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Article in *Terrorism and Political Violence* · October 2020

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF INITIAL INVOLVEMENT IN GANGS AND POLITICAL
EXTREMISM

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Abstract

There is a paucity of research comparing gang members and domestic extremists and extant studies find few explicit linkages. Despite this, there remains a great deal of interest in possible similarities between these criminal groups. Driving this interest is the possibility of adapting policies and practices aimed at preventing entry into criminal groups. A critical first step to determining compatibility is to examine the circumstances of the individuals who enter these organizations and better describe the entry processes. This study provides a unique comparison of entry into these groups by drawing on four broad empirically-derived mechanisms of group entry using 45 in-person interviews of U.S. gang members and 38 life history narratives of individuals who radicalized in the United States. Our results reveal that each of the four conceptual categories appeared to influence initial involvement; however, no single mechanism described involvement in criminal groups or differentiated involvement across the gangs and extremist groups.

KEYWORDS: violent extremism, gangs, criminal groups, terrorism, entry processes

Though the study of gangs has a long tradition, the study of individuals and groups that engage in terrorism is relatively new among criminologists.¹ We might expect *a priori*, that gangs and political extremists share some characteristics. Moreover, there has been speculation that gangs and extremist groups overlap in at least two ways. First, there may be direct connections between gangs and extremist groups, particularly regarding alliances and recruitment.² Second, gang members and political extremists may share individual characteristics, group structures and processes, or macro-level context.³ To the extent that gangs and extremists share characteristics, successful intervention methods developed for gang members might provide rapid progress in developing strategies for countering political extremism.

There are already programs and practices in place that assume an overlap between the two groups. For example, California's Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention act (STEP) targets gang members.⁴ Granderson has urged responding to street gangs as if they were terrorists and Densley describes the Islamic State as a "street gang on steroids."⁵ Similarly, the FBI identifies street gangs as "extremist groups" along with diverse political extremist organizations including the American Nazi Party, Ku Klux Klan, and Black September. Moreover, many U.S. Attorneys prosecute gang members under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations act;⁶ a tactic that has also been used against terror groups.⁷ Finally, within both federal and many state prison systems, gangs and racial supremacist groups, including some political extremists, are classified together under the broad umbrella of "security threat groups".⁸

While there has been considerable speculation about the overlap between gangs and politically motivated extremists, there have been few empirical comparisons. To date, comparisons between the affiliates of gangs and domestic extremist groups have generally been

characterized by anecdotal law enforcement accounts of links and post hoc narrative reviews of the literature.⁹ Little prior research has compared the factors that contribute to becoming gang members and political extremists, despite the potential for this research to inform theory, policy, and practice.

In this paper we compared the precursors to becoming a gang member or a political extremist. The three-step process we used to frame our data collection and analysis was exploratory and inductive. First, we conducted a literature review on how individuals join politically extremist, criminal organizations.¹⁰ Second, we used this review to develop a coding template for factors corresponding to how and why individuals joined extremist organizations. Finally, we modified the template based on a review of processes by which individuals join gangs to create a final instrument.¹¹ Our analysis highlights four conceptual categories of factors describing how individuals join criminal gangs or extremist groups: *pushes* and *pulls* to involvement in the groups, *barriers to positive socialization*, and *recruitment*. We use the template to analyze open source life histories of political extremists and face-to-face interviews with gang members in three large U.S. cities. While the methods used to collect these two datasets were different, the templates applied in both cases were identical.

CONCEPTUAL CATEGORIES DESCRIBING ENTRY INTO CRIMINAL GROUPS

Entry into a group—especially one with a distinct set of criminal norms—is clearly a major turning point in the life course.¹² Indeed, prior research on gangs and violent extremist organizations underscores the importance of the decision to join a criminal group.¹³ The four conceptual categories adapted here address two core aspects of initial involvement: "why" and "how." In pursuing answers to these two questions, we aim to understand the motives for becoming involved with criminal groups (i.e., the why), and the methods by which individuals

become involved (i.e., the how). The forces that pull individuals toward criminal group involvement or push them away from prosocial trajectories inform individual motivations, whereas the barriers to positive socialization and recruitment describe methods of initial involvement.

PULLS TO CRIMINAL GROUPS

Criminal group involvement comes with the prospect of attaining desirable outcomes, ranging from the moral and psychological advantages to the prospect of material gain.¹⁴ The rational choice perspective would argue that if the potential benefits of crime outweigh the potential costs (perceived or actual), an individual is more likely to engage in crime.¹⁵ Thus, the presence of pulls (or rewards) as a potential outcome incentivizes both criminal and noncriminal behavior.

There are many potential pulls toward involvement in extremist groups and gangs.¹⁶ For example, some groups may be attractive because they lend themselves to psychological rewards such as gains in personal significance.¹⁷ Individuals may also consider joining criminal organizations due to their belief that such groups are prestigious. The prospect of membership in an organization with high prestige enhances an individual's self-image and provides a concrete marker of identity transformation.¹⁸ For example, Decker and Curry described gang membership as a way to attain status and respect.¹⁹ Vigil held that gang members were "street elites" idolized by younger adolescents in neighborhoods characterized by economic disadvantages.²⁰ For gang members and domestic extremists, involvement has the potential to enhance a sense of self, furthering the belief that one's behavior is achieving some greater goal, or strengthening connections with like-minded individuals.²¹

Individuals may also seek group membership to attain material rewards. Becoming involved in a criminal group may increase the prospect of more money, drugs, or other property.

Crenshaw argues, for instance, that when weighing the potential costs of joining terrorist groups (e.g., death, imprisonment), individuals consider the possible material rewards that become available to them as members.²² Gang members commonly acknowledge the potential for economic returns to involvement as a motivation for joining, although few of them end up realizing those lucrative returns.²³ Still, the myth is strong and adds to the allure of gangs.

PUSHES TO CRIMINAL GROUPS

Individuals may also be pushed away from prosocial trajectories and toward criminal groups. This argument is most closely related to general strain theory.²⁴ Agnew conceptualizes strains as acute crises in the lives of individuals as well as ongoing or community-level stressors.²⁵ Strain theory can help explain social, personal, and structural pushes into criminal gang and violent extremist group membership. For instance, the presence of persistent helplessness or a pervasive uncertainty about one's future may serve as a salient push away from conventional society.²⁶ Through criminal group membership, individuals may resolve these states. Moreover, cultural disillusionment can signal the inability of individuals to achieve an idealized future and may lead to serious disappointment if they conclude that the imagined ideal was in fact tarnished.²⁷

Acute economic or socio-cultural crises may also push individuals toward participation in criminally involved organizations. Kruglanski et al. and Wiktorowicz argue that following an episode of intense personal instability an individual becomes particularly vulnerable to recruitment.²⁸ Moreover, classic gang theory identifies the role of a crisis, whether of status or identity, and isolates gang membership as a possible solution to that crisis.²⁹ Similarly, Decker and Van Winkle identify threats of violence as proximate motivations for affiliating with a street

gang.³⁰ In sum, research assessing the impact of pushes suggests that individuals who have experienced crisis may be more amenable to recruitment into criminal organizations.

BARRIERS TO POSITIVE SOCIALIZATION

Social control theories provide guidance for understanding sources of positive socialization which, if seriously impeded, may lead to deviant behavior.³¹ The control perspective assumes that intimate relationships, communities, and society writ large can channel individuals into prosocial trajectories and this positive socialization inhibits criminal self-interested impulses. Accordingly, youth drift toward criminal groups like gangs or terrorist cells not to cope with strains or the allure of the groups, but because they gravitate toward other similarly-situated individuals who have not experienced positive socialization.

Extending Hirschi, Sampson and Laub argue that marriage among adults is instrumental in reducing adult crime.³² Sampson and Laub suggest that positive social bonds can provide turning points – shifting the criminal career trajectory of individuals toward desistance.³³ In related fashion, Bersani and Doherty demonstrate that the dissolution of marriage can be a criminogenic turning point, illustrating barriers to positive socialization which could produce criminal behavior.³⁴ Thus, while prosocial bonds may reduce criminal involvement, barriers to the formation of bonds or their weakening may increase such activity.

In addition to individual-level sources of positive socialization, Sampson et al. argue that communities play a distinct role in constraining crime through collective efficacy.³⁵ The authors suggest that the capacity and willingness to act based upon mutual trust and cohesion among neighbors inhibits antisocial behavior via informal enforcement mechanisms. Accordingly, loose community relations may indicate a reduced capacity to exercise collective efficacy. Such conditions may set the stage for the emergence of criminal groups, giving youth the opportunity

for involvement. Studies show that gangs are concentrated in communities with high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage that fail to promote strong ties among individuals and social institutions.³⁶

RECRUITMENT

Learning theories suggest that involvement in criminal behavior hinges on who individuals associate with and that the means of learning and becoming socialized into behavior is a meaningful distinction.³⁷ Consequently, the messenger, the means of communicating the message, and the context in which the message is communicated are all important to socialization into criminal groups. Gerwehr and Daly argue that soliciting new members to an organization requires a recruitment setting (private or public) and a means of communicating with potential recruits (proximate or mediated).³⁸ Relatedly, Densley interprets gang joining as a dynamic communicative exchange between the prospective gang member and the gang.³⁹ Gangs evaluate the signals—including screening and credible commitments—prospective members are making apparent about their intentions and qualifications.

The rapid spread of social media may also facilitate connections to individuals with shared identities or ideologies. Bowman-Grieve and Kirke show that this phenomenon is not restricted to violent Salafist-Jihadist groups and that apart from the ability to provide information to prospective members, social media can also preserve anonymity.⁴⁰ Research suggests that gang members use the internet less for recruitment and more as a platform to air grievances and enhance individual or collective reputations.⁴¹ Both extremist groups and gangs may use social media to strengthen their brand. For extremist groups the influence on recruitment may be direct; for gangs it is likely indirect.

Finally, initiation rituals are understood by researchers as serving a functional role in generating group cohesion.⁴² Indeed, Decker suggests that most gangs “require an initiation process that includes participation in violent activities.”⁴³ This initiation then, not only assesses willingness to engage in criminal behavior, but also socializes new members into normative rituals and an acceptance of violence as commonplace. Vigil similarly recounts the role of initiation into Latino street gangs in Chicago as a form of “street baptism” – functioning as both a ritual of solidarity and a way to assess individuals on their courage and ability to “take a beating.”⁴⁴ Thus, initiation rituals provide a form of anticipatory socialization that prepares members for future expectations and activities.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Based on prior research on the factors which lead to involvement in extremist groups and criminal gangs, we identified four conceptual categories to structure our comparative study of initial involvement in both groups. Our aim is to determine how different or similar these mechanisms are across groups that are seemingly distinct from one another culturally, geographically, and socially. In contrast to much of the comparative work on criminal groups, which involves mostly post hoc comparison, we rely on data that were collected with the express purpose of conducting a comparative study of entry into gangs and extremist organizations.

METHODOLOGY

DATA

Data for this study are 38 case histories of political extremists and 45 semi-structured interviews with criminal gang members. The political extremist data are from the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) database, which includes individuals who committed ideologically motivated illegal acts, joined a designated terrorist organization, or

associated with organizations whose leaders have been indicted of ideologically motivated violent behavior.⁴⁵ Cases in PIRUS include Salafist-Jihadists, and right- (e.g., white supremacist, anti-government militias), left- (e.g., New Left, environmental extremists), and single-issue extremists (e.g., anti-abortion, Puerto Rican nationalists). Individuals must have radicalized in the United States, espoused, or currently espouse ideological motives, and have demonstrated that their illegal behavior and/or group involvement was linked to their ideological motives.

Data on extremists were collected from unclassified sources, including court records, media accounts, and biographies and autobiographies. Each life-course narrative includes information on a broad array of distal (early childhood and youth), proximal (adolescence and emerging adulthood), and recruitment-related factors (immediately prior to, and at the point of extremist group involvement). Individuals were selected for the current study based on three characteristics. First, we considered the availability of information in public sources related to their backgrounds and activities, eliminating individuals with a high degree of missing information critical to understanding their group entry. Second, as our aim was to understand general mechanisms of joining extremist groups regardless of ideological orientation, we purposely included cases covering a broad range of extremist ideologies. Finally, to match the gang member sample, we selected cases in which individuals were known to have engaged in criminal, politically extremist behavior with one or more confederates and were male. The final sample of 38 included individuals whose first publicly known extremist behavior occurred between the late 1960s and the mid-2010s.

Our data on gang members were derived from interviews conducted between 2014 and 2015 in three large U.S. cities known for a high prevalence of gang activity: Los Angeles, Denver and Phoenix. The semi-structured survey instrument was based on items derived from life histories

that were collected earlier for PIRUS.⁴⁶ Interviews were based on a purposive field-based sampling strategy in each city. Eighteen interviews were conducted at a gang job training/re-entry program in Los Angeles. Twelve interviews were conducted in Phoenix through contacts at a job training/re-entry center for gang members. Fifteen interviews were conducted in Denver at a gang intervention program. To be eligible for the interview, individuals had to self-report current or former gang membership, have served time in prison, be male, and be over 25 years of age. Younger individuals were excluded based on the assumption that they would be less comparable to the sample of extremists.⁴⁷ These characteristics made them more comparable to the PIRUS sample as well as more likely to be deep-end gang members. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The time overlap between gang members and extremists is greater than is obvious from the sample frame delineated above. While gang member interviews were conducted between 2014 and 2015, the mean year of initial involvement reported was 1993 (standard deviation of 9 years) as compared to the mean year of public exposure for extremists as 1994 (standard deviation of 16.2 years).⁴⁸ The eras covered by the two data sources suggests that the entry into gangs and extremism explored here did not occur in distinct time periods but rather time periods that overlapped.

ANALYTIC APPROACH

We imported the life histories and the interviews into MAXQDA, an interactive program which features tools for both qualitative and quantitative analyses.⁴⁹ We then employed a three-step coding procedure: (1) gang interview data were first coded using an expanded form of a guide originally developed for use with extremists' profiles (Jensen et al. 2018); (2) interview responses were then coded to capture emergent themes consistent with the four conceptual

categories described above; and (3) extremist life-course narratives were then coded using the revised guide. Our coding scheme was transitive; that is, we applied the PIRUS concepts to the gang data and gang concepts to the PIRUS data.

As the analysis continued, we were able to identify 22 indicators of the four conceptual categories measuring precursors to entering criminal gangs and politically-motivated extremist groups. In Table 1 we show the four categories and their respective indicators⁵⁰. The presence of emotional, material, and moral rewards or significance gain are indicative of improved possible futures for the individual. Alternatively, the presence of group prestige or improved status signifies anticipated improvements to an individual's social position. We identified seven indicators of pushes into criminal involvement. At the individual level, pushes manifested as acute crises in the lives of individuals, as well as ongoing or community-level stressors. Shown in Table 1, we also viewed evidence of helplessness, cultural disillusionment, uncertainty, and socially-based significance loss as pushes toward involvement. Acute crises include evidence of socio-cultural, personal and economic emergencies. The presence of barriers to positive socialization emphasizes the role of insulating factors to adverse outside organizations and forces. In Table 1, we identify four indicators of circumstances which signify barriers to positive socialization. Finally, we examined recruitment into gangs and extremist organizations by looking for evidence of five indicators.

- Table 1 Here -

COMPARING EXTREMISTS AND GANG MEMBERS

Table 2 compares gang members and extremists. The second column shows the percentage of cases that yielded evidence of each of the indicators. Notably, none of the indicators we identified for the four conceptual categories are observed in more than half of the pooled sample.

The most commonly observed indicators were initiation rituals, private recruitment, broken families, poor family connections, personal crisis, emotional rewards and significance gain. All other indicators were observed in fewer than 30% of the cases. Several indicators were observed in fewer than 10% of the cases, including boundaries to assimilation, loose community relations, helplessness, socio-cultural crisis, and uncertainty. This suggests that none of these base conditions is a sufficient explanation of entry into these two types of criminal groups.

- Table 2 Here -

Table 2 also shows that no single conceptual category is dominant in describing entry to the two types of groups as all four have at least one indicator among the five most prevalent. This suggests multiple motives and methods for involvement in these groups, and more generally, that it would be misleading to envision a universal entry pathway.

Columns three through six of Table 2 show the comparisons between extremists and gang members across the four conceptual categories. To facilitate comparisons, we have ordered the indicators by absolute difference within conceptual categories (column 5) and include chi-square test statistics for convenience (column 6). We find the single greatest percentage difference between the two groups for initiation rituals, followed by moral rewards, message boards or forums and material rewards. Across the four categories criminal pulls and recruitment have the largest number of comparisons with differences of 10% or greater ($n = 4$), followed by pushes ($n = 3$) and barriers to positive socialization ($n = 2$).

These observed differences are generally consistent with prior literature. Material rewards are known correlates of criminal membership, while the pull of moral rewards illustrate the roles negative “early experiences” (i.e., dysfunction at home and poor social ties) and “entry principles” (i.e., peer-acceptance) play in the self-selection process.⁵¹ Two of the indicators for

pushes and two of the indicators for recruitment also showed notable divergence. None of the indicators for barriers to positive socialization diverged substantially. We next consider in greater detail the qualitative evidence for similarities and differences in the antecedents to criminal group entry for each of the conceptual categories.

PULLS TO GROUPS

The central prediction about criminal group involvement from research on pulls is that offenders are motivated to engage in crime when the potential benefits of action outweigh the costs.⁵² Although empirical tests have been rare, an assumption in the terrorism literature is that compared to ordinary criminals, terrorists are more motivated by nonmaterial considerations such as personal significance and moral rewards.⁵³ The results in Table 2 support this conclusion. Compared to gang members, extremists were more likely to be motivated by the perceived moral authority of their actions. One extremist succinctly expressed this sentiment:

My religion, the state of affairs in the Muslim world, and a desire to alleviate suffering within it led me to desire to fight jihad. (E1)⁵⁴

By contrast, we found that gang members were more likely to cite material rewards or group prestige as a motivation for involvement:

I used to see my friends, you know, with the parents, getting stuff, you know? Used to come out with brand new shoes, games, stuff like that, you know? ...They used to talk to me and things like that, and that's what I wanted, like I wanted to become, you know, a gang member. 'Cause they used to show me love. That was what I thought at the moment, is they showed me love, you know?... I mean, like the expensive shoes, clothes, games, you know? (G1)

The material and emotional benefits of gang membership represent a strong attraction to G1 and to other gang members in our data. While some research has highlighted the role of material rewards as an enticement into terrorist organizations and as an incentive to be criminally active within organizations, this appears to be predominantly outside of the United States.⁵⁵ For

example, Post found that among Palestinian political extremists, "...Most interviewees reported not only enhanced social status for the families of fallen or incarcerated members, but financial and material support from the organization and community for these families as well."⁵⁶ This does not seem to be the case with our U.S. data.

Evidence of group prestige as a pull toward membership was more common among gang members than extremists:

Well, like the importance, you know, make me look better, you know, in the eyes of others 'cause I was always around, every time we showed up, we were all together, and we was part of a band...you were somebody. The girls even liked you more. The girls that didn't notice you before, they notice you afterwards. So, it's a little, you know, prestige, you know, a little, you know? Yeah, you get known. (G2)

Group prestige was viewed as facilitating a sense of camaraderie and security as well as social advancement for future members. Similarly, compared to extremists, gang members were more likely to note the prospect of emotional rewards as a motivator for group involvement.

Among the remaining pull indicators (significance gain, status), we found little difference between gangs and extremist members. Indeed, a perceived gain in significance through membership was common among both groups. Taken together, these findings suggest that despite a set of common pulls, gang members are influenced more by instrumental and extremists by more expressive factors.⁵⁷

PUSHES TO GROUPS

The central argument underlying the importance of pushes into criminal group involvement is that individuals who experience hardship – economic, psychological, or social – will be most likely to engage in criminal behavior if they lack prosocial coping resources.⁵⁸ Insofar as the two groups analyzed here are known to have engaged in antisocial behaviors, we would expect to find evidence of a variety of acute and persistent pushes.

According to Table 2, three indicators revealed large differences between gangs and extremists: socially-based loss of significance, cultural disillusionment, and economic crisis. Indicators of socially-based loss of significance and cultural disillusionment were more common for extremists than gang members while economic crisis was more common for gang members than extremists. Prior research focusing on the psychology of terrorism finds support for a link between forms of disillusionment and joining terrorist organizations.⁵⁹ These are the belief-based values that differentiated extremists from gang members, whose orientation toward material gain was more pronounced. Crenshaw cites “profound disillusionment with the current [political] order” as a motivator for joining terrorist groups and Bjørge credits cultural disillusionment as a mechanism for transitioning into and disengaging from terrorist organizations.⁶⁰ E2, a leftist extremist, describes his disillusionment in terms of perceived government failures:

I was outraged to learn that our government was paying farmers billions of dollars not to grow food, while people, especially children, around the world were going hungry – the epitome of an irrational and inhumane policy. (E2)

Similarly, socially-based loss of significance has been linked to domestic terrorism. Victoroff et al. emphasize the impact of perceived discrimination on support for suicide bombing, highlighting the importance of socially-based losses of significance.⁶¹ This experience is echoed by E3, an extremist:

According to E3, police targeted the Native American population, frequently arrested them, and forced them to perform unpaid labor. In his personal account, E3 notes that he was caught in bar raids to fill police quotas for this labor hunt around 25 times. (E3)

As indicated above, the primary goal of our analysis was to apply strictly the coding guide summarized in Table 1 based on the respondent’s own language or situation. In some cases, the same passage supported more than one of the conceptual categories. Thus, we coded this

statement from E3 as an example of socially based significance loss. However, the very next sentence in E3's case study read:

[He] had a minimum-wage job which he used to support a family of ten. (E3)

In other words, the targeted discrimination and state action against the individual's identity group (socially based significance loss) resulted in his incarceration, which in turn led to acute financial distress, which we coded as "economic crisis."

Other research identifies the importance of entry into terrorist organizations as a way of bettering individual social status.⁶² Our findings of high levels of cultural disillusionment and socially based loss of significance among extremists, compared to their gang counterparts, is consistent with this research.

In contrast, economic crises were more common among gang members than extremists and economic crisis showed a greater percentage difference between groups than either socio-cultural or personal crises. A gang interviewee describes how when growing up, he came to see crime as the only means of obtaining income, underscoring the strain caused by economic crisis:

I grew up with my brother. My brother was a gang member. He was, we were from the same gang, you know? So, I think...we used to be in the streets, I didn't used to work, he didn't used to work, so we used to spend the time on the street, you know? Whatever we used to (inaudible) money or rob somebody or sell drugs, you know, that was the only money we used to get. (G3)

The high incidence of perceived economic crisis among gang members is supported by prior research.⁶³ While experiencing strain may contribute to gang or extremist group membership, the magnitude of adversity may be more consequential than the specific variety. This interpretation is supported by the fact that personal crises such as criminal victimization and other traumatizing experiences were common for both groups. For example, following the death of his mother, one extremist is described as having begun to unwind emotionally:

In an article in the Chicago Sun Times E4's uncle said that after his mother's death "[it] seemed like he [E4] lost his best friend. She was the knot that held everyone together." (E4)

We found little evidence of differences on indicators of helplessness and uncertainty – with Table 2 showing both groups experiencing these at similarly low rates.

BARRIERS TO POSITIVE SOCIALIZATION

Criminologists have long argued that attachment to prosocial institutions such as the family, community, and dominant cultural groups inhibits involvement in criminal behavior.⁶⁴

Therefore, we anticipate that individuals who engage in gang and extremist behaviors will show evidence of structural barriers which prevent attachment to these sources. Table 2 shows that two barriers to positive socialization - poor family connections and loose community ties – showed large differences. In both cases, these indicators were more common among gang members than extremists.

The following gang member notes his lack of community-level integration:

The first time, see, I grew up in these projects which was black and Mexicans. So, I saw that we didn't see eye-to-eye with them, and I never understood them when I was that young. Like we were fighting with them. (G4)

Similarly, we see that in intact families, the absence of strong prosocial connections can enable involvement in criminal activities, and may lend itself toward painting potential emotional connections with gang-involved peers in a more favorable light:

Uh huh. Just 'cause, my family was, we didn't, never talked about anything. You don't talk about feelings; you don't talk about any of that. You suck it up and you deal with it. 'Cause my dad's from New York and that's how he was raised, like you suck it up and move on. We don't talk about feelings, we don't talk about any of that shit, you know? You're a man, you deal with that shit. I don't know anything about that. You're goin' through all kinds of weird shit, you don't even understand like, "Who am I?" I don't even understand what's goin' on here. (G5)

Broken families were common for both gangs and extremists. One gang member noted:

I think I joined, I joined a gang for...to have like a family, you know, 'cause I came from a broken family, I didn't get along, my father was always kickin' my ass, and they, my parents got broken up, and I didn't have no siblings except for a little sister, and I'm thrown into this mayhem of the neighborhood I'm livin.' (G6)

With a similar account for a political extremist:

E5 dropped out of college near or during the spring of 1974, about the time of his parents' divorce, which "crushed" him. (E5)

In sum, we find clear evidence of impediments to positive socialization among both extremists and gang members. Many of these individuals exhibited poor institutional attachments which might have otherwise served as a buffer to life strains.⁶⁵

RECRUITMENT

Research focusing on recruitment into criminal groups suggests that when individuals are socialized through their interactions with others who engage in or support criminal behavior, they will be more likely to also engage in such behavior.⁶⁶ We expected that recruitment processes and normative socialization would be a common theme among extremists and gang members. Our findings on recruitment diverge substantially for extremists and gang members. In fact, the single largest percentage difference we observed for any indicator was for initiation rituals—which were close to universal for gang members (82.2%) but rare for extremists (2.6%). By contrast, recruitment through message boards or forums, private recruitment and YouTube or video sharing were far more common for political extremists than gang members.

The frequency of violent initiation rituals for recruitment into gangs is evidenced by these comments from a gang member:

I just got jumped by some other jokers. I went through that situation maybe three or four different times because back then, it's like, so I might walk up on this group of homies and be like, "What's up with it, homie?" And, they like, "Who is you?" And I'm like, "I'm so-and-so. I just got put on by the homie so-and-so." And, these dudes don't know. So, you might have to do that again with them. (G7)

Violent initiation rituals likely reflect the environment in which gang recruitment takes place. Gangs are often conditioned by street-oriented circumstances related to specific neighborhood conditions.⁶⁷ Alternatively, extremist groups are promoted more often by ideological orientation, which may be less constrained by the physical environment.⁶⁸ Therefore, more personal styles of recruitment are likely to be used by gangs, but internet disseminated approaches may be more appealing for extremist groups with members who are geographically dispersed.

These patterns are supported by our data, with over one-third of extremists using electronic message boards or forums prior to their involvement and no gang members reporting such activity. This process of online socialization is highlighted by an Islamist extremist:

Aside from exploring his spirituality in social settings, E6 also began turning to the Internet. Around 2003 at age 19, E6 first began visiting online Muslim chatrooms and jihadist websites, including Clearguidance.com. (E6)

With respect to specific recruitment strategies, we observed substantial differences in recruitment styles. Compared to gang members, extremists were far more likely to use video sharing and YouTube. Presumably, these media are used to solidify group social norms – although as shown in Table 2, it was an uncommon practice overall. Among extremists, interpersonal recruitment was found to be most prominent, as shown here:

E7 devoted much of his time to Islam ... associating himself with a group of men who held regular evening meetings at the mosque. The group of men, who belonged to the conservative wing of the mosque, analyzed sections of the Qur'an together and spoke about the ongoing conflicts in Bosnia and Chechnya... [according to the ex-wife one of the men] “[they] met E7 at the mosque and...brought him home like a lost dog. They treated [E7] like he was their new pet.” [she] says that the two men lectured the newly-converted E7 on their radical interpretation of Islam: “They would be every day in our living room ... saying, ‘You have to kill the *kuffar*, the nonbeliever. You can’t associate with them...”

Similarly, gang member responses, while depicting the context of recruitment as geographically constrained to neighborhoods, also demonstrate the importance of personal interactions in the decision to join the group:

I didn't set out to say, "I'm gonna become a gang member." I just think I grew up in the neighborhood. All the guys in my neighborhood, sort of, it was, like I said, more or less broken families... Here's a group of guys, we all come from the same neighborhood - the older guys embraced us, you know, "You powerful. You strong. You a soldier." You know, they taught us that at a young age. They embraced us. "You family. You're a part of somethin'. You know, this is our neighborhood. We protect our neighborhood." (G8)

Thus, while general commonalities across recruitment strategies were present, the specific methods (i.e., violent initiations vs. extensive use of electronic media) were distinct.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Uncovering the similarities and differences between gang members and extremists is important for both advancing criminological theory and designing effective responses to the challenges posed by gang members and extremists. Such comparisons may be useful for applying successful policies from street gangs (an area with a long-standing research tradition in criminology) to political extremists (an area where criminology has been less intensively involved). By drawing on indicators consistent with research describing initial involvement into extremist groups and gangs we were able to make some direct comparisons with implications for theory, research, and policy. We offer several observations about the four conceptual categories we used to frame the analysis.

First, as anticipated there was a strong presence of pull factors across both groups. Among gang members, the presence of material and emotional rewards and the prestige of the group served as pulls toward involvement. However, ascribing morality to group involvement was far

more common among the extremists. This suggests that while both groups exhibited rational decision making in initial involvement, the specific rewards valued by the two groups differed.

Second, both groups were exposed to pushes from a variety of sources, with the primary source of variation being the functional form of the push: economic crises among gang members and cultural disillusionment and socially based loss of significance among extremists. While gang members experienced criminal pushes as individuals or members of a community, these circumstances were rarely extended to their entire ethnic or cultural identity. Extremists on the other hand, were more frequently exposed to threats to their cultural or social identities perhaps representing, as Silber and Bhatt suggested, a period of cognitive opening to an ideology which could shift the locus of blame to an external adversary.⁶⁹ The relatively high rate of crises among the individuals in both groups reaffirmed the need to consider how resilience in the face of traumatizing events must be integrated into prevention efforts.

Third, although we found criminal pushes among both groups, gang members more often discussed the impact of pushes on their personal circumstances – particularly their socio-economic circumstances. The events most salient among the extremist's narratives were those which provoked a need to achieve some broader political goal. Thus, extremists were more likely to favor moral justifications while among gang members, the notions of family or brotherhood, and material rewards were most salient.

Fourth, the case studies suggested differences between gang members and extremists regarding the importance of loose ties to the community and poor family connections. Gang members experienced both more often. This suggests that the presence of family in the lives of gang members was often distant and abusive. This appears to contrast with extremists who were

less likely to have poor family relations but were more likely to have experienced the traumatic loss of a parent or partner.

Fifth, for both groups there was considerable evidence of barriers to the formation of pro-social bonds, ranging from parental divorce to physical and emotional abuse to weak social relationships. The absence of family ties as a source of informal social control and supervision, was associated with entry into both groups.⁷⁰ And for both extremists and gang members the criminal group was perceived to play an important role in providing a more desirable social environment.

Finally, considering the role of recruitment indicators among the gang members and extremists, personal connections were far more influential among gang members. While extant social connections facilitated involvement among both groups, the use of electronic media was nearly exclusive to extremist groups. This may speak to one of the core distinctions between gang activity and political extremism – namely the political nature of extremist groups and the need to adhere to such views among potential members. Gangs, even those with a national presence, are largely a local phenomenon.⁷¹ We found that gang members often explicitly cited their socialization as a function of their membership in a given neighborhood, whereas extremist political identities were more commonly expressed through online social interaction. As others have argued, social media allows extremists to form communities of interest in cyberspace rather than physical neighborhoods.⁷² However, this is not to minimize the importance of personal connections among extremists or online social interactions among gangs. Even for those who exhibited online influence in their initial involvement, we found consistent evidence of local connections through which their ideology was contextualized.

It is important to note several limitations of our study and how they lay the groundwork for future inquiry. First, the differences in the two data sources presented coding challenges. While extremist profiles were derived from secondary data sources, such as official reports and autobiographies, gang data were gathered using face-to-face interviews. This difference limited our ability to draw direct group comparisons and conclusions which could be generalized to larger populations. We take care here in suggesting that the findings noted above are specific to the individuals analyzed and represent possible mechanisms and comparative dimensions for these two groups. Arranging for in-person interviews with terrorists raises major challenges but we acknowledge that it would be useful in future work to administer the same survey instruments or interview guides to both groups.⁷³

Second, we are sensitive to the potential sources of bias inherent to recall and differentially dated secondary sources. Moreover, due to the decades reflected in these data, the patterns observed here may also be a function of period effects and the concordant similarities/differences observed may be masked or overstated.⁷⁴ However, this study has shown that across the two samples (and associated decades of initial involvement in gangs and political extremism), these factors appear to be relevant, though the time-varying nature of their importance remains to be studied. Consequently, future work should sample cases to interview at the same time period.

Finally, our data face the limitations common to studies of the retrospective views of criminal groups. Thus, it is important to acknowledge the possibility that time within the respective criminal groups may have motivated interpretations of involvement. As Horgan observes, experiences within a criminal group may shape the narrative individuals provide when asked to recall or recount their decisions to join – specifically to be consistent with group goals.⁷⁵

The main purpose of this paper was to compare and contrast the processes by which individuals became engaged in two important types of criminal groups. More granular comparisons, both within (e.g., comparing Islamist and left-wing extremist groups) and across taxonomies (e.g., comparing organized street gangs and right-wing extremist groups) are a fruitful avenue for future research.⁷⁶ Additionally, subsequent work should consider these, and similar groups in terms of other stages of membership. In light of new research examining disengagement processes among political extremists, more work should explore the processes by which individuals exit organized criminal groups.⁷⁷

Our findings have implications for theories of involvement in criminal groups more broadly. When considering the scope of indicators explored – from push and pull factors to specific strategies of recruitment – we found that even among well-supported and researched explanations, no perspective clearly dominated (most notably among extremists). Theories of control suggest that barriers to positive socialization and the absence of prosocial influences should explain group involvement. However, these did not describe the involvement of those who left comparative privilege and prosocial environments to join extremist groups. Similarly, theories of socialization are insufficient in describing the relatively isolated and somewhat spontaneous development of criminal attitudes and behaviors absent strong interpersonal reinforcements. However, with respect to gang members, theories of extremist group involvement could be better adapted to reflect these realities. Loss of significance, manifest as the presence of criminal pushes, was found in many cases to characterize the circumstances of both extremists and gang members.

Our results suggest that a variety of protective factors are foundational in developing resilience to gang and extremist group involvement. These include family and other prosocial

relationships, the provision of basic economic needs, and a focus on developing cognitive resources in responding to individual crises. Similar to Jensen and colleagues, our results are consistent with the conclusion that the presence of affordable and culturally-cognizant counseling and mental health practitioner resources may provide a protective buffer to strains and mitigate pushes toward involvement.⁷⁸ It is also clear that different narratives from gang and extremist groups target different vulnerabilities, and as a result the counter-narratives provided in schools and online should consider these specific contexts. Partnerships between intervention programs, local stakeholders and researchers could help maximize benefits while minimizing the harm and possibility of negative externalities.

While evidence of each of the four conceptual categories examined was present in both groups, no perspective clearly dominated the findings. This suggests that understandings of entry into gangs and politically extremist groups share similarities but also register important differences and that efforts that draw on multiple theories are most promising.

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- ⁷² Robert W. Taylor, Eric J. Fritsch, and John Liederbach, *Digital Crime and Digital Terrorism*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ, USA: Prentice Hall Press, 2014).
- ⁷³ John Horgan, “Interviewing the Terrorists: Reflections on Fieldwork and Implications for Psychological Research,” *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 4, no. 3 (2012): 195–211, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2011.594620>.
- ⁷⁴ While most social processes are insulated from this critique, we acknowledge that the use of message boards and forums, as well as YouTube and other video sharing are, of course, more recent developments and were only prevalent for a portion of the cases. Supporting this contention, recent cases of domestic extremism have highlighted the role of the internet and media in producing environments conducive to violence; Sarah Mervosh, “Mass Shootings at Houses of Worship: Pittsburgh Attack Was Among the Deadliest,” *The New York Times*, October 28, 2018, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/27/us/mass-shootings-church-synagogue-temple.html>. All the same, we believe that as a comparative examination the value added by monitoring emerging trends in initial involvement merits its consideration here.
- ⁷⁵ “From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618, no. 1 (July 1, 2008): 80–94, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716208317539>.
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