

Gang life brings deep health risks for girls

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Social problems like housing instability, impoverished neighborhoods, personal trauma and troubled home life all contribute to a higher likelihood of teenage girls joining gangs, which in turn often leads to high-risk health behaviors.

Credit: Getty Images

Being involved in a gang poses considerable health-related risks for adolescent African American girls, including more casual sex partners and substance abuse combined with less testing for HIV and less knowledge about preventing sexually transmitted diseases, according to a new study.

The findings come from a questionnaire survey with 188 African American females, ages 13 to 17, who were incarcerated in a short-term detention facility in Atlanta. The data showed that low self-esteem, emotional problems, trauma history, low parental monitoring, friends who engage in risky behavior (e.g., skipping school, selling drugs, having sex), housing instability and poor neighborhood quality all contributed to a higher likelihood of these girls being involved in a gang. The survey also provided some insights about the association between gang involvement and the high-risk health behaviors.

Study author Dexter Voisin, professor at the UChicago School of Social Service Administration, and an expert on the impact of community violence on a wide range of youth problem behaviors, noted that this population has a high prevalence of [sexually transmitted diseases](#) and an increasing rate of detention, but has not been well studied. Voisin's research, "Correlates of Gang Involvement and Health-Related Factors among African American Females with a Detention History," is being published by Child Youth and Services Review, and is co-authored by Ralph Diclemente from Emory University and Monique Carry and Kelly King from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"The results from this study provide information that helps target certain African American females who may be at risk for joining gangs, " Voisin said. "It also identifies the [health risk behaviors](#) that may be associated with gang memberships."

Those risks include having a gang-involved boyfriend, problematic drug or alcohol use and initiating sex without a condom.

Among the 188 participants, 66 percent reported having received food stamps, 58 percent reported housing instability (either being thrown out of their house or running away from home), 52 percent reported living in neighborhoods with poor quality (living on a street with abandoned

homes or apartments; buildings with broken windows; and/or homes with bars on the windows and doors) and 27 percent indicated gang involvement.

Low levels of self-esteem and poor emotional processing skills were significantly correlated with gang involvement, as were low levels of parental monitoring, poor parental communication and housing instability.

"Adolescents who have strained relationships with positive family and community members and have displaced housing may find a sense of belonging with gangs," Voisin said. "It may be that the gangs satisfy the need for social connections and survival for these teens. At the same time, there are certain behaviors and norms within some gangs that are associated with increased social and health risk factors for their members."

"Our findings suggest that child welfare and other youth service providers should target anti-gang interventions for African American females who report low self-esteem, emotional regulation problems, have housing instability and poor relationships with their parents," Voisin said.

More information: Dexter R. Voisin, Kelly M. King, Ralph J. Diclemente, Monique Carry, "Correlates of gang involvement and health-related factors among African American females with a detention history," *Children and Youth Services Review*, Volume 44, September 2014, Pages 120-125, ISSN 0190-7409, dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2014.05.001.

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