk or gang-involved youth have more harmful death attitudes, then prevention and intervention efforts could be focused on mitigating those harms and promoting healthier perceptions of death.

Death attitudes will be evaluated based on which death attitude or attitudes each group most associate(s) with. Each respondent will get mean scores for each death attitude and depending on their group classification, these mean scores may lead to trends across each group. Three main hypotheses are outlined surrounding the possible trends among death attitudes for each group.

The first hypothesis is that out of the five death attitudes, at-risk and gang-involved youth are expected to associate with more negative death attitudes which include fear of death, death avoidance, or escape acceptance. Many youth fear death, as indicated by the popularity of pursuing protection as a motivation for gang involvement (Peterson et al., 2004). The motivation of protection indicates that youth are conscious of death and actively pursue strategies that they perceive will lessen their chances of dying. With death avoidance, youth with this attitude would work to minimize thoughts of death and minimize the importance of death. By minimizing violence and death experiences, they instead would focus on living in the present without worrying about their own mortality. Evidence of this idea can be found in the prevalence of the "live fast, die young" mentality held by many gang-involved youth (Vigil, 2003). Regarding escape acceptance, youth who are at-risk and gang-involved may live in poverty, communities with high rates of violence, and in broken homes which make their lives incredibly difficult. This kind of adversity may cause them to view death as an end to their current suffering. Gang-involved youth are shown to have higher levels of suicidality than non-gang-involved youth (Watkins & Melde, 2016), which indicates they may be more likely to hold this attitude.

> H1: At-risk and gang-involved youth are expected to associate with more negative death attitudes (fear of death, death avoidance, or escape acceptance).

Secondly, at-risk and gang-involved youth are expected to identify with similar death attitudes. This is because of the socialization process and their similar backgrounds and experiences. Also, if youth are at-risk for gang-involvement, then they may already be adopting the gang subculture and the attitudes that come along

with it (Vigil, 2019). This would lead them to associate with similar death attitudes and general perceptions.

> H2: At-risk and gang-involved youth are expected to associate with similar death attitudes.

The third hypothesis is that non-gang youth are expected to identify with more positive death attitudes including approach acceptance or neutral acceptance. Non-gang youth should be more likely to not need to contend with their mortality in a real sense, so they may be more positive in their view of death. They may simply view death as something that they do not need to worry about now. A small addition to this hypothesis is that age and religious affiliation may play important roles in the identification of death attitudes especially for non-gang youth. Young people are more likely to avoid death or feel neutral to it (Wong et al., 1994). This is in part because experiences with death as a young person are rare and distant. As people get older, they have to more frequently cope with the thought of their own death. For youth in the sample who have not experienced death in a real way or repetitively, they may not have had to think consciously about it. Additionally, religious affiliation was found to be related to approach acceptance which is connected to the belief of a happy afterlife (Wong et al., 1994). Youth who indicate that they ascribe to a particular religion may be more likely to associate with approach acceptance.

> H3: Low-risk non-gang-involved youth are expected to associate with more positive death attitudes (approach acceptance or neutral acceptance) and age and religious affiliation are expected to be especially significant for this population in influencing trends.

Chapter 4: Methods

SAMPLE SELECTION

The proposed study will collect data from youth ages 12 to 18 attending school in Prince George's County, Maryland. Other than the age and location criteria, all races and gender identities will be allowed to participate. The convenience sample drawn from this school district is appropriate due to the county's documented gang presence. According to a news report summarizing an FBI National Gang Threat Assessment, MS-13 and the Bloods are common in the county and have caused increasing levels of violence ("Gang membership high," 2011). In the same report, they mention that Prince George's County had "one of the largest gang populations in the southeast United States" ("Gang membership high," 2011).

The 12-18 age range was chosen because the focus of the proposed study is on youth in various stages of the gang socialization and entry process. In order to capture data from youth who are low-risk and non-gang, at-risk, and gang-involved, the age range must encompass youth who were influenced by the socialization process but have not yet joined a gang and youth who have officially joined a gang. According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), research has found that youth are especially vulnerable to gang influence around the ages 12-14 and most commonly join around age 15 (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, n.d.). With the ages 12-14, the socialization process has influenced them, but they have not yet joined a gang. After age 15, it should be more common for youth to respond that they are a formal member of a gang (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, n.d.).

Although youth gangs can include youth over the age of 18, they would be more difficult to access. Also, the 12-18 age range should be able to capture each category of youth. This age range allows the study to assess risk levels before gang involvement and is useful for temporal ordering. With regards to the difficulties in accessing the 18+ population, these age groups are not easily found in one place or institution. With younger populations, they are typically mandated to go to school through high school which places them in one place at standard hours. After high school, youth take dozens of different life paths which makes it difficult to get a diverse sample. One institution where this age group could be found is in colleges, but the population I am hoping to access may not be represented there. For these reasons, the age range was shifted down to those who would be present in middle and high schools.

Since the proposed study is trying to investigate death attitudes for youth who are not gang involved, who are at-risk for gang involvement, and who are currently gang-involved, the sample selection process will require contacting Prince George's County public middle and high schools to gain permission for their students participate. This method is similar to the selection methods of a separate gang research study conducted by Merrin et al., in 2015. Their study reached out to school districts in a specific county and requested permission to conduct their survey at the middle and high schools in the district. In that study, school administration needed to be on board with the research and parents were notified in advance. Parents were also allowed to pull their child out of participation (Merrin et al., 2015).

Gang-involved and at-risk youth will not specifically be sought out in this selection process because the sample size should be large enough to where that will not be necessary. Prince George's County public school (PGCPS) system has over 130,000 students enrolled total, and even looking at only middle and high schools would still involve tens of thousands of students (Prince George's Public School, 2020). There are 24 middle schools and 24 high schools located within PGCPS (Prince George's Public School, 2020). To minimize the administrative burden of contacting each of the 48 schools, 8 middle schools and 8 high schools will be randomly selected from the list and contacted. The PGCPS website provides excel sheets that list total enrollment broken down by each school and grade (Prince George's Public School, 2021). This data can be used to check the sample sizes of the 16 schools randomly selected. In the study conducted by Merrin et al. (2015), they were able to recruit 15 of the 16 total school districts they reached out to after fully explaining the purpose and subject matter of the survey, and within those school districts, they saw 90% participation. If similar participation can be achieved in the proposed research, then the sample size will be large enough to encompass youth from each category.

One potential issue is that gang-involved youth may not be at school when the study is conducted due to issues with school being common. Additionally, gang-involved youth may not want to answer that they were or are gang-involved even though the survey responses are anonymous. Regardless of whether enough gang-involved youth are identified within the sample, the analysis can still be conducted with just youth who score as at-risk on the Gang Risk of Entry Factors (GREF) and

youth who score as low-risk on the GREF (Hennigan et al., 2014). The GREF has already been validated to successfully predict future gang involvement (Hennigan et al., 2015). Therefore, the GREF will be useful in exploring whether there are distinctions between the predominant death attitudes among low-risk and high-risk youth. Screening for potential gang involvement can still be done by seeing how at-risk youth may differ from non-gang youth.

DATA COLLECTION

The proposed study will utilize primary data collected with a survey created and implemented using the Qualtrics platform. This platform is a survey service supplied through the University of Maryland. The survey is completely electronic and will need to be given on a computer, laptop, smart phone, or other similar device. Surveys will be administered during school hours and will be overseen by a teacher or administrator to ensure that students are answering without outside influence.

Since the sample includes minors and the topic of death is sensitive, ethical considerations will be taken into account. A similar vein of research, which has investigated bereavement in people, has used participants below the age of 12 including children as young as 3-years-old (Park et al., 2022). Park et al. (2022) further discussed how these researchers were able to conduct their study ethically. In many of the studies listed that involved people aged 12-17, the researchers required parental and participant consent to safeguard participants (Park et al., 2022).

With this concern in mind, the proposed study will continue to use the age range of 12-18 but will take measures to make sure that the participants and their

parents are given enough information to make fully informed decisions on whether they would like to participate or not. Handouts will be given to parents and students prior to the survey detailing the purpose of the survey, how the results will be used, and what kind of topics will be covered in the survey. Parents will be notified at least 2 weeks prior to the survey and will be required to sign a permission slip for their child to be able to participate in the survey. The students will also be given information at least 2 weeks prior and will be given consent forms to fill out on the day of the survey. Participation will be fully voluntary and completely anonymous.

Along with fully informed consent of the parents and the participant, the surveys can be terminated early if the youth signals discomfort in any way. The participants will be reminded before the survey that they can end the survey at any time for any reason. Additionally, the proctor of the survey will be present in the room to make sure that youth can reach them about concerns at any time. Information about counseling and other resources will also be prepared beforehand to ensure that youth are able to discuss any negative feelings they have during or after the survey.

The survey will consist of three different stages of questions. In the first section, basic demographic information including age, gender, race/ethnicity and religious affiliation will be collected. The second section of the survey will be used to determine the participant's level of risk for gang entry and separate the participants into the three separate groups: non-gang, at-risk, and gang-involved. In addition to the questions meant to identify risk level, there will be an added question that simply asks whether the youth is a member of a gang or not. The last question will be used to

determine the gang-involvement category. The last set of questions will be used to determine which of the five death attitudes the participant most identifies with.

MEASURES

Two separate measures will be utilized in the survey: the Gang Risk of Entry Factors (GREF) (Hennigan et al., 2014) and the Death Attitude Profile-Revised (Wong et al., 1994). The GREF is an assessment tool which has been validated as accurate in determining a youth's level of risk for future gang and involvement (Hennigan et al., 2015). This assessment measures risk factors across five different domains. One of the domains is defined as individual characteristics and includes "antisocial tendencies, impulsive risk taking, and guilt neutralization" (Hennigan et al., 2014, p. 117). A second area is peer associations which involves peer delinquency and negative peer influence, and the third area is early delinquent behavior. The fourth domain includes two factors associated with family which are parental monitoring and family gang influence (Hennigan et al., 2014). The final domain looks at accumulated strain. An example of a question that would appear on the GREF assessment is: "It is okay for me to lie (or not tell the truth) if it will keep my friends from getting in trouble with parents, teachers, or police" (Hennigan et al., 2014, p. 126). Each question is scored on a 5-point scale (Hennigan et al., 2014). The entire measure can be found in the appendix.

Throughout the five different domains, there are a total of nine risk factors (Hennigan et al., 2015). In the assessment, the risk factors are dichotomized with zero signifying low risk and one signifying high risk. Each risk was then added to

determine overall risk (Hennigan et al., 2015). Youth who scored as "high risk" on *four or less* factors were classified as low-risk whereas those who scored as "high risk" on *five or more* factors were classified as high-risk (Hennigan et al., 2015). At the end of this section, there will be a yes or no question asking whether the participant is a current or former member of a gang.

The Death Attitude Profile-Revised is a tool used to determine which of the five death attitudes a person identifies with. It contains 32 questions across the five broad categories of fear of death, death avoidance, neutral acceptance, approach acceptance, and escape acceptance (Wong et al., 1994). Respondents answer each question on a 7-point Likert scale with strongly disagree (SD) = 1, disagree (D) = 2, moderately disagree (MD) = 3, undecided (U) = 4, moderately agree (MA) = 5, agree (A) = 6, and strongly agree (SA) = 7 (Wong et al., 1994). An example of one of the questions that can be found in the DAP-R is: "death is a natural aspect of life" (Wong et al., 1994, p. 146-148). The full measure and list of questions can be found in the appendix. Each death attitude score determines how closely they identify with that attitude. Determining whether there are trends among the three groups in relation to the individual death attitudes will rely on how many youth in each group identify with each attitude and whether certain groups of youth display similar associations with attitudes.

The DAP-R has been validated which found internal validity with four of the five subscales (Clements and Rooda, 2000). Neutral acceptance was found to potentially need to be split into two separate attitudes, but no research has identified what the two separate attitudes are or how to split up the subscale (Clements and

Rodda, 2000). The DAP-R has also been replicated in multiple languages in hopes of maintaining this validity once translated into other languages. Currently, there are German (Jansen et al., 2019), Polish (Brudek & Steuden, 2020), Brazilian (Machado et al., 2019), Chinese (Zhu & Shi, 2011), and Spanish (Cruzado et al., 2022) versions among others.

VARIABLES

The independent variables in the proposed study are the categories of gang-involvement and level of risk for future entry. These categories include low-risk and non-gang (referred to as non-gang), high-risk and non-gang (referred to as at-risk), and any youth who answer that they are gang-involved (referred to as gang-involved regardless of risk level). Although gang-involved youth may be considered low-risk, their involvement in a gang means that they may still experience elevated level of violence and death regardless of their determined risk level. Each level corresponds to how they answer the GREF questions and the question about whether they are currently or were formerly in a gang. Youth who have four or less risk factors are categorized as “low-risk,” and youth who have five or more risk factors are categorized as “high-risk” (Hennigan et al., 2015).

The dependent variables are the different death attitudes as outlined in the DAP-R: fear of death, death avoidance, neutral acceptance, approach acceptance, and escape acceptance. Scores for each attitude are determined by adding up the numbers associated with each question associated with each attitude and then finding the mean (Wong et al., 1994). For example, fear of death has seven items associated with it

(questions 1, 2, 7, 18, 20, 21, and 32), so the score would be computed by adding up the responses for these questions (1-SD, 2-D, 3-MD, 4-U, 5-MA, 6-A, 7-SA). After the raw score is found, the mean of each dimension can be found by dividing the total score of each dimension by the number of questions associated with the dimension (Wong et al., 1994). Some people may associate overwhelmingly with one attitude while others may associate with more than one. Some individuals may not associate strongly with any attitude.

Lastly, demographic information is collected including age, gender, race/ethnicity and religious affiliation. These variables will be used to perform regression analysis and validate whether any trends found about risk level and death attitudes hold up after controlling for other factors.

ANALYTIC STRATEGY

The collected data would be transferred to and analyzed in SPSS and would have three potential stages. First, an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test would be conducted to look at the three independent variables and five dependent variables. This test would be used to see whether there are any significant differences among the death attitude means across the three independent variable groups (non-gang, at-risk, and gang-involved). Second, if significant differences are found to exist, a Tukey's honest significance test will be conducted to determine what the differences are. This would be used to see identify how the three groups differ and which death attitudes they differ with. Third, if significant differences are found and the specific difference are identified, regression analysis will be conducted to determine whether the results

hold up after controlling for demographic information including age, gender, race/ethnicity, and religious affiliation.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The centrality of violence to youth gangs poses harm to gang-involved individuals and the communities they live in. Along with the inherent violence involved with gang life, these youth are also much more likely to behave violently (Gordon et al., 2004) and be violently victimized (Curry et al., 2002; Peterson et al., 2004; Taylor et al., 2007). Additionally, they have higher rates of early death which result from homicides involving guns (Teplin et al., 2005). In the neighborhoods where this kind of violence is likely, typical socializing institutions are broken or weak which leads youth to be especially vulnerable to joining gangs (Vigil, 2019). With these issues in mind, efforts to develop better youth gang prevention and intervention strategies start with the creation of accurate screening tools to identify the youth who are the most likely to join gangs.

A variety of macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors have been identified including neighborhood economic disadvantage (Pyrooz et al., 2010), perceptions of school being unsafe (Lenzi et al., 2015), having delinquent friends, delinquent beliefs, violent victimization (Howell & Egley, 2005), and holding attitudes that go against mainstream society (Esbensen et al., 1993). One avenue of research that has yet to be investigated is the way that at-risk and gang-involved youth perceive death in comparison to non-gang-involved youth. Identifying any differences between the three groups would indicate that death attitudes could be used to screen for gang-involvement risk.

The proposed study aims to identify which death attitudes youth in each category tend to associate with and whether there are any group differences. The three

hypotheses are that at-risk youth are expected to associate with negative death attitudes (fear of death, death avoidance, or escape acceptance); at-risk and gang-involved youth will identify with similar death attitudes; and non-gang youth are expected to associate with positive death attitudes (neutral acceptance or approach acceptance). An added expectation to hypothesis three is that age and religious affiliation may impact the trends within the non-gang population.

If hypothesis one is supported by the results, this would mean that at-risk youth are more likely to associate with either fear of death, death avoidance, or escape acceptance. Each of these death attitudes have negative mental health outcomes attached to them (Wong et al., 1994), which indicates that access to therapy and prevention programs aimed at increasing wellness could be useful in preventing and intervening in youth gang entry. Trauma-Focused Cognitive Therapy could be especially helpful given the exposure to violent offending and violent victimization that is common among at-risk and gang-involved youth (Garbarino et al., 2020). In one study, this kind of therapy was used with a sample of child soldiers and was shown to decrease posttraumatic stress, depression, and anxiety symptoms (McMullen et al., 2013). Additionally, the boys who participated in the therapy experienced an increase in prosocial behavior. Although this was a sample of child soldiers and not youth gang members, Garbarino et al. (2020) point to their potential efficacy for youth gang members. This kind of strategy could help youth with these negative death attitudes cope more effectively and move past their trauma.

Another potential prevention or intervention strategy would involve community-based therapy providers. These are programs that utilize therapists from

the communities of the population in need (Ertl et al., 2011). These providers typically understand the youth involved in the therapy better than an outside provider. One study found that this strategy was effective among child soldiers and decreased posttraumatic symptoms (Ertl et al., 2011). Helping youth cope more effectively with traumatic experiences could steer them away from gang involvement and towards more prosocial institutions.

If hypothesis two is supported by the results, then it would mean that at-risk and gang-involved youth show similar death attitudes trends. This would further indicate that death attitudes could be used to screen for future gang involvement. Also, it would indicate that therapeutic efforts to address traumatic events could be used for both populations and could be used as either a prevention or intervention strategy. If at-risk and gang-involved death attitudes are found to be different, then more research would need to be conducted to determine why there are differences. Differences between the groups would indicate that there are missing factors that separate at-risk youth from gang-involved individuals.

Hypothesis three is that non-gang youth would associate with either neutral acceptance or approach acceptance. If this hypothesis is supported, then it would indicate that non-gang youth have more positive and healthy views of death. It would also indicate that these attitudes may protect them from gang entry risks. Relatedly, if the added expectation about age and religious affiliation are found to be accurate, then it would indicate that there are certain factors that lead to healthy death attitudes. Prevention and intervention efforts could then aim to shift at-risk and gang-involved youth death attitudes towards these two attitudes. These efforts could use the

therapeutic methods mentioned earlier in the discussion and focus on shifting these attitudes to a more positive attitude.

If no trends among each group are found, this would indicate that there are other factors that cause attitudes to form that do not involve gang risk or the associated experience that leads to the risk of gang entry. More research would then be required to investigate how death attitudes form among these groups and how they are impacted by a variety of macro-, meso-, and individual-level characteristics. It would also indicate that death attitudes may not be suitable to be used in screening for gang entry risk. Without any discernible trends, non-gang, at-risk, and gang-involved youth would be as likely to hold any of the five attitudes regardless of their category. Additionally, if no trends are discovered, this would indicate that there is a continued need for more research looking into other relevant variables for gang-involvement risk.

IMPLICATIONS

For policy, the implications focus on increasing the efficacy of prevention and intervention efforts by informing policymakers about the factors that indicate gang-involvement risk. If death attitudes are identified as a risk factor among the sample of at-risk youth, then prevention programs can be aimed at youth who exhibit the death attitudes identified. These prevention programs could also then focus on shifting these attitudes to healthier attitudes through various types of therapy. Additionally, intervention strategies could be developed or guided based on the trends found among gang-involved youth. If gang-involved youth exhibit similar death attitudes as those

among at-risk youth, then similar therapeutic programs can be instituted to shift death attitudes and lead to more prosocial outcomes for current and former gang members. Also, depending on which kind of negative death attitude the youth associate with, therapy providers may want to tailor their approaches to address the specific death attitude. The way a therapist approaches an avoidant person would differ greatly with how they should approach someone who exhibits escape acceptance.

With theory implications, if trends are identified among at-risk youth and gang-involved youth that differ from non-gang youth, then it would indicate that death attitudes should be researched further in terms of how they may contribute to risk levels. Additionally, if trends are found, then this could indicate that theories should try to incorporate more ideas of individual perceptions into their frameworks. Specifically, death perceptions could be included in looking at risk factors for various forms of crime, general delinquency risk, or potentials for desistance. This kind of death perception research could also be extended to include other populations who experience a heightened level of death in their lives. Some of the groups could include military personnel, victims of mass violence and genocide, victims of intimate partner violence, people who grew up or lived through war, and law enforcement officials.

In the multiple marginality framework, death attitudes would be placed among the individual-level factors that increase gang entry risk. More research should then investigate how these death attitudes are formed and what experiences and factors lead to specific death attitudes among these youth. Depending on the death attitudes that are most common among youth growing up in marginal areas, this research could

help explain another facet of vulnerability and marginality. Holding negative death attitudes could lead to a more isolating existence even within marginal communities.

Additionally, this research may also add to the understanding of mental health research being conducted on this population. Each death attitude is associated with different mental health and physical well-being outcomes (Wong et al., 1994). When studying levels of PTSD, suicidal ideation, anxiety, depression, and other outcomes, death attitudes should also be measured to see if there are specific mental and physical health outcomes for members of this population. Substance abuse research could also benefit from including death attitudes in their studies because those with more negative death attitudes may self-medicate via drugs and alcohol to cope with their emotions and thoughts.

If no trends are found among the data, then it would indicate that death attitudes may not be an individual-level risk factor and that experiences with death may impact risk via other mechanisms. More research should then be focused on figuring out other ways that experiences with death and violence impact at-risk and gang-involved youth. Death attitudes could still play an important role in this relationship, but there may be other factors mediating or moderating the relationship between death attitudes and gang involvement. For example, a gang-involved youth may be exposed to a lot of violence and death, but instead of fearing it as others might, this youth identifies as an atheist and believes that death is just a natural phenomenon and is nothing to fear. This would be consistent with some of the other research on death attitudes, but other external and internal factors need to be

evaluated. Personality traits, cultural values, religious beliefs, and other factors may play a role in the relationship between death attitudes and gang involvement.

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations with the study design. First, the proposed study uses a sample from public schools which may lead to a small number of youth who indicate gang involvement. Youth who are involved with gangs are much more likely than non-gang members to skip school or drop out (Howell, 2013), so they may not be present on the day that the surveys are administered. Additionally, the sample selection process does not make any overt efforts to ensure that gang members are included in the sample. This could hurt the ability of the proposed study to look at trends among gang-involved youth and between at-risk and gang-involved youth.

A second limitation is that not all the youth who live in Prince George's County would have gone through the specific socialization outlined in Vigil's work. His work is based on youth living in highly urban areas, and the sample for the proposed study includes all Prince George's County schools. Not all these schools would include students who live in the neighborhoods that Vigil identifies as being especially vulnerable to gangs and the socialization process. This makes it more difficult to use the data in the proposed study to discuss implications of Vigil's theory.

A third limitation is that the age range is quite limited. Youth gang populations have been getting older as youth stay in the gang longer (The United States Department of Justice, 2020). The 12-18 age range does not encompass many

of the ages present in youth gangs today. Also, the older populations may have been exposed to more violence and death and may have more pronounced death attitudes as a result. Future research could investigate older gang members to see what kinds of trends there are.

Lastly, the requirement that participants get their parent or guardian's permission may limit the sample size. Some youth may not have parents or guardians who are engaged in their lives or in their education. They may not be able to get a parent or guardian to sign off the permission form to participate in the study. Many at-risk and gang-involved you have dysfunctional families and a lack of parental support (Howell & Egley, 2005; Lenzi et al., 2015), so this may disproportionately affect them.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

If at-risk youth are shown to associate with fear of death, death avoidance, or escape acceptance, then more research would need to explore whether these attitudes impact their risk level and if they were developed as a part of the socialization process. If at-risk youth and gang-involved youth are shown to have similar trends among death attitudes, then future research could explore the usefulness of death attitudes as a screening tool. Future research should also investigate the mental health and behavioral outcomes that at-risk and gang-involved youth have because of their death attitudes. Also, future research could investigate how to shift death attitudes or if it is possible. If at-risk and gang-involved youth are more likely to have negative

death attitudes, then strategies should be developed to help them shift their death attitudes.

If at-risk and gang-involved death attitudes are found to be different, then more research should be conducted to determine why there are differences. Some questions that could be asked in the future include: do death attitudes change after joining gangs or are they completely based on individual characteristics and not on group-level factors? Differences between the groups would indicate that there are missing factors that separate at-risk youth from gang-involved youth, and these factors would be important to understand.

Future research could further link death attitudes with multiple marginality theory. One of the questions that could be asked in the future includes: do death attitudes result from the socialization process in disadvantaged neighborhoods? If at-risk youth hold certain death attitudes, then it might work to further isolate and marginalize them. The mechanisms behind this role could also be explored. With broader empirical results, future research could also ask the question of whether trends in death attitudes inform the role of exposure to violence in the risk level for gang entry. This relationship has been well-established (Merrin et al., 2020), but the mechanisms behind this relationship could be explored more.

Lastly, future research could look into older gang members instead of just the 12-18 age range that this proposed study uses. Older gang members may have different perspectives than younger gang members because they may have more experiences with death and violence, and they may have more general understandings of the world. Also, since they are older, the idea of their own death may hold more

weight than for younger gang members. Gang members that are older could also have had children or other life events that influence their thoughts about death and violence.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The important role that violence plays in the dynamics of youth gangs indicates that these experiences could impact the way that at-risk and gang-involved youth perceive death. Multiple marginality theory explains the socialization process that makes certain youth in disadvantaged areas especially vulnerable to joining gangs (Vigil, 2019). Many of these youth have similar backgrounds and experiences which would suggest that they have similar perceptions of death.

Violence and death are a central experience in the lives of many at-risk and gang-involved youth living in disadvantaged urban areas. Despite this, research has not yet quantified the way that these youth perceive death. Death attitudes can be negative or positive, and they have associated mental health outcomes which could exacerbate or mitigate risk levels for youth (Wong et al., 1994). In order to develop better prevention and intervention efforts, the role that death attitudes play in the lives of at-risk and gang-involved youth must be understood. The proposed study would begin the foundation of the death attitude research with this population and would open the door to countless future research avenues.

One of the more crucial future directions includes the need to explore whether death attitudes impact gang-involvement risk level. Relatedly, research would also be needed to investigate whether the socialization process causes certain death attitudes to form. Lastly, future research should explore strategies to help shift perceptions away from negative death attitudes and towards more positive death attitudes.

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Appendix: Measures

GREF ASSESSMENT: Los Angeles GRYD program version, the Youth Services Eligibility Tool (YSET) (Hennigan et al., 2014, p. 126-128).

Antisocial/prosocial tendencies total (Mn on 5-point scale = 15.91, SE = .056, range = 6 – 30)

- I try to be nice to other people because I care about their feelings.
- I get very angry and lose my temper.
- I do as I am told.
- I try to scare people to get what I want.
- I am accused of not telling the truth or cheating.
- I take things that are not mine from home, school, or elsewhere.

Weak parental supervision total (Mn on 5-point scale = 7.34, SE = .044, range = 3 – 15)

- When I go out, I tell my parents or guardians where I am going or leave them a note (or text or phone them).
- My parents or guardians know where I am when I am not at home or at school.
- My parents or guardians know who I am with, when I am not at home or at school.

Critical life events total (Mn count = 4.03, SE = .023, range = 0 – 7)

- Did you fail to go on to the next grade in school or fail a class in school?
- Did you get suspended, expelled or transferred to another school for disciplinary reasons?
- Did you go out on a date with a boyfriend or girlfriend for the very first time?
- Did you break up with a boyfriend or girlfriend or did he or she break up with you?
- Did you have a big fight or problem with a friend?
- Did you start hanging out with a new group of friends?
- Did anyone you were close to die or get seriously injured?

Impulsive risk taking total (Mn on 5-point scale = 13.58, SE = .047, range = 4 – 20)

- Sometimes I like to do something dangerous just for the fun of it.
- I sometimes find it exciting to do things that might get me in trouble.
- I often do things without stopping to think if I will get in trouble for it.
- I like to have fun when I can, even if I will get into trouble for it later.

Neutralization total (Mn on 5-point scale = 18.51, SE = .062, range = 6 – 30)

- It is okay for me to lie (or not tell the truth) if it will keep my friends from getting in trouble with parents, teachers, or police.
- It is okay for me to lie (or not tell the truth) to someone if it will keep me from getting into trouble with him or her.
- It is okay to steal something from someone who is rich and can easily replace it.
- It is okay to take little things from a store without paying for them because stores make so much money that it won't hurt them.
- It is okay to beat people up if they hit me first.
- It is okay to beat people up if I do it to stand up for myself.

Negative peer influence total (Mn on 5-point scale = 13.18, SE = .082, range = 5 – 25)

- If your friends were getting you into trouble at home, would you still hang out with them?
- If your friends were getting you into trouble at school, would you still hang out with them?
- If your friends were getting you into trouble with the police, would you still hang out with them?
- If your friends told you not to do something because it is wrong, would you listen to them?
- If your friends told you not to do something because it is against the law, would you listen to them?

Family gang influence (35% two or more think you will; 34% two or more family gang members)

- Including everyone you think of as being in your family, how many people in your family think that you probably will join a gang someday?
- How many people in your family are gang members now?

Peer delinquency total (Mn on 5-point scale = 10.69. SE = .055, range = 5 – 25)

- How many of your friends have skipped school without an excuse?
- How many of your friends have stolen something?
- How many of your friends have attacked someone with a weapon?
- How many of your friends have sold marijuana or other illegal drugs?
- How many of your friends have used any of these: cigarettes, tobacco, alcohol, marijuana or other illegal drugs?
- How many of your friends have belonged to a gang?

Self-report delinquency total (6 months time frame) Mn count = 4.43, SE = .044, range = 0 – 17)

- Used alcohol or cigarettes?
- Used marijuana or other illegal drugs?
- Used paint or glue or other things you inhale to get high?
- Skipped classes without an excuse?
- Lied about your age to get into some place or to buy something?
- Avoided paying for things such as movies, bus, or subway rides?
- Purposely damaged or destroyed property not belonging to you?
- Carried a hidden weapon for protection?
- Illegally spray painted a wall or a building – doing graffiti?
- Stolen or tried to steal something worth $50 or less?
- Stolen or tried to steal something worth more than $50?
- Gone into or tried to go into a building to steal something?
- Hit someone with the idea of hurting him/her?
- Attacked someone with a weapon?
- Used a weapon or force to get money or things from people?
- Been involved in gang fights?
- Sold marijuana or other illegal drugs?
- Hung out with gang members in your neighborhood?
- Participated in gang activities or actions?
- Been a member of a gang?

Used to screen for gang involvement:
Based on provider feedback (asked only if the youth indicated he or she is in a gang)

- Did you have to do anything to join the gang? Explain ...
- Which of the things in the list above have you done with another member of your gang in the last 6 months?

From: Eurogang Youth Survey
(http://www.umsl.edu/ccj/eurogang/euroganghome.html)

Some people have a group of friends that they spend time with, doing things together, just hanging out or kicking it. Do you have a group of friends like that?

- How old are the people in your group of friends?
- Does your group of friends spend a lot of time together in public places like the park, the street, shopping areas, or out in the neighborhood?
- How long has this group existed?
- Is doing illegal things accepted or okay for your group?
- Do people in your group actually do illegal things together?

- What kind of illegal things do people in your group do together?

Auxiliary questions

- Is your group of friends: a gang, a crew, clique, crowd, or posse that is not a gang?
- Right now, are you a gang member, a member of a crew, clique, crowd, or posse that is not a gang?
- Does your group have a name?
- Tell me three things that you and others in your group do together

Death Attitude Profile-Revised (DAP-R) (Wong et al., 1994, p. 146-148)

Wong, P.T.P., Reker, G.T., & Gesser, G.

This questionnaire contains a number of statements related to different attitudes toward death. Read each statement carefully, and then decide the extent to which you agree or disagree. For example, an item might read: "Death is a friend." Indicate how well you agree or disagree by circling one of the following: SA = strongly agree; A= agree; MA= moderately agree; U= undecided; MD= moderately disagree; D=disagree; SD= strongly disagree. Note that the scales run both from strongly agree to strongly disagree and from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

If you strongly agreed with the statement, you would circle SA. If you strongly disagreed you would circle SD. If you are undecided, circle U. However, try to use the undecided category sparingly.

It is important that you work through the statements and answer each one. Many of the statements will seem alike, but all are necessary to show slight differences in attitudes.

1. Death is no doubt a grim experience. **SD D MD U MA A SA**

2. The prospects of my own death arouses anxiety in me. **SA A MA U MD D SD**

3. I avoid death thoughts at all costs. **SA A MA U MD D SD**

4. I believe that I will be in heaven after I die. **SD D MD U MA A SA**

5. Death will bring an end to all my troubles. **SD D MD U MA A SA**

6. Death should be viewed as a natural, undeniable, and unavoidable event. **SA A MA U MD D SD**

7. I am disturbed by the finality of death. **SA A MA U MD D SD**

8. Death is an entrance to a place of ultimate satisfaction. **SD D MD U MA A SA**

9. Death provides an escape from this terrible world. **SA A MA U MD D SD**

10. Whenever the thought of death enters my mind, I try to push it away. **SD D MD U MA A SA**

11. Death is deliverance from pain and suffering. **SD D MD U MA A SA**

12. I always try not to think about death. **SA A MA U MD D SD**

13. I believe that heaven will be a much better place than this world. **SA A MA U MD D SD**

14. Death is a natural aspect of life. **SA A MA U MD D SD**

15. Death is a union with God and eternal bliss. **SD D MD U MA A SA**

16. Death brings a promise of a new and glorious life. **SA A MA U MD D SD**

17. I would neither fear death nor welcome it. **SA A MA U MD D SD**

18. I have an intense fear of death. **SD D MD U MA A SA**

19. I avoid thinking about death altogether. **SD D MD U MA A SA**

20. The subject of life after death troubles me greatly. **SA A MA U MD D SD**

21. The fact that death will mean the end of everything as I know it frightens me. **SA A MA U MD D SD**

22. I look forward to a reunion with my loved ones after I die. **SD D MD U MA A SA**

23. I view death as a relief from earthly suffering. **SA A MA U MD D SD**

24. Death is simply a part of the process of life. **SA A MA U MD D SD**

25. I see death as a passage to an eternal and blessed place. **SA A MA U MD D SD**

26. I try to have nothing to do with the subject of death. **SD D MD U MA A SA**

27. Death offers a wonderful release of the soul. **SD D MD U MA A SA**

28. One thing that gives me comfort in facing death is my belief in the afterlife. **SD D MD U MA A SA**

29. I see death as a relief from the burden of this life. **SD D MD U MA A SA**

30. Death is neither good nor bad. **SA A MA U MD D SD**

31. I look forward to life after death. **SA A MA U MD D SD**

32. The uncertainty of not knowing what happens after death worries me. **SD D MD U MA A SA**

Scoring Key for the Death Attitude Profile-Revised

Dimension	Items
Fear of Death (7 items)	1,2,7,18,20,21,32
Death Avoidance (5 items)	3,10,12,19,26
Neutral Acceptance (5 items)	6,14,17,24,30
Approach Acceptance (10 items)	4,8,13,15,16,22,25,27,28,31
Escape Acceptance (5 items)	5,9,11,23,29

Scores for all items are from 1 to 7 in the direction of strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). For each dimension, a mean scale score can be computed by dividing the total scale score by the number of items forming each scale.

For further information on the theoretical rationale and the psychometric properties of the scale consult the following source:

Wong, P.T.P., Reker, G.T., & Gesser, G. (1994). Death Attitude Profile-Revised: A multidimensional measure of attitudes toward death. In R.A. Neimeyer (Ed.), Death anxiety handbook: Research, instrumentation, and application. (pp. 121-148). Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis.

For information on the original DAP, consult the following source:

Gesser, G., Wong, PT.P., & Reker, G.T. (1987-88). Death attitudes across the life span: The development and validation of the Death Attitude Profile (DAP). Omega, 18, 113-128.