



THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO VIOLENT CRIMINAL ACTS OF STREET GANGS IN USA

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Abstract

Gang membership and criminal activity continue to flourish in the US communities. There are approximately 1.4 million gang members in the USA operating in over 33,000 gang groups such as street gang, prison gang, outlaw motorcycle gang, and neighborhood/local street gang. Street gangs could be defined as criminal organizations formed on the street operating throughout the United States. This study examines the concepts of gang membership, gang delinquency/violence in the light of some selected theoretical approaches and models such as developmental and life course perspective, risk factors model, selection, social facilitation and enhancements models, theory of normative ambiguity, anomie/strain theory, control theories/social bonding theory, social learning theory, social disorganization theory, integrated theory, and organizational theory/network approach. It is not aimed to make in-depth analysis of each theoretical approach/model or list all findings in the literature; this study aims at explaining gang membership and violence by linking these concepts to selected theories and models.

Keywords: Gang Membership, Gang Violence, Gang Delinquency, Theoretical Approaches, Theoretical Models.

AMERİKA BİRLEŞİK DEVLETLERİ'NDEKİ SOKAK ÇETELERİNİN ŞİDDET EYLEMLERİNE TEORİK YAKLAŞIMLAR

Öz

Sokak çeteleri ve suç aktiviteleri Amerikan toplumu içerisinde artmaya devam etmektedir. Amerika'da Sokak çetesi, hapisane çetesi, yasadışı motor bisiklet çetesi ve yerel sokak çetesi olmak üzere 33.000 farklı çete ve bunlara üye yaklaşık 1.4 Milyon kişi bulunmaktadır. Sokak çeteleri kısaca, ABD genelinde sokaklarda faaliyet yürüten suç örgütleri olarak tanımlanmaktadır. Bu çalışmada, Gelişimsel Hayat Seyri Perspektifi, risk faktörleri modeli, seçim, sosyal rahatlık ve gelişim modeli, belirsizlik teori, gayesizlik teori, sosyal sınırlar teorisi ve örgütsel bağlantı teorileri gibi bazı seçilmiş teoriler ışığında çete şiddeti ve çete üyeliğini analiz etmektedir. Bu çalışma literatürde yer alan her bir teorinin veya literatürdeki bulguları derin analizini yapmayı amaçlamamaktadır. Bu çalışma, seçilmiş model ve teoriler ile bağlantı kurarak çete üyeliği ve çete şiddetini açıklamayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çete Üyeliği, Çete Şiddeti, Çete Suçu, Teorik Yaklaşımlar, Teorik Modeller

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1. INTRODUCTION

The size of different type of gangs operating in the USA is more than 33,000 with approximately 1.4 million members. According to 2011 National Gang Threat Assessment Report released by National Gang Intelligence Center (NGIC), gangs continue to recruit new members across the USA in urban, suburban, and rural regions, commit different type of criminal activities including violent crimes such as homicide, and cooperate with other criminal groups that allow them to expand their influence over criminal enterprises, particularly street-level drug sales. NGIC also indicates that an average of 48 percent of violent crime in most jurisdictions and 90 percent of other crimes are committed by gangs (FBI, n. a). Besides, to various research findings, over 90% of the gang members commit violent crimes. In other words, gang members' delinquency and involvement in violent activities appear to be a natural result of gang membership.

Thornberry et al., (2003) note that 66% of large cities, 47% of suburbs, 27% of small cities and even 18% of rural areas have diverse gang formations in the USA. Although it is possible to mention several factors affecting gang expansion and violent criminality such as aggressive recruitment of juveniles and immigrants, alliances and conflict between gang groups, gang members released from prisons, gangs' use of technology and communication, and gangs' involvement in drug business, for many criminologists and public officials these and similar factors, however, are not enough to have full explanation of reasons of increase trend in gang membership and gang violence (FBI, n.a.; Howell, 1994).

There are various gang formations in the USA such as street gang, prison gang, outlaw motorcycle gang, and neighborhood/local street gang. In the 2011 National Gang Threat Assessment Report, "street gangs" are defined as criminal organizations formed on the street operating throughout the United States. On the other hand, "prison gangs" are originated within the penal system and operate within the correctional facilities; "outlaw motorcycle gangs" use their motorcycle clubs as criminal enterprises; "neighborhood or local street gangs" act in a specific neighborhoods and jurisdictions and these gangs are larger and more powerful national gangs that usually deal with drug distribution and sales (FBI, n. a).

Street gangs are mostly well organized delinquent groups which contain leaders, core members and peripheral members who are usually in similar age group. They usually have names, signs, colors, or/and territory (Spergel, 1984). Block and Block (1993) define the street gang as an association of individuals who has a name, geographic territory, regular meeting pattern, and organized and continuous course of criminality. Nevertheless, these characteristics might be in varying degrees. Several studies, regardless of time, geographic location, different methods of data collection and analysis have revealed that delinquency of street gangs is generally serious and violent.

This study examines the concepts of gang membership and gang delinquency/violence in the light of some selected theoretical approaches and models. In this regard after having very brief discussion on gang membership and gang violence, the theories/models of developmental and life course perspective, risk factors model, selection, social facilitation and enhancements models, theory of normative ambiguity, anomie/strain theory, control theories/social bonding



theory, social learning theory, social disorganization theory, integrated theory, and organizational theory/network approach will be examined. There will not be in-depth analysis of each theoretical approach/model and all findings in the literature will not be listed. This study simply aims at explaining gang membership and violence by linking these concepts to selected theories and models.

2. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF GANG MEMBERSHIP AND VIOLENCE

Type of violent activities that street gangs engage in differentiated as expressive violence and instrumental violence. In an expressive violence, the main goal is injury or violence, and other motives have secondary position. Conversely, in instrumental violence, the primary goal is not to injure, kill, or hurt but to acquire property or money. Street gang related violence often contains expressive characteristics. For instance, while defending identity through impulsive and emotional ways, saving the reputation in the gang, expansion of membership are about expressive violence; drug related activities that includes gaining more money is about instrumental violence. In many cases, expressive violence is more violent than instrumental type violence (Block and Block, 1993).

NGIC list the violent criminal activities of street gangs in 2011 National Gang Threat Assessment Report as assault, drug trafficking, extortion, firearms offenses, home invasion robberies, homicide, intimidation, shootings, and weapons trafficking (FBI, n. a.). Deschenes and Esbensen (1999) defined following crimes as a violent crimes committed by gangs: “1- carried a hidden weapon for protection, 2- hit someone with the idea of hurting them, 3- attacked someone with a weapon, 4- used a weapon or force to get money or things from people, 5- been involved in gang fights, 6- shot at someone because you were told to by someone else” (p. 75).

Homicide is one of the serious delinquent acts committed by the street gangs. Young adults and Hispanics have been overrepresented in gang homicides cases (Cury & Spergel, 1988; Maxon, Gordon & Klein, 1985; Spergel, 1984); nevertheless, there is no consensus as to what constitutes the gang homicide (Bailey & Unnithan, 1994). Block and Block (1993) who examined Chicago gang homicide data classified gang related street crimes and neighborhoods as: turf hot spots where gangs fight over territory control; drug hot spots where gangs intensively deal with drug; and drug and turf hot spots where gangs commits both of the crimes. Gang involvement in violent crimes and homicide was more often turf-related rather than drug-related. The most deadly gang related crimes were between the street gangs and gun has become the main tool in almost all gang related homicides (Block & Block, 1993). Gun ownership is one of the important predictors of general and violent delinquency (Thornberry et al., 2003). Street gangs own gun in order to protect themselves from reciprocal gang violence, to protect their turf, to retaliate against rival gangs, and to have good reputation among others (Decker, 1996; Lizotte et al., 2000).

Street gangs intensively involve in drive-by shootings which might have deadly results. Hutson, Anglin & Pratts (1994) who focused on drive-by shootings in Los Angeles where 400 different gangs with 60,000 members have existed observed that more than 90% of drive-by shootings have been perpetrated by street gangs. The main purpose of the drive-by shootings is to terrorize and kill rival groups' members during which children and adolescents are mostly



victimized. To their finding, in Los Angeles, gang members are 60 times more likely to die because of homicide than members of general population.

Leadership in gangs is an important role that gang members would like to have. Gang members who have been incarcerated are more likely to gain leadership positions due to the fact that they are often more respected on the streets especially by younger gang members which in turn make it easier to order younger gang members to commit crimes. Prisons for these gang leaders are utilized to make connections and establish contacts and criminal networks in the community. These connections and criminal networks allow them to more successfully control gang operations. Many gang members released from prisons are usually armed with new knowledge and improved techniques that might have negative impact in terms of street gang activity and violence (FBI, n. a).

“Demographic characteristics of the street gangs” is another important topic of gang studies. Findings of many gang related research revealed that gangs are overwhelmingly male (Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Esbensen & Winfree, 1998; Triplett & Meyers, 1995), mostly from the minorities as African American and Hispanic (Esbensen & Winfree, 1998; Esbensen, 2000, Thornberry et al., 2003) and gang members with lower socio-economic status are more likely to involve in violent crimes compared to those with higher status (Miller, 1966).

NGIC’s 2011 report stresses that the number of juvenile participants of gangs has been growing in many jurisdictions. Juveniles are targeted by gangs for recruitment because they are vulnerable and susceptible to recruitment tactics, they are likely to avoid harsh criminal sentencing, and they can be easily directed to violent activities. Immigrant population gives opportunity to street gangs to recruit new members. Especially, increased gang recruitment of youths among the immigrant population result in increase in the size of gang membership and gang related violence in a various jurisdictions (FBI, n. a). Accordingly, gang membership is mostly early adolescence phenomenon (especially for females), and prevalence declines overtime regardless of the race and ethnicity. Most of the adolescents stay in gang groups less than one year (Esbensen & Huizanga, 1993; Thornberry et al., 2003). While female membership mostly clusters in early adolescence until mid-adolescence, males’ membership covers adolescence period with decrease overtime (Thornberry et al., 2003). To various research findings, over 90% of the gang members commit violent crimes. However, females do not commit violent crimes as much as males; males are more violent than females (Deschenes & Esbensen, 1999; Miller & Decker, 2001; Thornberry et al., 2003). Since females do not involve in violent activities as much as males, the rate of being victim of gang related violence posed by rival gangs is less for females.

3. THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO STREET GANGS, MEMBERSHIP AND VIOLENCE

In this part, some selected theoretical approaches are briefly described and then they are linked to the street gang related issues such as membership, delinquency and violence utilizing the finds of several empirical studies.



3.1. Developmental and life course perspective

There are two main concepts underlie the analysis of life-course dynamics. These are trajectory and transitions. A trajectory might be defined as a pathway or line of development over the life span of the individuals. School life, work life, marriage, parenthood, and criminal behaviors are some of the examples of trajectories. Basically trajectories have long term characteristics. On the other hand, transitions are some of the important life events such as first job, first marriage, and first baby. They evolve over shorter time spans and embedded in trajectories. Transitions might be either age-graded or not. The events which are considered as important are the normative timing and sequencing of role transitions. The period of time between first marriage and professional status that result in some earnings in adulthood can be mentioned as an example. Accordingly, quoting from Elder (1985, 17), Sampson and Laub (1999) defines the life-course as “pathways through the age differentiated life span where age differentiation is manifested in expectations and options that impinge on decision process and the course of events that give shape to life stages, transitions, and turning points” (p.189). We can see age-graded roles and social transitions and their effects on human behavior in this definition. In other words, main focus points of life course perspective are duration, timing, and ordering of major life events and their influences on future social developments.

Trajectories and transitions may cause turning points or changes in the life-course. The long term view embodied by the life-course focus on trajectories suggests a very powerful connection between childhood events and adulthood experiences. Successful adjustment into adulthood can be affected by transitions and turning points. In this manner, trajectories might be modified by some of the social institutions and life events such as work, military service, marriage, school etc. New conditions and events may affect the life course so as to change its direction; so that we can't say that life course is fully determined (Elder, 1985; Sampson and Laub, 1999). In this context, developmental criminology “refers to the study of a number of transitions that may occur as one moves along a path include onset, escalation, acceleration, diversification, stabilization, and desistance. The key goal for a developmental criminology research agenda is to explain these various stages through theory and empirical testing” (Hoffman & Cerbone, 1999, p. 344).

Thornberry et al. (2003) advocate that the life-course perspective has a lot of implications for gang related studies. They hypothesize that “adolescent gang membership will have a disruptive on life-course trajectories, leading to off-time and disorderly transitions...Gang members who remain in the gang for an extended period of time will be more likely to experience problematic transitions” (p. 166). With regards to adolescent gang membership they stress on several precocious or off -time transitions such as “dropping out of school, early pregnancy, teenage parenthood, living independently from one's parents (early nest leaving), unstable employment patterns, and cohabiting” (p. 167). Youths are expected to make successful transition into adult roles; during this period, some of the events, behaviors, and associations such as gang membership and delinquency negatively affect appropriate transitions. That is, social network of the gangs constrain the behaviors and prevents access to pro-social networks.



Thornberry et al.'s (2003) longitudinal panel study covered the ages of 13 through 22 found that gangs have very harmful and even deadly effects on many aspects of the life-course development. They see gang membership itself as a trajectory. After entry into a gang, delinquent trajectories incline towards upward. The transition into the gangs occurs in different ages, and period of stay in the gang may differentiate. Structural position, neighborhood context, family, school, individual characteristics, peers or combination of these factors might be the reason for gang membership that leads to violence. Also, duration is important for gang violence that “the longer anyone remains on any trajectory, the harder it is to avoid its consequences, and deviant trajectories are no exception” (p. 8).

Life course and developmental perspective complement other studies on gang membership and violence by creating detailed understanding of street gang phenomenon. They are also useful in terms of explaining antecedent characteristics, origins and aftermath of gang membership and violence, and also estimation of time ordered causal models especially when it is done using longitudinal research design. However, longitudinal studies have some weaknesses such as limited ability to study group process, influence of group process on the behaviors of gang members, and difficulties of distinguishing whether delinquent acts of gang members were committed as individuals or for the gang. Further, generalizability of the findings is another problem since the study is limited with particular location/s, group/s, individual/s, and time.

3.2. Risk Factors Model

According to risk factors model, there are several and mostly overlapping risk factors in a person's background and they lead to negative results including adversity and criminality (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1999; Hill, Hawkins & Battin, 1999; Sameroff et al., 1993; Small and Luster, 1994). Identification of risk factors is important in terms of initiating programs for prevention of possible delinquency and violence in the future. Howell's (1997) study categorized the risk factors as community, family, school, peer, and individual characteristics. Different risk factors from multiple developmental domains might lead to gang membership as well as violence which is the natural result of membership.

Taking gang membership as a dependent variable, Thornberry et al. (2003) found that several risk factors (independent variables) are significantly related to joining a gang. For instance, neighborhoods with higher proportion of African Americans, poorer residents, and higher arrest rate; demographic characteristics of being African American, less educated parents, income of family below poverty level; inadequate parent child relations and less attachment of families' to sons; school problems such as weak attachment to teacher and school, lower parental expectations; friends who involved in delinquent acts; individual characteristics such as experiencing negative life events, having depressive symptoms; and prior delinquency increases the possibility of being a gang member. Among these factors, especially prior illegal violent activity increases the risk of being gang member and committing violent crimes. However, many of these risk factors are not significant for female gangs.

In sum, gang members have several disadvantages in multiple domains of their development and disadvantages increase the probability of participation in the gangs.



Accordingly we can observe multidimensionality of life course perspective that is affected by several risk factors.

3.3. Selection, Social Facilitation and Enhancements Models

In order to understand why gang members commit more violent and serious crimes than nongang members, Thornberry et al. (1993, 2003) posit individual based ‘selection model’, group based ‘social facilitation model’, and mix of both of them ‘enhancement model’.

3.3.1. Selection model

Selection model is a kind of individual based model. According to this model, gangs attract/select their members among the adolescents who are already delinquent or who have tendency to offend. To selection model, it is expected that delinquency rate of gang members will always be higher than nonmembers and this will be the case before, during and after the gang membership.

Selection model proposes that gangs attract adolescents who lack self-control (which is the basic premise of general theory of crime) and also those who have no social control. Accordingly, gang itself does not have effect on deviant behaviors of individuals in the gang, but different characteristics of gang members that nonmembers do not have cause delinquency.

3.3.2. Social Facilitation model

Group activity is an important element for social facilitation model. This model suggests that gang members are not different from nonmembers in nature. The probability of delinquency or committing violent crime is not more than nonmembers for gang members before joining a gang group. After joining a gang, group dynamics and group process as well as normative structure of the group are likely to lead delinquency. In other words, gang membership is the main reason of gang violence or delinquency. So, delinquency is limited with the duration in the gang. Some factors inducing delinquency in a gang are; 1-Gang membership legitimizes the violent behaviors 2- When there is a threat to the status of gangs and gang members, status is regained through delinquency and violence, 3- Aggression is important in terms of ensuring and maintaining group cohesion and solidarity (Thornberry et al., 2003).

Decker (1996, p. 262) explains the development of gang violence with a model that includes 7 steps; “1- Loose bonds to the gang; 2- Collective identification of threat from a rival gang (through rumors, symbolic shows of force, cruising, and mythic violence), reinforcing the centrality of violence that expands the number of participants and increases cohesion; 3- A mobilizing event possibly, but not necessarily, violence; 4- Escalation of activity; 5- Violent event; 6- Rapid de-escalation; 7- Retaliation.” Put simply, threat against a group from a rival group creates group solidarity and cohesion; in turn it leads to violence as a response to the threat.

There are parallelisms between social facilitation model and findings of various studies: Deschenes and Esbensen (1999) found that gang members felt less guilty than nongang members about committing violent crimes and all gang members regardless of gender approved physical violence; Miller and Decker (2001) pointed out the significance of group process in gangs and



found that females as males involved in gang related violence and in this context 74% of all sample had attacked someone with a weapon with the intention of injuring them seriously; Rosenfeld et al. (1999) found that gangs facilitate homicides especially in racially isolated and disadvantaged neighborhoods; Jansyn (1966) emphasized that delinquent activities of street corner groups generally emerge as a response to threats to the solidarity of gang; Decker (1996) found that in a gang, collective identification of threat by rival gangs results in increased cohesion and then leads to violence to cope with that threat, and Thornberry et al. (1993) found that after joining gang group rates of delinquency and drug use increased and then upon departure from the group these rates started to decrease. Social facilitation model is also a kind of support for socialization theories such as differential association and social learning.

3.3.3. *Enhancement model*

Enhancement is the combination of selection model and social facilitation model. To this model, gangs select their members among the adolescents who are already delinquent, and then group process and group dynamics cause individuals to engage in more delinquent behaviors. So group has a facilitator role for the persons who have already criminal records. In this model, it is expected that gang members would have higher rates than nongang members in terms of criminality, and criminality rates would speed up especially when they are active gang members.

Sarnecki's (1990) study supported the enhancement model. Sarnecki conducted his longitudinal study in Sweeden using samples of adolescents under the age of 20 and all samples were suspected of having committed crime. He found that delinquency is directly related with network of delinquent relations. He also stressed that "the stronger the connection to this network, the more substantial, serious, and long-lasting were the delinquency and other asociality. This network also seemed to be very important with regard to the reproduction of juvenile delinquency in the municipality. At the end of the follow-up period juvenile delinquency in Borlänge had basically the same character as at the beginning, even though the juveniles included in the network were, to a large extent, new. The young offenders who were central figures in the new network had successively learned their roles from the network's old members" (p. 31).

Overall, although these 3 models attempt to explain relationship between gang membership and delinquency/violence, empirical information regarding validity of these models is not enough (Thornberry et al., 2003). Nevertheless, previous research findings generally supported the social facilitation model which argues that violent delinquency and violent behaviors increase when an adolescent becomes a gang member.

3.4. **Theory of Normative Ambiguity**

According to this theoretical approach, gang violence occurs when one party impugns and degrades the honor of other party. Gang member's belief in terms of code of personal honor influences his reactions to perceived insults. Horowitz and Schwartz (1974) explain gang violence benefiting from "theory of normative ambiguity." To Horowitz and Schwartz (1974), three conditions are necessary to name a case as a gang violence: 1- In the same setting, at least one party must think that existence of other party or his behavior threatens his safety and dignity, 2- He makes the other party (through his words, gestures and actions) feel that he would like to



injure him physically, or he attacks for physical injury, 3- He must be ready to account for his actions as a member of a gang. In this context, “any provocative or threatening incident can become basis for a collectively held grievance. But, until it does, we feel that physical conflict between peers should not be classified as gang violence” (p. 239).

Honor is an important concept in terms of formation of violence. Miller (1966) who examined gang violence found that in most assault cases assaulters and targets were evenly matched. In other words, “the bulk of assaultive incidents involved contests between peers in which the preservation and defense of gang honor was a central issue...Gang members fight to secure and defend their honor as males; to secure and defend the reputation of their local area and the honor of their women; to show that an affront to their pride and dignity demands retaliation” (p. 110, 112). Accordingly, gang violence has retaliatory characteristics. It is a respond to real or perceived violence against the gang (Decker, 1996).

According to Horowitz and Schwartz (1974), honor “impels one to take an unequivocal stand, to choose decisively and openly between divergent courses of action, and to enforce one’s claim to deference as a non-negotiable right. One may even have to defend an inadvertent slip as a deliberate expression of one’s character. The effort here is to be what one wants to be what one wants others to think one truly is” (p. 243). Accordingly, Horowitz and Schwartz (1974) argue that honor has an expressive value and there is explicitly a tendency towards momentum in situations of normative ambiguity. They also emphasize that individuals initially respond to a certain amount of provocation by impression management. However, over time, individuals may insult and then damage other party in order to respond to violation of personal space. If a gang member fails to do so, it might be considered as a weakness. Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1999) in their ‘thesis of a subculture of violence’ makes a similar point by proposing ‘the adult male who does not defend his honor or his female companion will be socially emasculated’ (p. 105).

Congruent with this explanations, Horowitz and Schwartz (1974) noted that “...to use the idiom of the street gang, one’s pride ultimately tips the precarious balance between honor and impression management in favor of violence. Thus, relatively minor incidents have a notable tendency to snowball, and it is this movement toward a violent resolution of perceived violations of personal space that we call momentum” (p. 243). Put simply, gang members have to choose either conventional or honor bound responses. In other words, conditions may force them to behave according to the norms of the gang or of the legitimate world. For instance, he knows that killing or fighting is wrong and illegal act not only against the law and but also against the values of the society, but at the same time, he may be thinking that the honor must be saved regardless of all negative consequences like murder of other party. Horowitz and Schwartz (1974) advocate that “as long as young man remains in the gang he rarely becomes acutely conscious of this dilemma. It is only after a variety of circumstances push him toward conventional or street career that he may see that the capacity to operate smoothly in two contrasting social settings involves what the larger society regards as allegiance to two antithetical codes for conduct” (p. 243). In sum, the idea of “normative ambiguity links the fluctuation between conventional and violent behavior among street groups to the interpersonal relations...This tension is never formally resolved but rather is lived through until one is old enough to decide whether one is going to move away from the risks of street life” (p. 243, 251).



3.5. Anomie/Strain Theory

Origin of new versions of anomie and strain theories goes back to the study of Merton (1938, 1999) and further to the revisions in Merton's theory which are made by Cohen (1955), and also Cloward and Ohlin (1960). Anomie theory and strain theory are different from each other but they are related. Today, general strain theory and institutional anomie theory are the most famous versions of these two theories.

Anomie theory and institutional anomie theory; The main focus of the anomie theory is to explain why some societies like the U.S. have higher crime rates than others. Anomie theory posits that although there is strong emphasis on financial success (especially in U.S.), the emphasis on legitimate ways such as hard work and education to carry out this dream is weak. Since the regulations are inadequate in the process of ensuring financial success, individuals are more likely to try and use all the ways regardless of legality or illegality. In this manner, societies that are unsuccessful to regulate goal-seeking behavior are characterized by a state of 'anomie' (Cullen & Agnew, 1999).

Institutional anomie theory of crime which is the leading version of anomie theory suggests explanations about high crime rates in the U.S. as anomie theory did. The moving point of institutional anomie theory is same with anomie theory that high level encouragement of people for monetary success (or in other words 'American Dream') without legitimate norms for achievement such goals result in higher crime rates in the U.S. According to institutional anomie theory, the major structures such as family, school, political system, culture are dominated by economy and these structures/institutions become less important than economic institutions. As a result, life of the individuals become economy oriented, and institutions such as family, school, political system become incapable of socializing and training individuals. In such an environment even deviant behaviors cannot be sanctioned effectively (Cullen & Agnew, 1999).

Strain theory and general strain theory; The main question that strain theory looks for answer is that why some individuals and groups are most likely to commit crimes. As an answer, strain theory posits that when individuals are prevented from achieving cultural goals such as monetary success and having middle class status through legal channels, they are pressured into offending. There are several barriers and obstacles in the social structure and those obstacles and barriers prevent lower class individuals to carry out their goals such as good education, good job or having middle class status. When these goals are not accomplished through legitimate channels, it creates strain and pressure for individuals and as a result they may respond it by committing crime. So, illegitimate channels may appear to be solution for reaching the goals. Classical strain theory has been tested very commonly and many of those studies did not support the strain theory. Most of the studies that did not give supportive evidence for strain theory found that middle-class delinquency as common as lower-class delinquency (Akers, 2000; Cullen & Agnew, 1999; Title and Meier, 1990).

Focusing on delinquent gangs, Cohen (1955, 1999) comes with different explanation of strain theory. According to Cohen, as Merton (1938) emphasized, goal blockage is important factor for gang delinquency. However, the reason is not the blockage of monetary success of lower class or working class boys. As well as financial success, respect from others is another



important issue. Financial goals might be met by criminal activities such as theft, but middle-class status can not be obtained through same channels. As a result, lower-class and working class gang boys adapt new status system to have achievement; they create hostility against middle class; and they establish a status system that values everything that middle-class reject. For instance, while middle-class value private property and respect for others, gang groups value destruction, violence, theft, aggression to others (Cohen, 1955, 1999). One of the biggest critiques against Cohen's approach is that values of delinquent gangs are not opposed to conventional values as Cohen claims (Cloward & Ohlin, 1999).

On the other hand, extending the Merton and Cohen's works, Cloward and Ohlin (1960, 1999) explain that there are three delinquent subcultures. These are 'criminal subcultures' that commit theft; 'conflict subcultures' that generally fight; and lastly 'retreatist subcultures' that use drug. The kind of subculture that is adapted depends on the nature of illegitimate opportunities that are available to them. Put simply, gangs develop subcultures depending on illegitimate opportunities in their environment. Subcultures of gang groups are solution for; 1- problem of adjustment to middle-class status, and 2- their inability to obtain monetary success through legal channels. These subcultures rationalize or legitimize delinquent behaviors including violent ones. So, using strain theory, Cloward and Ohlin (1999) reflect developmental perspective in explanation of delinquent subcultures.

There are several critiques against their approach. For instance, the specialization of gang members is not limited with the crimes of theft, fight and drug use. Conversely, gangs engage in broad range of delinquent behaviors. It is also necessary to consider availability of both legitimate and illegitimate opportunities to have full explanation of crime (Cullen & Agnew, 1999). Agnew (1999) also lists several weaknesses of abovementioned classical strain theory approaches. These theories "1- are unable to explain the extensive nature of middle-class delinquency, 2- neglect goals other than monetary success/middle-class status, 3- neglect barriers to goal achievement other than social class, and 4- do not fully specify why only some strained individuals turn to delinquency" (p. 152). Taking into consideration these weaknesses, Agnew created a new version of strain theory named as "*Agnew's general strain theory*". General strain theory is social psychological version of strain theory. According to Agnew's theory, crime and delinquency were considered as an adaptation to stress regardless of the source of that stress. Agnew (1992 and 1999) argues that strain results from negative relationship with others. In other words, when an individual is not treated by others as he or she would like to be treated, strain occurs. This negative relation might be in three forms; "relations where others: 1- prevent or threaten to prevent the achievement of positively valued goals (e.g., monetary success, popularity with peers), 2- remove or threaten to remove positively valued stimuli (e.g., the loss of romantic partner, the death of a parent), or 3- present or threaten to present negatively-valued stimuli (e.g., insults, physically assault, overwork)" (1999, p. 120). Cullen and Agnew (1999) explain that there is tentative support to general strain theory. So far, researchers examine certain types of strain and therefore further research is needed to figure out what kind of strain is mostly related to crime. Although, today, strain and anomie theory are no longer popular theories to examine causes of crime, it has become one of the most influential theories of crime.



Paternoster and Mazerolle (1994) conducted a test using longitudinal sample of adolescents and found that several dimensions of general strain are positively related to involvement in a wide range of delinquent acts. They observed that strain has not only a direct effect but also it has indirect effects on delinquency. Through indirect affect, it weakens the inhibitions of the social bond and increases possibility of involvement with delinquent peers. Mazerolle (1998) also observed gender differences in rates of property and violent crimes by using general strain theory. He found some evidence of gender differences in the effects of negative life events and experiences on violent crimes and property related crimes. In order to explain potential pathway of delinquency escalation in early and mid-adolescent, Hoffmann and Cerbone (1999) used general strain theory. Their research revealed that there is a relation between exposing a relatively high number of stressful life events and a significant growth of delinquency.

Agnew's general strain theory appeared to be more successful than more limited versions of strain theories of the past. However, in order to make adequate evaluation about its empirical validity and power, there is a need for additional research on gang violence.

3.6. Control Theories/Social Bonding Theory

Unlike other theories focusing on reasons of committing crime, control theories explain why people do not commit crime. The basic assumption of the control theories is that everybody is likely to involve in delinquency and there is no individual variation in motivation to commit crime. Hence individuals need to be controlled not to be offender. Accordingly, social control theory proposes that delinquency occurs when the social and cultural constraints over human behavior become weaker and less effective. When the control weakens, it results in several unacceptable behaviors such as school dropout, alcoholism, mental illness, delinquent and criminal careers, or some combination of these outcomes. Even it may end up with more violent crimes and especially serious prolonged delinquency (Akers, 2000; Hirschi, 1969; Sokol-Katz et al., 1997).

Some other control theorists have thought differently as in the example of *Reckless' Containment Theory*. *Reckless' Containment theory* incorporated the crime motivating factors of personality, social environment and situation. This theory proposes that inner and outer pushes and pulls toward deviance will produce delinquent behavior, unless they are counteracted by inner and outer containment. In other words, if the motivations to deviance are strong and containment is weak, it is likely that an individual/s will commit crime. "Pushes" that lead to delinquency might be poverty, deprivation, blocked opportunities etc. "Pulls" are positive inducements toward delinquency such as delinquent subcultures, gang structure, attractiveness of gang group etc. Some of the outer containments are school or parental supervision and discipline, strong group cohesion, and a consistent moral front. Inner containments are strong conscience or a good self-concept (Akers, 2000).

Hirschi's control theory is usually referred to as *social bonding theory*. Basic proposition of social bonding theory is that delinquency occurs when an individual's bond to society is weak or broken. Hirschi's social bonding theory proposes 4 types of bonding to others: *Attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief*. These are strongly intercorrelated. If these 4 bonding are



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stronger with family, school, adult and peers, there will be more conformity and less criminality. *Attachment* to parent and parental supervision are very important for controlling delinquency. Peers also have the same effect. In fact, it does not matter to whom one is attached. Even attachment to delinquent peers, friends or deviant parents reduces the possibility of criminality (Hirschi, 1969, 1999). However, contrary to social bonding theory, later research has found that attachment to delinquent friends (Linden & Hackler, 1973; Josine, 1992) and deviant parents (Jensen & Brownfield, 1983) resulted in delinquency. Attachment to peers leads to conformity only when peers and parents are not delinquent. Gang related research does not support attachment related approach of social bonding theory. Because being a gang member and strong attachment to the gang group is most likely to result in involvement in violent activities.

Commitment is about investment in conventional educational and occupational endeavors. The stronger the commitment, the stronger to conformity. *Involvement* is about spending time with conventional activities such as being together with family and joining several social activities (sport, hobby, recreation activities etc). *Belief* might be defined as endorsement of general conventional values and norms. If a person believes these formal and informal norms, it is less likely that he/she will be a delinquent. Apart from abovementioned shortcomings about attachment variable, in general, research findings revealed that the magnitude of the relationship between social bonding variables and deviant behavior has ranged from moderate to low. High correlation is not too often. In sum, many research has supported social bonding theory to some extent (Akers, 2000; Hirschi, 1969).

According to Elliot, Huizanga, & Ageton (1985; Sokol-Katz et al., 1997) the possible reasons of weak social control are failure of developing internal controls during the childhood; breakdown or reawakening of previously established internal controls particularly during adolescence; and social disorganization in some social units such as family which results in weak external controls.

Rate of female gang members' serious and violent crimes is less than male partners; females generally have the role of helpmate in commission of crimes; females generally do not commit violent crimes alone, and more serious and violent type crimes are committed by males. These differences between females and males in offense settings have theoretical support. In this context, according to social control theory, the level of supervision that children receive is important in terms of delinquency and violent crimes. It is believed that while boys are given more freedom, girls are restricted much more than boys by their families especially during adolescence period. In this manner, the more females are closely supervised, the more their opportunities for offending a crime are limited. Accordingly, high level of supervision for females creates gender differences in terms of delinquency and violent crimes (Hirschi, 1969; Mawby, 1980). These statements support the findings regarding gender differences in the street gangs discussed above.

In this manner, variations in the weakness of social bonds directly impact on crime rates and frequencies between genders. Accordingly, females have lower rates of delinquency and violent crimes since they have stronger attachment to family, school, positive peer relations and involvement in conventional school activities. Among those factors, strong social bond to family



was found as the most important insulator for females than males, and further, influence of family decreases for boys faster than girls as they get older (Deschenes & Esbensen, 1999). The role of family attachment is important that it helps internalizing of norms for conventional behaviors (Hirschi, 1969).

3.7. Social Learning Theory

There are two important theories within the framework of social learning theory; Sutherland's Differential Association Theory and Akers' Social Learning Theory. Akers' social learning theory is a kind of behavioristic reformulation of Sutherland's differential association of crime (Akers, 2000; Burgess & Akers, 1966).

Differential association theory; Sutherland's differential association theory is a micro level theory. There are nine propositions of this theory; "1- Criminal behavior is learned, 2- Criminal behavior is learned in interaction with other persons in a process of communication, 3- The principal part of the learning of criminal behavior occurs within intimate personal groups, 4- When criminal behavior is learned, the learning includes (a) techniques of committing the crime, which are sometimes very complicated, sometimes very simple, and (b) the specific direction of motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes, 5- The specific direction of motives and drives is learned from definitions of the legal codes as favorable or unfavorable, 6- A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of law, 7- Differential associations may vary in frequencies, duration, priority, and intensity, 8- The process of learning criminal behavior by association with criminal and anti-criminal patterns involves all of the mechanisms that are involved any other learning, 9- Although criminal behavior is an expression of general needs and values, because non-criminal behavior is an expression of the same needs and values" (Akers, 2000; Sutherland & Cressey, 1999). The core proposition of the theory is the sixth one which basically indicates that exposure to others' definitions which are favorable to criminal behavior is important in terms of formation of criminal behavior. The seventh proposition makes it clear. That is, if a person is exposed to law violating definitions more frequently, in longer time periods, more intensively and as a priority than law abiding definitions, it is probable that he/she will violate the law. So it is not just an easy learning period (Akers, 2000).

Akers' social learning theory; Akers' social learning theory is not competitive with differential association theory. Conversely, it is broader version of differential association theory that it integrates Sutherland's theory with differential reinforcement and other principles of behavioral acquisition, continuation, and cessation. In other words, if a research findings support differential association theory it also supports Akers' theory. Differently, Akers' theory includes more behavioral terms, and concepts from behavioral learning theory that makes it soft version of behaviorism. So it does not simply mean that criminal behavior is learned (Akers, 2000).

There are four big concepts that take place in the Akers' theory; differential association, definitions, differential reinforcement, and imitation. First concept-differential association is similar with Sutherland's approach with some additions that differential association has both behavioral interactional and normative dimensions. Second concept- definitions are an individual's own attitudes or meanings that are attached to given behavior. Based on



rationalizations, definitions of the situation, other evaluative and moral attitudes, an act can be defined as right or wrong, good or bad, justified or unjustified, doable or undoable. If many individuals define the behavior as good (positive definition) or at least justified (neutralizing definition) rather than as undesirable (negative definition), it becomes more likely that those individuals will engage in that behavior. Third concept-differential reinforcement means the balance of anticipated or actual rewards and punishments which come after or result of a behavior. Possibility of committing crime depends on the past, present, anticipated future rewards and punishments for their actions. While reward/positive reinforcement and avoidance of punishment/negative reinforcement strengthen the behavior, aversive stimuli/positive punishment and loss of reward/negative punishment weaken it. Reinforcing sources are those groups which control individuals' major sources of reinforcement and punishment and expose them to behavioral models and normative definitions. So, firstly family and peers-friends, then schools, churches, and other groups are some important ones of these groups. Last concept-imitation is about exhibiting same type of behaviors after observing others' behaviors. Accordingly, observation of behaviors in a group may affect an individual's behaviors (Akers, 2000; Akers, 1977 cited in Morash, 1983). To Akers et al. (1979) social learning theory is complementary to other sociological theories and it can be used to have more comprehensive explanations of deviant behaviors.

Although variables of differential association, definition, imitation, and differential reinforcement are directly related to gang membership and violence, among them, perhaps the most important exploratory variable which have link to gang research is differential associations (Winfree et al., 1994b). In this context, Battin et al. (1998) found that adolescents who have delinquent friends are more likely to engage in delinquent behaviors. Moreover, if an adolescent's friends are members of a delinquent gang, the possibility of that adolescent's involvement in delinquent activities increases due to group process and norms favorable to violence within the gang. Gangs encourage and reinforce participation in violent behaviors and produce more frequent, intense and enduring association with delinquent friends.

In addition to the study of Battin et al., Winfree et al. (1994a; 1994b) in their work found that gang membership and delinquency could be explained by social learning variables of attitudes (toward gangs and gang activity), social reinforcers and punishers, and differential association. These results were true even controlling demographic variables such as ethnicity, gender, and place of residence (Winfree, 1994a). Put simply, operation of the social learning variables offer critical insights into the ties between gangs and crime (Winfree, 1994b). Benefiting from Akers's social learning theory, Morash (1983, p. 313) hypothesized that regardless of whether the peer group is like a gang and irrespective of the community context or youth, peers' delinquency is itself predictive of individual's delinquency. As a result of the test, she verified her hypothesis.

Deschenes and Esbensen's (1999) findings are also consistent with propositions of social learning theory. They used integrated approach examined the varying perceptions of violence of males, females and gang members. They especially took into account the social learning variables considering that they are significant correlates of violent crimes. They found that adolescents use techniques of neutralization to justify violent behavior. In this regard while few adolescents



approved of violence, many of them accepted the use of violence in specific conditions. For instance, majority of youths justified hitting if “1- one is hit first, 2- it is necessary to protect yourself, 3- there is a threat to family or friend” (p. 85-86). However, differences in perceptions of guilt and the ability to neutralize violent behavior are particularly important when looking at gang versus nongang youths. While both male and female approved physical violence in gangs, in non-gang members males were more likely than females to accept physical violence. Accordingly, Deschenes and Esbensen (1999) emphasize that the most plausible explanations of this gender difference of violence relate to “differences in learning and reinforcement of behaviors through the process of socialization” (p. 67-68). In sum, gang membership seems to be significantly related to neutralization of violence and lack of guilt, for both males and females. Another study by Esbensen and Deschenes (1998) revealed that social learning models helps more than social bonding models in terms of distinguishing between gang and non-gang members including both male and females.

Similarly Bjerregaard and Lizotte (1995) who examined the relation between gun ownership and gang membership found that youth who joined the gang exhibited higher rates of tendency to gun ownership and other delinquent behaviors. But these delinquent behaviors are generally limited with their presence in the gang. Because of the fact that their gun subculture and delinquent behaviors have decreased when they left the gang. They noted that gang milieu facilitates illegal activities and there is an influence of social learning process on the illegal activities. “Gangs provide youths with both an environment which is conducive to learning criminal values and behaviors and to techniques for engaging in those activities” (p. 52).

Social learning theory is one of the mostly tested and preferred theories in the general crime related literature despite some critiques of it. For instance, it has been argued that the testability of basic learning principles which incorporated in social learning theory is tautological. That is, the statement of ‘if behavior is reinforced it will be strengthened’ is tautological. Another criticism is about temporal sequence of events. Although social learning theory states that delinquent associations cause delinquency, some argues that delinquency causes delinquent associations. Contrary to criticisms, Akers emphasized that almost all research conducted using social learning theory has found strong relationships between social learning variables and delinquent behaviors as theoretically expected. Especially, findings of several social learning related studies’ revealed peer effect and also child–parent interaction as a strong predictor of deviant behaviors. So, the big amount of research literature figured out the importance of differential associations and definitions in explaining crime (Akers, 2000).

3.8. Social Disorganization Theory

Social disorganization theory was first developed by Shaw and McKay (1999) in the studies of urban crime and delinquency. This theory has generally been applied to urban crime and deviance. Social disorganization theory assumes that if there is less solidarity, cohesion or integration within a society, community, or group, it is likely to observe higher rates of criminality. The rates of delinquency in the lower class neighborhoods are high especially near the inner city and it decreases toward the more affluent areas. In inner cities, the conventional institutions becomes weak and value system supportive of crime is nurtured. Although families or



other adults in this disorganized inner city communities try to teach children moral values, they meet difficulties because of several criminal influences such as gangs and adult criminals. Most badly, when delinquent traditions take hold, it is transformed from one generation to the next, especially through interaction in neighborhood peer groups. In the areas where crime rates are high, it is most likely to observe poor housing, incomplete and broken families, high rate of illegitimate births, and unstable population, and physical decay. The residents have lowest level socio-economic status with low income, education and occupation. These areas are characterized by high rates of adult crime, drug addiction, alcoholism, prostitution, and mental illness. These are the result of social disorganization in these areas. In addition industrialization, urbanization, and other social changes cause social disorganization (Shaw & McKay, 1999; Akers, 2000).

According to Spergel (1984), social disorganization theory may be the best one in terms of explanation of development of violent gangs. Therefore, Pizarro & McGloin (2006) examined the distinction between gang and non-gang homicides. They focused on the etiological differences between these homicides at the multivariate level benefiting from social disorganization theory and Decker's (1996) collective behavior hypothesis of gang violence. They found significant differences between gang and non-gang homicides at the incident level. Although poverty was a significant predictor, the social disorganization measure did not predict gang homicide.

Curry and Spergel (1988) examined the gang and non-gang homicides that occurred in the city of Chicago from 1978 to 1985 within the realm of social disorganization approach. They found that gang homicide rates were ecologically distinct from non-gang homicide rates. This result was fitting nicely within a social disorganization framework. In order to operationalize social disorganization theory they used following variables: 1- Economic disadvantage factor (the percentage of people living below the poverty line), the mortgage investment per dwelling, and the unemployment rate; 2- A measure of the concentration of Hispanics in a community. Their findings revealed that the concentration of Hispanics in a community and poverty were significantly related to gang homicides. Rosenfeld et al. (1999) also found that neighborhood disadvantage was predictor of both gang and nongang related violence.

On the other hand, according to Akers (2000), to what degree social disorganization has influence on crime is unclear. Often, it is not measured carefully. Even in the most disorganized areas, only a limited number of youth involve in crime. Moreover, it is not so clear exactly what physical, economic, population, or family conditions constitute social disorganization.

Also, there are still concerns about the strength and relevance of some social disorganization variables such as economic status, family disruption, residential mobility, urbanism, and ethnic heterogeneity in explaining homicide rates within geographic areas. Moreover, no social disorganization variables had presented a consistently positive relationship with homicide rates in geographic areas in almost all studies (Land, McCall, & Cohen, 1990). In this regard, although many studies found that economic status and family disruption were related to homicide rates within geographic areas, some others could not find any relations (Loftin & Parker, 1985). Many other researchers found conflicting evidences in terms of strength, direction, and relevance of other social disorganization variables such as residential mobility, ethnic



heterogeneity and urbanism, and gang homicide (Land et al., 1990; Loftin & Parker, 1985; Peterson & Krivo, 1993).

3.9. Integrated Theory

There are also some studies that prefer integrated theory approach with several reasons. The advocates of integrated theory mainly indicate that single theory is not enough to explain all variations in crime. Also, to supporters of integrated theory, classical theories generally predict similar outcomes and they do not provide a firm basis devising crucial tests. Since classical theories generally contain single explanatory variable, they exhibit poor performance; however, the causes of crime and delinquency are multiple in nature, and therefore it is necessary to combine different theories in order to find out all causal variables (Elliot et al., 1999; Liska et al., 1989). In this regard, Liska et al. (1989) note three types of integration: Side-by-side integration, end-to-end integration, and up-and-down integration. “*Side-by-side integration* is the most common form of integration that partitions cases of crime by the theories that best explain them... *End-to-end integration* is about specifying the temporal order between causal variables, so that the dependent variables of some theories constitute the independent variables of others. For instance, the variables from social control do not directly affect deviance but affect the variables from differential association theory, which in turn directly explain deviance... *Up-and-down integration* is also known as deductive integration. It is accomplished by identifying a level of abstraction or generality that will incorporate some of the conceptualization of the constituent theories” (Liska et al., 1989, p. 7-14). Another classification is as conceptual integration and propositional integration. While the former means that concept from one theory are shown to overlap in meaning with another theory’s concepts, the latter might be made by placing explanatory variables from different theories into some kind of causal or explanatory sequence. Also there is a ‘small or middle range integration’. In this type integration theories are perceived as general theories rather than as parts of an emerging theory (Cullen & Agnew, 1999; Lizka et al., 1989).

Baskin and Sommers (1993) who examined violent crimes emphasized different studies on initiation into the violent crime “ignore the advances in criminological theory and research based on the integration of control, strain, learning, and ecological approaches” (p. 562). In their study they found that neighborhood, peer, and addiction factors are some important variables that impact on initiation into violent crimes of both males and females. In addition, depending on age at first crime, different configurations of these factors facilitate the initiation of violent offending. Deschenes and Esbensen (1999) examined relative contribution of social-bond, self-control, and social learning concepts to the explanation of gang violence. Their findings pointed out the importance of several variables such as poor parental monitoring, low commitment to school, and gang membership as a predictor of gang violence. Further, peer groups and gang membership appeared to be important factor for especially male involvement in violence.

Spergel (1984) who examined development of violent gangs in Chicago emphasized that social disorganization theory might best account for development of gang violence; culture conflict theory is good to explain the creation of integrated gang type; and further strain or anomy as well as social disorganization might be best option for explaining segmented gangs’



development. In order to establish his model he proposed several propositions benefiting from these theories. The first proposition contends that “the violent gang is a natural, lower-class interstitial institution, resulting mainly from the weakness of secondary institutions, such as school, local communities, and ethnic organizations, and to some extent from the weakness of primary institutions such as family, to provide adequate mechanisms of opportunity and social control, particularly in the transition of males from youth to adulthood” (p. 202). Second proposition indicates that “the violent gang is essentially a young adult adaptation, generally following upon the individual’s prior delinquent status” (p. 202). Since older and less educated adolescent who are generally from minority group is in trouble to find job and thus violent gang becomes an option for him to obtain alternate income and status. The last proposition posits that for violent gang adaptation there appear community-structured routes such as integrated and segmented. The integrated type is more prevalent and can be observed in unstable newly settled locations where lower-class people like Hispanics and Asians live. In contrast, segmented type produces lower gang violence and they are mostly stable but very poor locations where poor Blacks and sometimes Hispanics live. Spergel (1984) found that larger societal processes of segmentation and integration may create different violent gang associational patterns among offenders and victims. These patterns of association differentiate by age, race and ethnicity in the several gang types and subcultures. He also argued that while there are heterogeneous patterns in the integrated subculture, it is more homogenous in the segmented subculture.

Elliott et al. (1999) used end-to-end integration model and integrated strain, social control and differential association/social learning theories in their study. They described 2 big pathways to delinquency: 1- Low social control increases the likelihood of association with delinquent peers that increases the likelihood of delinquency, 2- If individuals have high social control it creates strain which reduces their level of control, which increases their likelihood of association with delinquent peers that results in delinquency.

Hirschi (1979) is one of the biggest critiques of this theory. He emphasizes that such approaches generally do not take into consideration differences in the assumptions especially in the end-to-end type integrative theories. So, integration does not become in meaningful sense. According to Lizka et al. (1989) theoretical integration is not always persuasive. Although integrative approach criticizes that crucial test of crime and deviance are rarely definitive and so offers integrative theory, Lizka et al. stresses that it is unrealistic to expect definitive result in any form of hypothesis, hence it does not form a good reason to adapt an alternative strategy for theorizing. However, Lizka et al. (1989) think that there is a need for theoretical development and it can be carried out through theoretical integration.

3.10. Organizational theory/Network & Group Approach

Group is one of the most important dynamics for gang delinquency and violence. As argued in different part of this paper, it is likely to see group influence in different models such as social facilitation or enhancement model, and in different theories such as social learning theory.

The solidarity is important for the gangs. When there is decline in the solidarity it starts to threaten gang members. The way to respond to this threat is group activity that group activity arouses interest, attracts, and re-involves the group members. The meaning of a group is a kind of



defense for them against enemy. These enemies are generally other adolescent/gang groups, groups from other locations or neighborhoods. If a person is not a member of any group, it is most likely to be harassed by any of the numerous groups in the area (Jansyn, 1966).

Peer group influence, particularly the influence of delinquent peers, is one of the strongest predictor of delinquency and violent behavior. In this context, social network theory seems to be one of the most appropriate approaches in terms of explaining group effect on delinquency (Thornberry et al., 2003). According to social network theory, social networks constrain the behavior of members who participate in the group such as street gang. Groups want their members' behaviors to be consistent with the group's dominant behavioral themes. Network approach also helps some basic theories such as social control, differential association, or Agnew's social learning theory to explain delinquent behavior. In this manner, social control theory's explanation about the constraining effect of social integration; and differential association and Agnew's social learning theory's emphasis on the interaction among actors and their associates are consistent with network approach's basic premises. The social network also takes into consideration the content of norms and behaviors which exist in the personal network. In addition, network approach is effective in terms of examining the structural characteristics of personal networks and their implications for the study of delinquent behavior (Krohn, 1986).

Taking into account the network approach, Thornberry et al. (2003) suggested that gang groups are expected to have stronger and qualitatively more different criminogenic influence on their members than nongang criminal groups. As they expected, their study revealed that the impact of gang membership is greater than the impact of other delinquent groups including highly delinquent ones in terms of violence and general delinquency. To them, the reason might be the gang structure and group process which are more formal and hierarchical than other adolescent peer groups. Accordingly, unlike nongang groups, this structure of gangs creates conditions for violent delinquency. Further, gang groups are territorial that it causes conflict and violence in order to protect the turf. On the other hand, strong group process which includes violence and aggression contributes cohesion and solidarity and more violent crimes as well. It appears that association with delinquent peers is an important predictor of general and violent crimes of street gangs.

In this regard, Papachristos (n.a.) used network approach to describe and analyze gang related homicides. He basically argues that murder is not a property of individuals. Conversely, it is a property of social networks and it occurs through an epidemic like process of contagion in which violence diffuses among connected individuals and groups. "In short, social order of murder is defined by the manner in which social networks are constructed and by the people's placement in them" (p. 3). His findings revealed that "gangs are not group of murderers per se, but rather social networks in which violence ricochets back-and-forth" (p. 5).

4. OVERVIEW AND CONCLUSION

Gang membership and criminal activity continues to flourish in the US communities. According to NGIC's 2011 National Gang Threat Assessment Report, overall increase in gang membership, expansion of criminal street gangs' control of street-level drug sales and collaboration with rival gangs and other criminal organizations are some of the most prominent



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recent gang related facts. Gangs not only involve in violent activities to defend their territory from rival gangs, but also they are likely to establish new alliances between rival gangs by suspending their former racial ideologies in pursuit of mutual profit. Gangs always seek new tactics to enhance their criminal operations. In this regard, they develop new tactics against law enforcement tactics, diversify their criminal activity and commit lower-risk and more profitable crimes, employ new strategies utilizing communication and internet technologies, establish associations and alliances with other gangs and criminal organizations both domestically and internationally (FBI, n. a).

NGIC further reports demonstrate that gangs have increasingly involved in non-traditional crimes such as alien smuggling, human trafficking, and prostitution. Besides, currently, gangs are also engaging in white collar crimes such as counterfeiting, identity theft, and mortgage fraud due to higher profitability and lower risk of detection and punishment compared to crimes such as drug and weapons trafficking in the US (FBI, n. a). Based on the NGIC's recent report, it can be asserted that gangs' engagement in uncommon and extraordinary crimes require more empirical examination. These new trends also seem to need more theoretical inquiries in order have detailed understanding of the phenomenon.

Understanding of what brings individuals together so as to lead violent activities clouded somewhat by the lack of adequate level of agreement in the gang related scientific literature. Nevertheless, based on the data collected through both qualitative and quantitative methods such as observational studies, official reports, and survey research, it is possible to emphasize that there is a strong relationship between gang membership, and delinquency and violence. In other words, gang membership facilitates delinquent and violent activities, and gang violence appears to be a natural result of gang membership (Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Curry & Spergel, 1988, 1992; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Fagan, 1989; Rosenfeld et al., 1999; Thornberry et al., 2003). Accordingly, Thornberry et al., (2003) found that 98.1% of the gang members involved in general delinquency and the percentage for involvement in violent crimes is 90.6%. Furthermore, when compared with non-gang members, gang members also account for larger proportion of violent and other type of crimes for both males and females and the longer they stay in the gang the more they commit all types of crime (Esbensen & Hizanga, 1993; Thornberry et al., 2003)

There are several risk factors in individuals' life that might lead them to participate in gang groups such as family, peer, neighborhood, social environment, or background characteristics. It is important to take into consideration these and other possible risk factors in terms of preventing negative effects of these risk factors, and creating adequate policies and strategies against street gangs.

It is for sure that no theory has perfect explanation power, especially the measurement of very sensitive topics such as gang membership and gang violence. In fact, in many cases it is not possible to use only one theory to explain whole process. Each theoretical approach and model covers different aspects of gang concepts and helps us have different aspects to gang phenomenon. On the other hand, propositions of some theoretical approaches are supportive of each other. For instance, the proposition of social facilitation model which contends that participation to a gang is most likely to result in delinquency and this delinquency is limited with



the active membership period in the gang might be linked to socialization theories of differential association theory and social learning theory.

Most of the studies, especially those that reveal descriptive information such as size of the groups, and increases and decreases in the numbers rely on surveys of law enforcement agencies. So, it is most likely that findings obtained through these surveys are biased. For instance, increase in the gang violence might be the result of heightened awareness of gang related problems, new policies of several organizations such as police agencies or government against gang groups, public's interest towards to gang problem that forces authorities to make detailed research etc. (Thornberry et al., 2003).

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