

## **Assessing the Differential Impact of Ethnicity on Gang Vulnerability among African American Males and Females**

**Jessica S. Davis Ganao, PhD**

Assistant Professor  
Department of Criminal Justice  
North Carolina Central University  
219 Whiting Criminal Justice Bldg  
Durham, NC 27707

**Danielle Brown, BS**

Candidate for the Master of Science  
John Jay College of Criminal Justice  
The City University of New York  
524 W 59th St  
New York, NY 10019

### **Abstract**

*Research on African American male and female delinquents is often aggregated, which means differences between these two groups are often not detected. However, African American males and females often have very different lived experiences, which is influenced by culture. Even individuals that are part of the same household can experience life differently, which might impact the prevalence and incidence of delinquency among African American males and females. Related to this, is the extent to which ethnicity mediates behavior for African American youth. Therefore, the purpose of this study is two-fold, the first, is to determine the differential impact of gender in understanding gang vulnerability for African American males and females. The second purpose of this study, is to assess the role of ethnicity in understanding gang vulnerability for African Americans in general and then by gender. Implications for further research are discussed.*

**Keywords:** African Americans, Juveniles, Gangs, Vulnerability, Females

### **Introduction**

Factors that impact gang involvement continues to be a topic of discussion in research and in the practice arena. Statistics show that in 2012 there were over 30,000 gangs in the United States [National Gang Center (NGC), 2014]. They also show that female involvement in gang activities has remained consistent over time. In 2010, females represented 7.4% of all gang members in the United States (NGC, 2014). This estimate has remained consistent since 1998 (NGC, 2014). Ethnicity is perceived to be a factor that plays a role in deciding to become a member of a gang. The National Gang Center (2012), estimated in 2011, that 46.2% of gangs were of Latino ethnicity and 35.3% were of Black or African American ethnicity. Research on gang involvement is not clear on the role ethnicity plays. In addition, the research is not clear as to how gender mediates the effect of ethnicity, therefore, the purpose of this paper is to determine the differential impact of gender and ethnicity on gang vulnerability.

### **Literature Review**

Although there is extensive research on gang involved youth, the focus of this study will be on youth attitudes that make them vulnerable to gang involvement as an outcome variable. There are studies that mostly focus on risk factors, however, they tend to be related to parent indicators (e.g., parent attachment and monitoring), neighborhood indicators and criminal justice indicators (e.g., delinquency records). Although these indicators are primary factors that impact gang involved youth, this study seeks to understand how attitudes of African American youth related to gangs impact their vulnerability to gang participation.

## ***African American Females and Gangs***

Gender is another consideration in research on gangs, however, the nature and extent of female criminality including gang membership is poorly understood. Research on females and gangs often show that females are treated superficially, as the belief that women's level of participation and seriousness of offending are too insignificant to warrant serious attention (Esbensen, Winfree, He and Taylor, 2001; Walker-Barnes and Mason, 2001). However, more recent gang research has paid greater attention and need to gender and to the participation of women in gangs. From existing research, it can be concluded that women do not join gangs for primarily the same reasons as men nor do they involve themselves in the same acts (Brotherton, 2008). In the early 1990s, women were often depicted as mere appendages to men within gangs. However, women saw the gang as a resource while they strived both for increased autonomy and to fulfill traditional family obligations in economically stressed and culturally marginalizing environments. "The females in this instance connected their resistance to a broader struggle for ethno-racial identity and to an ideology of grassroots empowerment and community self-help against what they considered a history of neocolonial subordination, unlike their male counterpart" (Brotherton, 2008). In general, the juvenile justice system has not always operated in the best interest of female offenders, mostly due to the ignorance of understanding female issues (Holsinger 2000; Cox et al., 2003). Still the number of females engaging in problematic behavior is increasing and research is needed to address their specific pathways (Cox et al., 2003; Davis Ganao, Suero, Glenn, 2014; Davis Ganao and Suero, 2014). As it relates to African American females specifically, Brown (1977) criticized the lack of information on female gang involvement. Unfortunately, the lack of research on female gangs, and African American females in particular, has persisted over the last three decades. This absence is in spite of the increase in the visibility and violence among African American gang involved females (Wing and Willis, 2013).

## ***Ethnicity and Gangs***

Ethnic identity is another individual level factor that is often discussed as it relates to gang involvement, but is very rarely used in research on gangs. Ethnicity is a social category that is distinguished by two main features: first there are usually rules of membership that decide who is and is not a member of that social category; and secondly there is content or sets of characteristics such as beliefs, desires, moral commitments, behaviors and physical attributes that are associated with members of that social category (Fearon & Laitin, 2000). The extent ethnicity influences gang involvement is not really understood; however, definitions of gangs often include some mention of ethnicity (Brotherton, 2008). Group membership in gangs most often hinge upon shared ethnicity, language and culture. It also very much depends upon locale, age, and activities (White, 2008). The majority of gangs appears ethnically homogeneous therefore they reflect the segregated neighborhoods where the youth live and is associated with the formation of gangs (Grund & Densley, 2012; Decker, Gemert, & Pyrooz, 2009). Therefore, ethnic composition of gangs represents the extension of social and economic characteristics of the larger community (Grund & Densley, 2012). Ethnicity is one of the most widely discussed and little studied aspect of gangs. (Decker, Gemert, & Pyrooz, 2009).

Studies indicate that there are few gangs that actually share a single ethnic identity (Grund & Densley, 2012). Ethnicity often supersedes race in the context because the "racial backgrounds" of many minority groups are not easily defined (Grund & Densley, 2012). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that the complexities of social life frequently pivot around ethnicity, and that ethnic identification, too, is dynamic, historical and multidimensional (White, 2008). As prior research has illustrated the importance to consider gender and ethnicity in social dynamics, this study will assess the role each has in understanding gang vulnerability. The specific hypotheses to be tested in this study are:

H<sub>1</sub>: To assess the differential impact of gender on known risk factors on gang vulnerability

H<sub>2</sub>: To assess the mediating effect of ethnicity on gang vulnerability.

## ***Methodology***

### **Data and Participants**

The data for this study was obtained from the Gang Resistance Education and Training Program (G.R.E.A.T.), which is a national program operated under the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The G.R.E.A.T program is a program that has been shown to be effective in preventing gang violence. The program is typically based in schools and is ran by local law enforcement agencies.

The participants for the present study are all African American and almost equal in terms of gender. Males represent approximately 48% (n=734) of the sample, whereas, females represent 52% (n=804) of the sample. Majority of the sample was born in the United States (n=1481) only 3% (n=51) of the sample was foreign born. The average age of respondents is approximately 14 (M=13.94; SD =.661); and age ranges from 11 to 18 in the sample.

### Study Measures

Gang Vulnerability is the dependent variable. This is a composite measure that measures among other items respondents' belief regarding having friends in gangs; whether being in a gang is okay, and their belief in doing illegal gang activities. A factor analysis indicates that all Eigen values are above a .4; in addition, the Cronbach's Alpha is .879. The composite measure has a range that goes from 4-20 with higher scores indicating higher gang vulnerability. The additional study variables for this study are grouped in models. The first model includes parent attachment and parent surveillance variables, which represents the parent model in this analysis. The delinquent attitude model consists of the following variables: attitudes about gangs (good or bad), guilty conscience, and perception of minor delinquency. In addition, a criminal justice model was used in the analysis to test the effect of victimization, delinquency and drug use on gang vulnerability. Finally the last model in this analysis to be tested in a peer model that assesses the effect of peer associations, peer influence, and friends' delinquency. All of the measures used in this analysis are composite measures see Table 1 for data specifics.

Prior research on gangs consistently find that individual level factors such as families, and peers, as well as macro level indicators such as neighborhood factors influence gang involvement. Specifically, the research is consistent that family dynamics influence gang involvement [Krohn, Schmidt, Lizotte, & Baldwin, (2011); Ozbay & Ozcan, (2008); Schwartz, (2006); Davis, (2007); Aquilino and Supple, (2001). Anderson et al., (1999); Baumrind, (1991); Jones, Cauffman, & Piquero, (2007); Bamed and Farrell (1992); Jones et al., (2007); Cernkovich, Lanctôt, & Giordano, (2008); Booth, Farrell, and Verano, (2008); Case & Katz, (1991); Decker & Curry, (2000); Wyrick & Howell, (2004)]. In addition, a plethora of research exists that chronicles the influence of peers on delinquency in general and gang involvement specifically [Dukes, R.L. Martineez, R.O., Stein, J.A. (1997); Wang, (2000); Miller & Brunson, (2001); Esbensen and Deschenes, (1998); Bell, (2009); Krohn, Schmidt, Lizotte, & Baldwin (2011); Miller, (2007); Ozbay and Ozcan, (2008); Decker & Curry, (2000); Thornberry et al., (2003)]. In addition, research has also found that neighborhood factors can influence gang involvement [Carson & Esbensen, (2012); Howard & Egley Jr., (2005); Papachristos, Hureau, & Braga, (2013); Katz & Schnebly, (2011)].

### Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study proceeded in several steps. First, all composite measures were created using knowledge gained by conducting a factor analysis and then a Cronbach's alpha. All measures were found to be within acceptable limits. Secondly, a Student's *t* was ran on all of the measures with gender as a preliminary assessment of the differential effects related to gender. Next, the measures were placed into a series of regression analyses to test the models for the entire sample and then by gender. The final step in the analysis was to determine the mediating effect of ethnicity on gang vulnerability for the entire sample and then by gender.

### Findings

***t*-Test Results.** The *t*-test findings (Table A1 in Appendix A) show there is a difference in the means for males and females for all the variables in the models except for drug use ( $t=-.281$ ;  $p=.779$ ). This finding is a preliminary indicator that gender is a factor when assessing the study models.

**Results Related to Hypothesis 1.** To assess the differential impact of gender on gang vulnerability a series of regression analysis were conducted (see Table A2). As it relates to the entire sample, the *Parent Model* shows the weakest association to gang vulnerability among the four models. The *Delinquent Attitudes Model* shows the strongest association to gang vulnerability. The *Peer Model* and the *Criminal Justice Model* are both statistically significant and show a moderate effect on gang vulnerability. As it relates to gender, the four models show a stronger association to gang vulnerability for males than for females. Consistent with the overall findings, the *Parent Model* shows the weakest association to gang vulnerability among the four models. The *Delinquent Attitudes Model* shows the strongest association to gang vulnerability followed by the *Peer Model* and the *Criminal Justice Model*. In terms of the female sample, the models are consistent in terms of strength as they are for males; however, the models are consistently weaker as compared to the male sample.

An analysis to determine whether the differences in the  $R^2$  are statistically significant for the study's models for males and females was conducted (see Table A3). The findings indicates there is a significant difference between males and female on all the models except for the parent model. This finding shows evidence there is a differential impact for males and females as it relates to the study models.

### **Results Related to Hypothesis 2**

The second purpose in this study was to assess the mediating effect of ethnicity on gang vulnerability (hypothesis 2). In addition, we want to see whether there is a mediating effect for ethnicity as it relates to males and females regarding the study models. In order to do this, the process illustrated by Baron and Kenny (1986), Judd and Kenny (1981), and James and Brett (1984) was utilized. These researchers suggest to determine mediating effects to follow these four steps:

Step 1: Show that the causal variable is correlated with the outcome.

Step 2: Show that the causal variable is correlated with the mediator.

Step 3: Show that the mediator affects the outcome variable.

Step 4: To establish that M completely mediates the X-Y relationship, the effect of X on Y controlling for M (path  $c'$ ) should be zero.

As it relates to step 1, the findings for the analysis indicate that majority of the variables in the models are associated with gang vulnerability (see Table A2). This finding is consistent for the overall model and for males and females as well. All of the variables are significant for the entire sample; however, victimization is not significant for males and parent attachment is not significant for females. The findings from step 2 are mixed (see A4). The findings for the entire sample show that all models are statistically significant to ethnicity except the peer model. However a closer look show that parent surveillance, perception of delinquency, and drug use are the only variables that are significant to ethnic identity, the hypothesized mediating variable. As it relates to gender the findings are clearer, consistent with the findings for the entire sample, the models are all significant for females except for the peer model. As it relates to males however, the parent model is the only significant model and parent surveillance is the only significant variable to ethnicity. These findings indicate there is a clear gender differential as it relates to gender with ethnicity as a mediating factor. The third step in the process to determine whether ethnicity is a mediating factor as it relates to the study models and gang vulnerability (see Table A5). This step determines if ethnicity and gang vulnerability are statistically associated with each other. The results indicate ethnicity is not statistically associated with gang vulnerability. Ethnicity is not associated with gang vulnerability for the entire sample nor for males or females. Therefore, it appears that ethnicity does not mediate the models as it relates to gang vulnerability, regardless of gender. In fact, the findings suggest that ethnicity is probably an exogenous variable that has a significant effect only on some of the variables in the model, mostly as it relates to the female sample, as indicated.

### **Discussion and Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was two-fold, the first was to assess the differential impact of gender as it relates to factors that impact gang vulnerability. The overall findings indicate the Delinquent Attitudes Model has the strongest effect on gang vulnerability followed by the Peer Model and then the Criminal Justice Model. There is also strong support to suggest that there is a differential effect regarding gender on gang vulnerability. All models were significant for both males and females, but the models were consistently stronger for males than for females. This finding supports the hypothesis that gender is a factor in understanding research related to African American males and females. Specifically, the findings suggest that there is a differential impact regarding males and females on gang vulnerability for Delinquent Attitudes Model, the Criminal Justice Model, and Peer Model. These findings are consistent with prior research (Davis Ganao, 2012). Prior research that assess the differential impact of gender as it relates to delinquency consistently show that gender is a determining factor in the study.

As it relates to the second purpose of this study, that is to determine whether ethnicity has a mediating effect on gang vulnerability, the findings are consistent that it does not. The steps taken to determine the role of ethnicity show that ethnicity is probably an exogenous factor as oppose to a mediating factor. In addition, this finding is only consistent for females and not males, which further suggests the importance of understanding the differential effect of gender in the study of juvenile behavior and specifically gang vulnerability. The findings from this study clearly suggest the need to explore the ethnicity construct more vigorously in juvenile justice research.

Prior research suggest that ethnicity is an integral component of gang culture but how it impacts the culture is not really understood. Although the findings in the current study were not as anticipated, further exploration of ethnic identity should be conducted, as ethnicity is a complex construct and should be explored in multiple dimensions. The current study uses a one-dimensional scale to assess ethnicity, which may have impacted the findings in this study. In addition, the data was collected mostly on 13-15 year olds, which may impact the use of the ethnic construct, as age may be a determining factor in ethnic identity development. In conclusion, research that focuses on gender differences is important even within a particular race/ethnic group as illustrated in this current research. There are several factors that impact the lived experiences of males and females regardless of race; however, the intersection of race is an important factor to consider when conducting research, as it can and does impact findings. Which of course has implications for policy.

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### Appendix A: Tables

**Table A1. Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables & t-Test Results with Gender as Control**

Variable	Mean	SD	Range	t-statistic
<b>Parent Model</b>				
Parent attachment	55.88	14.963	12-84	4.356***
Parent surveillance	14.90	3.255	4-20	-7.104***
<b>Delinquent Attitudes Model</b>				
Gangs are good	12.15	2.197	10-17	4.108***
Gangs are bad	11.78	2.231	7-14	-5.023***
Guilty Conscience	37.08	8.938	16-48	-6.989***
<b>Criminal Justice Model</b>				
Victimization	5.37	1.027	4-8	6.116***
Delinquency	20.93	3.806	17-34	9.218***
Drug Use	7.41	1.468	6-12	-.281
<b>Peer Model</b>				
Peer associations	8.50	3.667	4-17	4.163***
Peer Influence	7.60	2.246	2-10	-4.372***
Friend's Delinquency	38.08	15.100	18-90	7.178***

**Table A2. Regression Findings for Step 1 with Gang Vulnerability as the Outcome Variable**

Study Variable	Standardized Beta	Standardized Beta	Standardized Beta
	Entire Sample	Males	Females
<b>Parent Model (n= )</b>			
Parent attachment	R <sup>2</sup> =.083***	R <sup>2</sup> =.096***	R <sup>2</sup> =.061***
Parent surveillance	-.068*	-.115**	-.038
<b>Delinquent Attitudes Model (n= )</b>			
Gangs are good	R <sup>2</sup> =.410***	R <sup>2</sup> =.475***	R <sup>2</sup> =.341***
Gangs are bad	-.257***	-.247***	-.231***
Perception of Minor Delinquency	.246***	.307***	.198***
Guilty Conscience	-.235***	-.234***	-.243***
<b>Criminal Justice Model (n= )</b>			
Victimization	R <sup>2</sup> =.300***	R <sup>2</sup> =.359***	R <sup>2</sup> =.221***
Delinquency	-.058*	-.026	-.090*
Drug Use	.483***	.495***	.428***
<b>Peer Model (n= )</b>			
Peer associations	R <sup>2</sup> =.360***	R <sup>2</sup> =.391***	R <sup>2</sup> =.319***
Peer Influence	.136***	.163***	.112**
Friend's Delinquency	-.116***	-.137***	-.097**
	.395***	.383***	.396***

\* p<.05; \*\* p<.01; \*\*\* p<.001

**Table A3. Significance of the Difference between Males and Females for the Study Models**

Model	Males (R <sup>2</sup> )	Females (R <sup>2</sup> )	z-score	Significance (p)*
Parent Model	.096***	.061***	.69	p=.4902
Delinquent Attitudes Model	.475***	.341***	3.15	p=.0016
Criminal Justice Model	.359***	.221***	2.95	p=.0032
Peer Model	.391***	.319***	3.68	p=.0002

\* These significance values are two-tailed

\*\*\* p≤.001

**Table A4. Regression Findings with Ethnicity as the Outcome Variable for the Entire Sample & by Gender**

Study Variable	Standardized Beta Entire Sample	Standardized Beta Males	Standardized Beta Females
<b>Parent Model</b>	R <sup>2</sup> =.017***	R <sup>2</sup> = .020**	R <sup>2</sup> = .015*
Parent attachment	-.046	-.041	-.041
Parent surveillance	-.106***	-.122**	-.100*
<b>Delinquent Attitudes Model</b>	R <sup>2</sup> =.009**	R <sup>2</sup> =.005	R <sup>2</sup> = .017**
Gangs are good	-.028	-.003	-.053
Gangs are bad	-.054	-.060	-.045
Perception of Minor Delinquency	-.078**	-.056	-.105**
<b>Criminal Justice Model</b>	R <sup>2</sup> =.014***	R <sup>2</sup> =.003	R <sup>2</sup> =.038***
Victimization	.016	.027	.004
Delinquency	-.037	-.035	-.093*
Drug Use	-.096***	-.027	-.132**
<b>Peer Model</b>	R <sup>2</sup> =.004	R <sup>2</sup> = .009	R <sup>2</sup> = .008
Peer associations	-.020	.012	-.044
Peer Influence	-.027	-.081	.027
Friend's Delinquency	-.060	-.088	-.050

**Table A5. Regression Findings for Step 3 with Ethnicity &Gang Vulnerability**

Study Variable	Standardized Beta Entire Sample	Standardized Beta Males	Standardized Beta Females
	R <sup>2</sup> =.000	R <sup>2</sup> =.002	R <sup>2</sup> =.000
<b>Ethnicity</b>	.011	.041	-.016