

# Creativity and Gangs: Who Joins Gangs and Why? A Critical Review of the Literature

Kyung Hee Kim<sup>1,\*</sup> and Robert J. Kipper<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia and <sup>2</sup>The National Center for the Prevention of Community Violence, Newport News, Virginia, USA

**Abstract:** Youth gang violence is increasing in the US. This literature review examined factors that influence gang membership, including home climates, school climates, substance abuse, and personality including Type-T personality and creative attitudes. Their creative undertakings can be channeled into positive productivity, if creative climates are cultivated to meet adolescents' creative needs, by providing them with diverse resources and experiences; inspiration and encouragement; high expectations and challenges; and the freedom to be alone and unique [1].

**Keywords:** Adolescents, Creative attitudes, Creative climates, Deviant behaviors, Drugs, Gangs, Substance abuse.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Creativity is making something unique and useful [1]. All individuals are born with creative potential, but their creativity (and whether positive or negative creativity) is dependent on what remains after their creative potential is stifled or distorted by their climates [1]. Creative climates in the home and at school are the most critical for individuals' creativity development. Creativity is a gift, but for individuals living in an uncreative climate, it can be more like a curse. The Creative climates are necessary for individuals' creativity to grow strong and flourish and they include **Soil**, **Sun**, **Storms**, and **Space** (4S). Diverse soil climates provide individuals with *diverse resources and experiences*, bright sun climates *inspire and encourage*, fierce storm climates provide *high expectations and challenges*, and free space climates encourage the *freedom to be alone and unique* [1].

Gang members' habitual involvement in illegal activity leads a large number to end up incarcerated for periods of time. Some prisoners are extremely creative [2,3]. Gang members exhibit creativity when participating in their initiation rite, partaking in criminal activities, promoting/selling illegal substances, secretly transporting drugs and contraband, and avoiding interference from the constant and dynamic threat of law enforcement [4]. Gang membership is banned in schools and jails, therefore, gang members have cleverly adopted dress codes, hand signs, and other secretive forms of communication including graffiti, tattoos, and music [4]. The present study synthesized existing literature of the factors that influence adolescent gang membership

such as home and school climates, substance abuse, and personality factors including Type-T personality and creative attitudes. The likelihood of engaging in risky activities is reduced with age, thus illegal behaviors decrease during adulthood [5,6]. This indicates that avoiding or delaying adolescents unhealthy risks can set a different lifetime pattern in individuals. Changing unhealthy behaviors in adolescence has the potential to have a broad impact on society, injury, human suffering, and related economic costs.

## 2. FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE YOUTH GANG MEMBERSHIP

Youth gangs (aged 12 -24) is a group of three or more members who identify themselves with a common name and symbols. They are characterized by their involvement in severe criminal activity [7,8]. Gang violence is an increasing public health problem in the US [7-11]. The Federal Bureau of Investigation [10] reported that there are 1.4 million active gang members in the US. After controlling for age, race, and criminal history, gang members are increasingly more criminally active, more predatory and violent, involved in more drug dealing, a greater danger to public safety and security, when compared to non-gang members [8,12-18]. To generate income, gangs are involved in prostitution and human trafficking, and to possess power they infiltrate educational facilities, military and government institutions, and law enforcement agencies. They have become more sophisticated in their crime planning and recruitment process by actively using technology, especially social networks [19,20].

### 2.1. Home Climates

Home life and parenting influence an adolescent's decision to join or shun gang membership. Adolescent

\*Address correspondence to this author at The College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia, USA; Tel: 757-221-1328; E-mail: kkim@wm.edu

violence is associated with family victimization, through witnessing or experiencing family violence [21,22]. Many criminals have unfortunate family backgrounds with histories of physical, sexual, or psychological abuse. They frequently exhibit signs of depression or posttraumatic stress disorder [3]. Adolescents behavior problems are internalized and manifest through psychosocial, mental (including anxiety and depression), and identity problems, or they are externalized as academic failure, substance use (alcohol, tobacco, drugs), risky sexual behavior, anti-social, aggressive, and norm-violating tendencies [23-27]. Regardless of culture, parental availability, support, and monitoring are protective factors against adolescents' behavior problems [24,25,28-33]. Child abuse prevention and outreach programs can help parents and reduce gang proliferation [34].

## 2.2. School Climates

School climates such as the overall environment, teachers, and students' attitudes toward school and learning influence an adolescents' decision to join or shun gang membership. School strongly influences *adolescents'* psychosocial development, and a positive school climate protects adolescents from externalizing behavior problems through their 1) perception of teacher availability and attentiveness; 2) discussing their problems with teachers; 3) high academic achievement; 4) positive opinion about school; 5) involvement in school clubs and sports; 6) sense of belonging and attachment to school; or 7) interactions with caring and reliable counselors, coaches, or support personnel [22,28-37]. Negative peer attitudes and actions are related to more physical fighting, and knowing peers affiliated with gangs is also associated with increased risk [38].

## 2.3. Substance Abuse

Substance use influences an adolescents' decision to join or shun gang membership. Substance use typically begins in adolescence, which is associated with risky behaviors including sex and reckless driving [39-42]. Alcohol and marijuana have the highest rates of abused substances and the two substances are most frequently the cause for treatment regarding drug dependency [43]. Daily/almost daily substance users are at a higher risk of experiencing injuries and negative psychosocial consequences and engage in a broader spectrum of risky behaviors than nondaily users [44]. Walters [45] found that *reactive* (unplanned, spontaneous, and hot-blooded) criminal thinking (as

opposed to planned, deliberate, and cold-blooded proactive criminal thinking) is correlated with prior substance abuse. Substance abusers likely magnify their reactive criminal thinking due to drug-induced neuro-cognitive deficits related to decision making skills and behavioral inhibition [45,46]. A common characteristic among alcoholics is their early drinking age, usually experimenting in adolescence. Delaying the onset of early drinking and reducing the current amount consumed increase social and emotional maturity. This combination decreases the risk of causal drinking progressing to full-blown alcoholism and unhealthy risk-taking including the accord to join a gang [47-54].

There are connections among alcohol use, marijuana use, violent behavior, and gang membership [55-59]. Alcohol and marijuana use are the most widely used substances in gang life, and producing the normalization of recreational drug use within their everyday lives [60-64]. While the reasons that gang members use marijuana vary, becoming a part of a gang provides easy access and opportunity to the drug, and marijuana use is a collective activity in gangs [63]. Gang members have difficulties finding and sustaining legitimate and viable employment so gangs earn income through the sale of drugs, and selling marijuana supports the underground economy within gangs [63].

Marijuana and alcohol use is often credited with enhancing creativity [65-68]. But the relationship between substances and creativity provide a convenient excuse for adolescents to explore, and ultimately substance use is not beneficial for creativity [69-72]. Many eminent writers and artists have expressed a flash of inspiration through drug and alcohol consumption [73]. However, the overwhelming number of eminent creators who have not used substances are frequently ignored. In the end, creators who abused substances did not lead to positively affecting their long-term creativity and it often took away from their lives [72]. Also, creativity-related outcome expectancies (and not actual use of these substances) often account for the enhancement in creativity [70,74-77].

Relaxation or relief from stress and anxiety is one of the most frequently used reasons for partaking in marijuana use [78-80]. But marijuana craving leads to continuous marijuana use [81-84]. Marijuana use not only increases anxiety, but also induces psychotic symptoms among adolescents [85,86]. Higher anxiety is related to increased marijuana craving, more marijuana use, and eventually marijuana-related impairment [85,87-89].

## 2.4. Personality

### 2.4.1. Type-T Personality

An individual's personality type also influences adolescents' decision to join, or shun, gang membership. Adolescents who have Type-T personality might be attracted to gangs. Individuals who have Type-T personality include those who seek thrills (T), stimulation, excitement, attention, and arousal. They tend to be risk takers, have unruly behavior, and get into more trouble [90,91]. Type-T personality individuals are drawn to complexity and novelty [91]. They feel imprisoned by activities that were initially satisfying, and neither reason nor fear prevents them from pursuing a new challenge or change [92-94]. This personality type leads to behaviors such as creativity, crime, drinking and drug experimentation, aesthetics, and human sexuality [94]. Farley [90,91] indicated that national differences in Type-T personality can be identifiable, and US can be characterized as a *Type-T nation*. So, many Americans are risk-takers and depending on their creative environment/climate can have either a positive or negative effect.

### 2.4.2. Creative Attitudes [1]

In addition to creative climates previously mentioned, creative attitudes (the way individuals *react* to the creative climates) are important. 4S attitudes (soil, sun, storm, and space) mirror 4S climates. The 4S attitudes nurture individuals' soil attitudes such as open-minded, bicultural, mentored, complexity-seeking, and resourceful attitudes, which encourage them to become *resourceful cross-pollinators*. Sun climates nurture their sun attitudes such as optimistic, big-picture-thinking, curious, spontaneous, playful, and energetic attitudes, which encourage them to become *curious optimists*. Storm climates nurture their storm attitudes such as independent, self-disciplined, diligent, self-efficacious, resilient, risk-taking, persistent, and uncertainty-accepting attitudes, which encourage them to become *resilient hard-workers*. Space climates nurture their space attitudes such as emotional, compassionate, self-reflective, autonomous, daydreaming, nonconforming, gender-bias-free, and defiant attitudes, which encourage them to become *defiant dreamers*.

The 4S attitudes enable individuals' creative thinking skills—ION (inbox, outbox, and newbox) thinking skills during the creative process. Inbox thinking is narrow and deep (inside the box) to gain or evaluate knowledge and skills; outbox thinking is quick and broad (outside the box) to imagine diverse possibilities; and newbox thinking transforms the elements of inbox

and outbox thinking into a new creation (new box). Inbox thinking is enabled by soil/storm attitudes; outbox thinking is enabled by sun/space attitudes; and newbox thinking is enabled by all 4S attitudes.

The 4S attitudes can be viewed negatively, especially in un-creative climates. Creative individuals who display soil attitudes are considered negative such as being distracted, rootless, channeled, overcomplicated, or opportunistic. They display sun attitudes that might be or seem negative such as being unrealistic, dreamy, annoying, impulsive, mischievous, or hyper. They display storm attitudes that might be or seem negative such as being aloof, compulsive, a workaholic, arrogant, combative, reckless, obsessive, or fearless. They display space attitudes that might be or seem negative such as being unstable, overreaching, withdrawn, uncontrolled, delusional, wild, gender-free, or rebellious.

Gang members exhibit many of the positive/negative sides of the creative attitudes above. They are risk takers and feel attached to something new and exciting when they join gangs. Adolescents who struggle with issues of conformity may find gangs to be their creative outlet. Gangs provide an opportunity for adolescents to rebel against social norms and be nonconforming. The culture of gangs takes adolescents from required conformity to one of nonconforming independent expression. Adolescents' creativity is expressed and supported in gangs through graffiti or spray art, music or rap, hand signs or language, clothing or style, body art, and the opportunity to be risk takers by violating the law. Gang culture allows adolescents to exist in a world where they control their dress, behavior patterns, and communication styles, and with this direct connection to like-minded peers, they feel a sense of belonging they might never have had before. Gang culture displays a general acceptance for those who join gangs regardless of individual abilities. Gang members protect one another in various situations from simple put downs to violent events, and they have unspoken loyalty to one another.

## 3. DISCUSSION

Gang members can be creative individuals but they are living in un-creative climates. If adolescents' creative needs are met, they can become exceptional or gifted individuals, but if these needs are not met, creative urges can cause problems [95,96]. Kim and VanTassel-Baska [96] found a relationship between behavior problems and creative attitudes. Further, creative high school dropouts show signs of malad-

justment, problems with authority, nonconformity, family conflicts, hostility, suspiciousness, oversensitivity, and egotism. Kim and Hull [95] used national data sets to examine the role creativity played in high school dropouts and found that having a creative attitude is associated with a 62% increase in the probability of dropping out of school. Creativity is a gift, but it is a curse for adolescents in traditional school environments. Torrance [97] called highly creative students *creatively handicapped* because their creativity, which is an asset, creates a situation where achievement is extremely difficult in most classrooms. It is likely that some creatively handicapped adolescents are caught up in gangs, which are becoming an increasing challenge in today's society and law enforcement.

Society inadvertently marginalizes the creatively handicapped and turns them into creative deviants. America should be concerned with a decrease in creativity among its children and adolescents [98]. Traditional outlets for creativity have diminished in American schools through excessive standardized testing. Adolescents are no longer raised in a cultural norm of creativity, and they have fewer forums for creative expression. Non-tested subjects are given less and less time in the classroom leading them to become victims of standardized testing. Gangs may attract creative individuals, because creative individuals connect to the idea of counter-cultural experiences, risk taking, and a sense of inclusion offered by gang membership. They might be forced to express their creativity through the growth of subcultures such as gangs and other creative deviant outlets. To a creative student with inadequate means for expression, a gang may appear to offer a more accepting and supportive climate than other available alternatives. Without constructive creative outlets, adolescents may become even more negatively creative in ways that alarm and challenge law enforcement officials. In order to stop being marginalized and reduce the risk of creative deviants, creatively handicapped adolescents need constructive creative outlets such as school programs that highlight a positive approach to their curiosities, preferences, or interests. Educators can redirect negative behaviors of the Type-T personality into a stimulation-seeking motive instead of viewing the behaviors as problems [99]. Type-T personality adolescents prefer uncertainty, unpredictability, high risk, novelty, variety, complexity, ambiguity, and flexibility. They need to be in educational settings that are inductive, discovery learning, variable paced, student centered, heuristic, and creative without stifling their provocative gift by standardized testing [99]. Today's marginalized creative deviants are negative influences

on society, but they can become tomorrow's innovators if they are in creative climates. According to Kim's [100] CATs model, there're three steps to innovation (the results of the creative process): Cultivate creative Climates (*Step 1*); nurture creative Attitudes (*Step 2*); and apply creative Thinking skills (*Step 3*). Let's cultivate diverse soil climates by providing adolescents with diverse resources and experiences. Let's cultivate bright sun climates by inspiring and encouraging them. Let's cultivate fierce storm climates by providing them with high expectations and challenges. Let's cultivate free space climates by providing them with freedom to be alone and unique [1].

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PDF | Purpose This article provides a critical review of the state of research on the gang membership-violent victimization relationship. Methods This study examines a comprehensive list of published quantitative studies that have assessed the relationship between gang membership and... gang membership increases violent victimization. First, several researchers who have analyzed the G.R.E.A.T. data to discern a statistically significant relationship between gang membership and violent victimization use the cross-sectional sample which... Respondents who join gangs at one wave may leave their gang by the subsequent wave when the dependent variable, i.e., violent victimization, is retrospectively reported on. If this occurs, the causal effect.