Guest editorial

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Reimagining gang research without the police: moving the field forward in the era of "defund the police"

In the first week of July 2020, we were given the opportunity to put together a special edition for the *Journal of Aggression, Conflict and Peace Research* on contemporary issues in street gang research. We chose to focus on an issue probably as old as the field of study itself: the separation of the object of study from society's reaction to it. After a month of protests ignited by the murder of George Floyd but fueled by centuries of White supremacy in policing and state violence against people of color (Ward, 2018), it seemed as necessary as ever to take a hard look at blind spots in our own field of research.

When one of us proposed to focus the special issue on reimagining gang research without the use of police data, we all agreed on the concept, but further discussion among ourselves revealed we all had different interpretations of what that could mean. One interpretation could be to take a critical look at the scientific implications of the tendency of gang scholars to be more deferential to the views, perceptions and concerns of law enforcement and other criminal justice actors than to the gang members and communities they write about. Another interpretation could be to consider the weaknesses and implications of drawing conclusions about gangs from data collected by police officers, for police business. Many contributors to this special issue have specifically addressed these themes in some way; importantly, all contributors have provided their own interpretation of what it means to reimagine gang research without the police.

In this editorial, we want to highlight areas where we, as gang scholars, need to be better. We believe that many of us, unwittingly or not, have been part of the problem. As a community of scholars, we need to recognize the power we have in guiding perceptions of a phenomena and reactions to it. We argue that most of our past failures have been to inadequately use this power or even failing to recognize that we have it. Through our silence and tacit endorsement of the status quo, we have allowed the criminal justice system and its actor to take ownership of the concept of the gang and let them – along with the media – proliferate ideas and myths we *know* are wrong. We watched – and sometimes assisted – as they used the mythical idea of the gang to justify policies and practices that have contributed to uphold White supremacy and destroyed trust in institutions among communities of color.

We examine the impact of gang scholars' ideological deference to law enforcement in two areas of scholarship: policy-relevant research and the use of police data and definitions of a gang. We anchor our discussion in two specific examples. First, we examine the use and evaluation of gang interventionist. Second, we provide a critique of the National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS) and its continued use by gang scholars. Although we provide our own suggestions for the field to move forward, we believe that the contributors to this special issue do a much better job, than we could ever do, in suggesting paths forward to ensure future gang research is an endeavor that can be independent from the police.

Convenient revival of gang interventionists

It has been said that criminology is virtually irrelevant in influencing public policy (Austin, 2003; Braga and Apel, 2016). Austin (2003, p. 558) in his critique of the relevance of

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criminology in public policy debates argued that "criminologists have very little good 'science' to offer policy makers." Austin attributed the lack of evidence to poor methodology, bad data, ideological biases, over-enthusiastic support for policies and programs without evidence and the heavy influence of funders on the directions of gang research. We believe that gang research – for better or for worse – has been fairly influential on public policy compared to other areas of criminology. Focused-deterrence and the Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) are two well-known policies and programs that have been the direct result of impressive collaborations between gang scholars and policymakers led, among many others, by David Kennedy, Anthony Braga and Finn Esbensen. In fact, gang research has an impressive history of policy-relevant research, a legacy left to our generation of scholars by giants such as Irving Spergel and James F. Short.

Consistent with Austin's critique, gang research has achieved *some* policy relevance because scholars have embraced experimental methods and have consistently performed high-quality evaluations of GREAT and focused-deterrence strategies. However, it is worth considering why these two programs have been evaluated thoroughly and replicated (and evaluated again) is no accident. A naïve observer might argue that it is because policymakers and funders have recognized the strong theoretical underpinnings of these programs and therefore have invested substantially in adopting and evaluating them. It should be pointed out to this observer that the original version of GREAT was essentially the largely ineffective Drug Abuse Resistance Education in disguise [1].

Rather, we would argue that these programs have had a chance to evolve, be replicated and evaluated because they fall in line with law enforcement's view of the world, and by extension, the federal agencies that support both this view and the funding of these programs, and perhaps, the ideological biases of gang scholars. This does not in any way diminish the evidence behind these programs. If we are to follow Austin's recommendation, we must admit that as far as evidence-based policy is concerned, these programs are some of our best suggestions to policymakers.

Do gang programs necessarily *need* to revolve around and be acceptable to the police? Basic logic dictates that they do not have to. Evidence suggests that we just do not have a scientifically rigorous answer to this question. Practice points to incredibly frustrating obstacles in the implementation and evaluations of gang programs that do not involve the police and even some that do. Each of these aspects can be seen in the "revival" of the gang intervention worker.

Gang intervention workers are members of the community where gangs are active. Often former gang members themselves, they have some legitimacy with gang members and therefore can guide the group and its members toward prosocial activities and prevent violence by mediating disputes. This intervention modality is not new. It was a strategy that was common in the 1960s and 1970s but was found to have several negative consequences. These included increasing a gang's cohesiveness when a gang worker was assigned to a group, which in turn was associated with an increase in delinquency (Klein, 1971). This finding basically led academics – and presumably, policymakers – to abandon the idea. Until more recently.

Gang interventionists have made a "comeback" as a component of larger comprehensive programs, including focused-deterrence approaches. This revival was not associated with any change in the evidence we have on their effectiveness (Klein, 2011), but more likely from the realization on the part of police officers that they have lost their ability to credibly convince communities they have harassed for decades that they care about reducing violence. For the sake of effective deterrence, law enforcement reluctantly conceded that they needed to find messengers that would be more effective (Kennedy, 2009). There are many examples in the literature where rifts between gang intervention workers and police officers have played an important role in sinking large comprehensive initiatives (Spergel *et al.*, 2006). As Klein (2011, p. 1038) points out gang interventionists, especially if they are former gang members, are

perceived by law enforcement and other service providers with suspicion, especially when interventionists are reluctant to share information with them: "The police, in particular, resent this failure (while being equally guilty of the failure to share information)."

There are good reasons to believe that gang interventionists play an important role in preventing gang violence. For one, they seem to be the common denominator in many different types of gang programs that have shown signs of effectiveness such as Cure Violence (Butts *et al.*, 2015), GRYD (Brantingham *et al.*, 2021), the Comprehensive Community-Wide Gang Program (the Spergel Model; Spergel, 2007) and the Group Violence Reduction Strategy (Papachristos and Kirk, 2015). As they are part of larger comprehensive programs, we know very little about their independent effect on gang violence – positive or negative.

Policymakers, funders and scholars appear weary of gang interventionists programs if they ruffle the feathers of law enforcement. For instance, in a review of the literature on Cure Violence, arguably one of the programs where interventionists occupy the most central role, Butts *et al.* (2015, p.40) describe Cure Violence as "operat[ing] independently of, while hopefully not undermining, law enforcement." Similar to the Spergel Model before it, the implementation, funding and effectiveness of Cure Violence – another theoretically driven and designed program – seem to be dependent on whether law enforcement are willing to collaborate with a program not led by them. Furthermore, "policy makers are more likely to invest in law enforcement—not necessarily because enforcement is the best strategy for the problem, but because enforcement is familiar [...]. When a program staff involves former gang members and previously incarcerated offenders, it will be much more difficult for public officials to embrace it" (Butts *et al.*, 2015).

Gang scholarship and policy making without the police. Austin (2003) argued that criminologists became irrelevant for policymakers in part because of an ideological bend of a "white male-dominated field" (p. 560) and the heavy influence of the quasi-monopoly of funding from politicized federal agencies design to control crime. As a solution to the latter problem cause, he suggested that criminologists seek out alternative sources of funding from private foundations, which is applicable here and increasingly possible. The current climate may yield opportunities to innovate when it comes to non-law enforcement–led programs, and private foundations and federal, state and local agencies alike may be more receptive to funding rigorous implementations and evaluations of these initiatives. In this issue, Caterina Roman discusses how focused deterrence strategies emphasizing highly targeted, but still aggressive enforcement, have evolved as one of the most widely accepted gang violence interventions at a time when many are calling for a reduction in the powers of the police. She argues that we may be too quick to accept evidence of effectiveness and that evaluation research has failed to truly consider any questions beyond whether or not an approach "works." Furthermore, she highlights many mechanisms – including practices of federal funding agencies and researchers – that have led us to a situation where the field's policy recommendation becomes almost inevitably tilted toward law enforcement-led strategies. Roman (2021) offers several insightful recommendations for the field to move forward.

Elke Van Hellemont and James Densley address head-on the impact of the ideological bend of gang scholars on policy. Inspired by Zimring and Hawkins' *Crime is Not the Problem*, Van Hellemont and Densley (2021) argue that by equating gangs with crime, gang scholars have provided law enforcement with a license to target the gang and its members, as opposed to focusing on their most problematic and damaging behavior: gang violence. They advocate for a complete rethinking of how gangs are policed – from the use and sharing of data and information about gangs between the police and social service providers to a change in their fundamental role. For Van Hellemont and Densley (2021) argue for a move away from the crime-fighting model of the police to a "consent-based policing model" (p. 12) where law enforcement takes a back seat and is there to assist social service providers and community-based violence interrupters, not the other way around.

Relinquishing expertise out of convenience: use and abuse of the National Youth Gang Survey

Critics of gang research have noted that academic studies of gangs have increasingly become intertwined with the demands of the police and governments in general (Hallsworth and Brotherton, 2011; Katz and Jackson-Jacobs, 2004; Klein, 2007). In Europe, many have noted the tendency to evoke the concept of the gang to explain violence in urban areas. American gang researchers, through the Eurogang network, have been accused of providing policymakers with the tools to label more groups as gangs, which in turns facilitates the rationalization of heavy-handed approach to handle these groups (Hallsworth and Young, 2008).

In the USA, it is extremely difficult to disentangle academic research on street gangs and the state's interest in controlling street gangs and their monopoly on the use of force. In part, this is due to the fact that the predominant sources of funding come from government agencies dedicated to the control of crime and delinquency, such as the Department of Justice, the Office of Justice Programs, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). To be sure, funding from these agencies and the dedicated work of the people who have worked for them have contributed to an incredible explosion of gang research in the 1990s and 2000s (Pyrooz and Mitchell, 2015). However, we argue that there is a cost to scientific integrity when most research is funded by agencies designed to facilitate state control over the subject of study.

Klein (2007, p. 14) argued that starting in the 1980s, the interests of funding agencies have shifted gang research away from "an earlier interest in the character of gangs to the later interest in gang crime specifically." With a change in focus, came a change in data used: from rich ethnographies, field observations and gang member interviews, gang scholars have relied increasingly on broad individual-level surveys and police data. An insidious side effect of this shift was to alleviate an important source of discomfort among gang scholars: the slippery definition of what constitutes a gang or a gang member. The burden was shifted on youths to interpret what a gang meant to them in large-scale surveys or to police departments to define what they deem to be a gang. Simultaneously, gang researchers shifted to the study of individual gang members and their behavior, at the expense of studies of gangs at the group level (Short, 2006).

Some have suggested that this change in gang scholarship coincided in important changes in the structures and demands of academic institutions (Katz and Jackson-Jacobs, 2004). The pressure to "publish-or-perish" may have led gang scholars to enter the "business of producing a massive body of shoddy and superficial studies" (Austin, 2003, p. 558). The increasing digitization and access to police data facilitates the rapid production of new studies, with lengthy limitation sections nobody reads. Similarly, our generation benefited from the herculean efforts of the previous generation of gang scholars who sought to answer causal questions of the impact of gang membership on delinquency through large-scale, longitudinal surveys. For all the good these surveys have done for our field, an unintended consequence of their availability may be that they have allowed scholars to continually produce new, but increasingly small insights about gang membership. The pressure to publish weighs especially on graduate students and junior scholars in precarious situations. The path of least resistance is chosen, reinforced through peer review by others in the same predicament, and scientific innovation becomes stifled out of necessity.

Whatever the reasons that have led to the current state of gang research, the outcome is that the expertise of our generation of gang scholars would be more adequately described as experts of gang membership and gang crime, than of gangs. If that is the case, then who are experts of gangs? Unfortunately, outside of gang research, the recognized experts are law enforcement. As we keep using police data on gangs and gang members, we are continually reinforcing this idea. Is there any scientific value of the concept of the gang if a gang is

whatever the police say is a gang? Yet, we are quick as gang scholars to let law enforcement define our object of study when it is convenient.

Nowhere is the deference to law enforcement more obvious than in the widespread use of data from the NYGS. It has become standard practice to use the survey to justify the importance of studying gangs and finding solutions to the gang problem. According to the survey, it is estimated that in 2012 (the last available survey), there were 30,700 gangs across the USA and 850,000 members, the largest numbers since 1996, the first year of the survey (National Gang Center, n.d.).

The NYGS is emblematic of two important problems in gang research: one well-known and recognized, the other less often acknowledged. The first problem is the slippery definition of what constitutes a street gang. This is an unsettled, difficult debate in the field, but a healthy one (Ball and Curry, 1995; Curry, 2015). At the core of this debate has been the question of whether crime or delinquency should be included as part of the definition of what makes a gang. When gang scholars use police data or the NYGS, they are giving up on the debate altogether and making an unequivocal decision on the question of whether gangs as synonymous with crime. The NYGS asks representatives of a police department to provide information about the gang problem in their jurisdictions, including the number of gangs, gang members, gang-related crimes and other demographics related to these groups. The NYGS defines a gang as "a group of youths or young adults in your jurisdiction that you or other responsible persons in your agency or community are willing to identify as a 'gang.'" (NGC, n.d.).

The second problem is gang scholars' uncritical preference for convenience over rigor when it comes to data about gangs. The paper trail required for the administration of justice is a blessing and a curse for criminologists in general and gang researchers in particular. On one hand, police departments and other criminal justice agencies generate enormous amounts of data on a daily basis about crime, people involved in crime and even people going about their daily, law-abiding lives. Furthermore, some police data is easily compatible across jurisdictions in large part because of federal requirements (e.g. NIBRS and UCR) and the relatively standard everyday demands law enforcement and other branches of the criminal justice system across jurisdictions. This can allow for fine grain analyses of incidents in specific areas as much as it makes large-scale comparative analyses across places and time. The amount of topic-specific data criminologists have access to is undoubtedly the envy of most other fields of social sciences. It is doubtful that the field of criminology would have evolved in the way that it did without police data. On the other hand, readily accessible data can be a curse for the field if researchers spend more time justifying the appropriateness of the imperfect but easily available data than attempt to generate new and better data.

This is not an issue that is unique to gang researchers. For as long as criminologists have used official measures of crimes, they have had to deal with the inconvenient truth that such data is inherently flawed in complex ways that are difficult to untangle. The solution to this dilemma has not changed much despite an impressive amount of research on the validity of official crime data and sources of biases in reporting. Skogan (1974) described three camps with regard to the use of official crime data for research purposes: those who reject the data altogether, those who seek to redefine the meaning of official crime statistics, and those who acknowledge the weaknesses but justify their use because no other source of data is available [2].

Howell and Griffiths (2018), in one of the few standard and recent introductory textbooks on gangs, devote an entire chapter to the analysis of data of the NYGS. Although the authors acknowledge that researchers have expressed doubts about the quality of law enforcement data about gangs, they quickly brush the concern aside by pointing to two studies who have "proved the NYGS survey to have good reliability and validity in independent tests" (Howell and Griffiths, 2018, p. 176). It is important to note that those two studies, Decker and Pyrooz (2010) and Katz *et al.* (2012) [3], almost exclusively studied the reliability of the NYGS, and

tests of validity are extremely limited. Generally, these analyses compare responses on the NYGS with other sources of police data about gangs such as threat assessments and the supplemental homicide report. Other than showing that police officials are using their own internal records to answer the questions of the NYGS and generate other reports on gangs and their crimes (as opposed to educated guesses), this finding tells us nothing about whether the NYGS offers a valid measure of the *actual* size of the gang problem.

At the end of the day, the biggest indictment of the quality of the NYGS is its poor usage as a source of data in the scientific literature. Nevertheless, statistics from NYGS are frequently cited to justify studies, particularly to justify prevention and intervention approaches, including many police-based interventions (Braga, 2015; McGarrell *et al.*, 2013). The NYGS is collected by the National Gang Center, a center funded by the OJJDP, the Bureau of Justice Assistance and other US Department of Justice programs. As a result, the greatest impact of the NYGS is in guiding and motivating funding decisions for future research studies on street gangs, which overwhelmingly favor police-based initiatives, even if they are purely preventative, such as GREAT [4].

As the late James F. Short once wrote: "The police should not be expected to perform systematic studies of youth collectivities, whether they are called gangs or something else. Such research is the job of scholars, independent of policy burdens" (Short, 2009, p. 728). With the endorsement of the NYGS, we give law enforcement the power to define the problem, then use this definition to fund more programs led by law enforcement.

Law enforcement has no incentive to portray gangs accurately. If anything, they have a lot more to lose from correcting narratives of gangs as powerful, well-organized entities that threaten to destroy the fabric of America [think Felson's (2006) Big Gang Theory]. From a financial standpoint, a city or state is far more likely to grant a police department additional funding to fight street gangs who are doing everything they can to recruit young boys and girls in suburban America's grade schools, who engage in indiscriminate violence against innocent citizens at the wrong place and wrong time, who were responsible for the crack epidemic and now decimating White America with the opioid epidemic and are using every trick in the book to make a mockery of America's immigration system to conduct their international business. It is not far-fetched to blame the construction of the gang as an ever-evolving sophisticated threat for the rapid militarization of the police, and sky-rocketing budgets (Balko, 2013). Somehow, following the greatest crime decline in recent memory, Americans have been convinced that law enforcement needs more armored vehicles, weapons and tactical units to wage a good-versus-evil fight against drugs and gangs. Would cities have written blank checks had the police chief described gangs in their cities as "loose collection of cliques [. . .where] leadership is ephemeral, turnover is often high, and cohesion only moderate" (Klein and Maxson, 2006, p. 164). What would law enforcement look like today had someone asked police chiefs the question Decker (1996, p. 263) rhetorically asked and answered: "If gangs are composed of diffuse subgroups, how is violence organized? [. . .] Not very well and not very often".

There have been many efforts to justify the use of law enforcement data in gang research, and in some cases, its use may be appropriate. At the same time, we must recognize the power and legitimacy we are implicitly giving to law enforcement. Whatever bias there is in police data, it is unlikely to be a bias that favors less enforcement. If we put as many efforts on coming up with creative ways to collect new, better data and leaving the ivory tower to engage with our subjects as we have put on justifying mediocre data, the scientific integrity of our field will be enhanced, and our relevance in creating a safer, more just society will grow.

Ideally, gang scholars, and criminal justice and criminology researchers, should be more vocal about rectifying these unsubstantiated notions about gangs and gang-related crime. They need to establish themselves in mainstream media as true experts of gangs and highlight the biases of law enforcement in portraying the gang problem. Law enforcement controls the popular narrative when it comes to street gangs. In many cases, they can choose

what group gets defined as a street gang without much pushback (Reid and Valasik, 2020; Simi *et al.*, 2008; Valasik and Reid, 2021 on the whole debate about far-right/alt-right groups). In many jurisdictions, this can have important legal ramifications, as sentence enhancements and additional crimes can be levied against those accused of being part of a group.

Of course, to be recognized as gang experts, we must, well, study gangs. Many of the contributors of this special issue propose different avenues to study gangs without relying on the police. Martin Bouchard (2021) focuses on the use of social network analysis to study gangs in two critical settings where they can be found: in schools and in prison settings. Thomas and Taylor (2021) remind us of the continued importance and relevance of the school as a setting for studying gang membership. Bichler *et al.* (2021) demonstrate how publicly available court records can be used to study networks of violence for an entire system of gangs in Los Angeles over several years. All three papers provide important ways forward for the application of social network analysis in gang research, which has previously been limited primarily to the use of data extracted from arrest records and field interview data (Faust and Tita, 2019; Gravel, 2018). Finally, Ellen Van Damme (2021) discusses the implications of using the police as entry points into the field when studying gang. She explores the importance of bypassing police gatekeepers when doing field research on gangs in an environment where police cannot be trusted. Van Damme's insight from her research in Central America – where police corruption is widely acknowledged and feared – rings true in many communities in America where gangs are found.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we hope that this special issue can generate some reflection on the role we have played in perpetuating institutional racism and our responsibility in finding solutions to lift up communities of color. On top of the unearned privilege many of us have inherited through pure chance, we often benefit from the considerable power that come with a higher education, economic status and our affiliation with wealthy academic institution. It is a yearly tradition in this field to commiserate about the fact that our ability to change policy and make a difference is extremely limited – around a $15 beer at the bar of $300-a-night hotel room during the American Society of Criminology annual meeting. The truth is that we *do* make a difference – ever incrementally – through the research decisions and partnerships we make, the data we use and the evidence we cite – and the research decisions and partnerships we do not make, the data we do not use and the evidence we do not cite. Maybe the President will call you to ask your advice on what to do about gangs. Maybe not. Probably not.

Reimagining gang research without the police is not hard. That is how it started and flourished for many, many years. The field was led by incredible scholars who cared as much about building a sound science of the gang as they cared about making lives and communities better. Such a commitment required collecting new data, building new relationships, and there was nothing convenient or easy about it. Perhaps we are romanticizing the past a bit to make a point, but it is hard to argue that it would not be ludicrous for anyone to write Thrasher's "The Gang" or Short and Strodtbeck's "Group Processes and Gang Delinquency" today. Thankfully, our generation of gang scholars stands on the shoulder of these giants, and the generations they mentored, so there is less a need to replicate these classics. Nor would we want to – we live in a much, much different world. That said we should at least attempt inconvenient work, perhaps even ludicrous efforts. Inconvenient work can be uncomfortable and risky but will make for a better science, better policies and hopefully better stories around that $15 beer.

But most importantly, we need to recognize that ideas and concepts – similar to the concept of the gang – have power that can be wielded similar to a weapon. Our responsibility as scholars is to preserve the scientific integrity of ideas and concepts and to make sure we are not letting the powerful control, reshape and wield it over the less powerful.

Notes

1. It should be said that GREAT has been substantially revised, and later versions were informed by theory (Esbensen *et al.*, 2013).

2. See Brantingham *et al.* (2018) for a similar discussion in the context of the more contemporary problem of data-driven policing.

3. Howell and Griths originally refer to a conference presentation at the 2010 American Society of Criminology Annual Conference by Katz and Fox, but we could not find a published version of the presentation, and this paper's focus appears to be similar to the presentation.

4. The GREAT is primarily led by police ocers. Interestingly, the organization that is in charge of the NYGS, the Institute for Intergovernmental Research, is also in charge of the training and delivery of the GREAT program along with many other law enforcement programs.

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