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YOUNG WOMEN AND GANG VIOLENCE: GENDER, STREET OFFENDING, AND VIOLENT VICTIMIZATION IN GANGS*

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Drawing on multiple data sources in St. Louis, this article examines how gendered situational dynamics shape gang violence, including participation in violent offending and experiences of violent victimization. Combining an analysis of in-depth interviews with young women in St. Louis gangs with an examination of homicide reports from the same city, we find that young women, even regular offenders, highlight the significance of gender in shaping and limiting their involvement in serious violence. They use gender both to accomplish their criminal activities and to temper their involvement in gang crime. Consequently their risk for serious physical victimization in gangs is considerably less than young men's. St. Louis homicide data corroborate these qualitative findings. Not only are young women much less likely to be the victims of gang homicide, but the vast majority of female gang homicide victims were not the intended targets of the attack. In contrast, homicide reports suggest that the majority of male gang homicide victims were the intended targets. We suggest that gendered group processes and stratification within gangs are key factors explaining both violent offending and victimization risk in gangs.

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Much contemporary gang research has been spurred by recognition that a strong relationship exists between gang membership and participation in crime and delinquency. Gang members account for a disproportionate amount of crime, particularly serious and violent acts, and gang membership itself increases both the frequency and the severity of offending (Battin et al. 1998; Esbensen and Huizinga 1993; Thornberry 1998; Thornberry et al. 1993). More recently, researchers also have focused on the victimization risks associated with gang involvement. Gang youths are more likely to participate in violence; in addition, there is growing evidence they are at high risk for violent victimization (Decker 1999; Huff 1996, 1998; Miller and Brunson 2000). Given that the primary targets of gang violence—particularly gang homicides—are other gang members, this is a particularly important line of inquiry (Block and Block 1993; Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Maxson and Klein 1996; Rosenfeld, Bray, and Egley 1999).

These findings, based primarily on studies of male gang involvement, raise additional questions about young women in gangs. Evidence suggests that female gang members' crime patterns are complex. Like their male counterparts, gang girls are disproportionately involved in delinquency. Young men in gangs, however, still are involved more extensively in the most serious forms of gang crime (Bjerregaard and Smith 1993; Esbensen and Winfree 1998; Fagan 1990; Miller and Brunson 2000). Several recent studies have examined gender-specific victimization risks for young women in gangs (Fleisher 1998; Miller 1998a), but less attention has been given to victimization associated with gang-related offending, or to victimization resulting from gang-motivated offenses. In particular, little attempt has been made to examine gang homicides involving females, both as victims and as offenders.

To investigate these issues, we draw from several sets of data in St. Louis, Missouri, including survey and in-depth interviews with female gang members, and quantitative and narrative data from the St. Louis Homicide Project (Rosenfeld, Decker, and Kohfeld 1990). We are concerned with the gendered situational dynamics shaping gang violence—what Hagan and McCarthy (1997:81; also see Short 1998) call "foreground causal factors" of crime. We address the following questions: What situational factors help account for gender differences in gang youths' patterns of offending, particularly serious offending? Given the well-documented relationship between offending and victimization risk (Lauritsen, Sampson, and Laub 1991), how does gender shape the relationship between gang membership, participation in gang-related offending, and victimization risk? Finally, what of homicide,

the most serious and perhaps quintessential gang crime? Given the distinct character of (male) gang homicides (Block and Block 1993; Maxson and Klein 1996; Rosenfeld et al. 1999), how do gang homicides involving females fit into these patterns of violence?

Gender, Gangs, and Street Offending

As noted above, several studies show that gang members account for a disproportionate amount of delinquency, particularly serious and violent acts. Thornberry and Burch (1997), for instance, report that gang members made up approximately one-third of the sample in the Rochester Youth Development Study but accounted for 86 percent of all serious delinquent acts reported in the interviews, including 69 percent of all violent crimes. Moreover, studies show that gang membership facilitates delinquency: that is, individuals' participation in crime increases dramatically when they join gangs, and it declines significantly once they leave their gangs (see Thornberry 1998). These patterns hold for female gang members as well, such that young women in gangs show higher rates of delinquency than their nongang peers, both female and male (Bjerregaard and Smith 1993; Deschenes and Esbensen 1999; Esbensen and Winfree 1998; Thornberry et al. 1993).

Despite gang girls' greater involvement in delinquency, however, young men still are involved much more extensively in the most serious forms of gang crime. For instance, Fagan (1990; also see Miller 2001) reports a bimodal distribution of delinquency for gang girls but not gang boys: approximately 40 percent of the gang girls in his study were involved only in petty delinquency, while one-third were involved in multiple index offending, compared with 15 percent and 56 percent respectively for young men. Moreover, evidence from a number of studies suggests that gun use is much more prevalent among male than female gang members (Decker, Pennell, and Caldwell 1997; Fleisher 1998; Hagedorn and Devitt 1999; Miller and Brunson 2000).

Several explanations have been offered for these differences. Bowker, Gross, and Klein (1980:516) found evidence of the "structural exclusion of women from male delinquent activities," whereby male respondents reported that they purposely kept girls from participating in activities such as drive-by shootings and gun assaults on rivals. Their findings are consistent with a large body of literature showing that gender stratification is a key organizational element of delinquent and criminal street networks (see Maher 1997; Miller 1998b; Steffensmeier 1983). On the other hand, Joe and

Chesney-Lind (1995; also see Campbell 1993) suggest that participation in violence is a stronger normative feature of male gang involvement than it is for young women in gangs. They argue that for girls, "violence (gang and otherwise) is not celebrated and normative; it is instead more directly a consequence of and a response to the abuse, both physical and sexual, that characterizes their lives at home" (Joe and Chesney-Lind 1995:428).

Neither explanation is fully sufficient, however. The first does not adequately examine how young women negotiate their interactions within youth gangs. Even in view of the significance of gender stratification on the streets, young women's agency must be taken into account (see Maher 1997). The second explanation discounts too easily evidence that violence sometimes is normative for women, including young women in youth gangs (Miller 1998b, 2001; Simpson 1991; Simpson and Elis 1995). Moreover, neither of these explanations can account fully for the key features of gang girls' street offending: that they are involved widely in delinquent activities, and, more important, that their level of participation in violence and other crime varies considerably.

Noting the significance of these issues, Messerschmidt (1995) draws from the sociological literature on gender as situated accomplishment (see West and Fenstermaker 1995; West and Zimmerman 1987) to suggest that gang girls' crime can be recognized as a resource for accomplishing femininity: "[D]oing gender' renders social action accountable in terms of normative conceptions, attitudes and activities appropriate to one's sex category in the specific social situation in which one acts" (Messerschmidt 1995:172). Thus he suggests that young women in gangs engage in activities, including violence, with the goal of enacting normatively appropriate femininity:

For girls in the gang, doing femininity means occasionally, and in appropriate circumstances, doing violence. However, because participation in violence varies depending upon the setting, girls are assessed and held accountable as "bad girls" differently. Given that gang girls realize that their behavior is accountable to other girls and boys in the gang, they construct their actions in relation to how those actions will be interpreted by others in the same social context. (1995:183).

Though Messerschmidt notes the reciprocal relation of gender and other social practices, this conceptual theme has not been explored fully. That is, crime may not simply be a resource for accomplishing gender, but the converse also may be true: female gang members may use gender as a resource to accomplish both their

participation in and their avoidance of gang crime. We find evidence of this point with regard to women's participation in street robbery (Miller 1998b) and drug sales (Jacobs and Miller 1998). Moreover, Miller's (1998a) study of gang girls in Columbus, Ohio suggests that young women in gangs often use gender to avoid involvement in activities they find dangerous or morally troubling. Thus gang girls' constructions of gang roles and identities, including their use of gender to negotiate participation in gang crime, may have direct outcomes with regard to gang violence, including gang-related victimization.

Homicide and Victimization Risk in Street Gangs

Though the strength of the relationship between gang membership and crime has been well documented, scholars have focused considerably less attention on how gang membership increases victimization. In view of gang members' high levels of serious crime, the well-established relationship between offending and victimization risk (Lauritsen et al. 1991), and the group processes that facilitate intergang conflict (Decker 1996; Sanders 1994), gang membership probably increases youths' risks for violent victimization. As noted above, growing evidence exists to support this claim. To date, our best evidence comes from gang homicide data. For instance, Decker (1999) followed up on the gang members in his and Van Winkle's (1996) research on gangs in St. Louis, and reported that nearly one-fifth of the original sample are now deceased, primarily because of gun violence. In fact, this is a conservative estimate: Decker has succeeded in tracking only about half of the original sample.

Scholars have debated about the conceptual significance of relying on gang member versus gang motive as the definitional criterion in examining gang homicides (see Maxson and Klein 1990, 1996; Rosenfeld et al. 1999). In their analyses of gang homicides in Los Angeles and Chicago, Maxson and Klein (1990) concluded that regardless of the definitional criteria employed, the overall character of gang homicides is quite distinct; key features distinguish them from nongang homicides. They are more likely to occur on the streets, to involve "drive-bys" and guns, and to produce more victims and suspects, more male victims and suspects, and younger victims and suspects. In contrast, using data from the St. Louis Homicide Project, Rosenfeld and his colleagues (1999) report important differences between the two types. They find that gang-motivated homicides (i.e., those committed with a specific gang-related motive, such as retaliation, conflicts resulting from colors or signs, or protection of territory) are more likely than homicides involving

gang members but lacking a gang-related motive to possess the following characteristics: younger victims and suspects who are close in age to one another, multiple suspects, witnesses present, and occurrence in public spaces. These differences may result in part from differences between chronic and emerging gang cities; Los Angeles and Chicago are the former type, and St. Louis is the latter (Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Spergel and Curry 1993).

Regardless of the definitional criteria employed, researchers recognize that gang membership is important in fostering serious interpersonal violence and victimization. As noted above, gang norms, group processes, and associations with gang peers place gang youths in situations of violent conflict (see Decker 1996). Much gang violence, and gang homicide specifically, is retaliatory (whether gang-motivated or not); it reflects threat, which Decker and Van Winkle (1996) view as the underlying cultural aspect of life in the gang. They believe that gang life is characterized by the ever-present threat of violence, which shapes perceptions and responses to the activities of daily life and facilitates conflict.

In fact, Rosenfeld et al. (1999:514) highlight two facilitation processes at work in gang homicides. First, the routine activities involved in gang membership "may facilitate access to risky situations such as drug markets that are not themselves the product of gang activity." Second, mechanisms of gang functions "may directly facilitate violence by virtue of the public and participatory nature of gang conflicts." Similarly, male gang members in Miller and Brunson's (2000) study described their victimization risk as shaped by two factors: their involvement in risky behaviors that generate interpersonal conflicts, and their likelihood, as gang members in known gang territories, of being the targets of rival gang violence.

How are these group processes—including perceptions and experiences of threat and participation in risky activities—shaped by gender? What are their outcomes with regard to gang violence? Several studies have examined gender-specific victimization risks for young women in gangs, such as sexual abuse and exploitation (Fleisher 1998; Miller 1998a), and evidence suggests that although gang girls often participate in gang conflicts, they rarely resort to guns to resolve conflicts (Hagedorn 1998; Miller 2001). Consequently gun victimization is much less prevalent among female than male gang members. For instance, Hagedorn (1998:197) states that female gang members in his sample reported having been shot at an average of .33 times, compared with 9.1 times for male gang members, for a ratio of 27:1.

Gang membership facilitates interpersonal conflict, and most youth gangs—particularly African-American gangs such as those in

St. Louis—are mixed-gender (Curry 1997; Fleisher 1998; Miller 1998a, 2001; Miller and Brunson 2000; Nurge 1998). By what processes, then, does gang-related and gang-motivated offending translate into different kinds of interpersonal conflict among males and among females, with different consequences for gang-related victimization risks? To clarify these questions, drawing from multiple data sources in St. Louis, we examine how gang girls describe their participation in gang crime: why they engage in particular crimes, how and why they avoid other, prototypically “gang” crimes, and how they distinguish their activities from young men’s. We examine what their explanations reveal about the gendered nature of group processes and the role of threat in gangs, and link this evidence with the empirical findings on gender and gang homicide specifically.

METHODOLOGY

Data from this study were taken from two sources: interviews with female gang members in St. Louis (Miller 2001), and reports from the Homicide Division of the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department as part of the St. Louis Homicide Project (Rosenfeld et al. 1990). As stated earlier, St. Louis typically is classified as an emerging gang city: most recently, gangs developed there in the mid to late 1980s (Decker and Kempf 1991; Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Spergel and Curry 1993). St. Louis has experienced many social and economic dislocations common to midwestern industrial cities: a fleeing middle class, an eroding tax base, declining industrial employment, substantial population loss, and increased racial isolation. Gang proliferation in the city appears to be linked to these trends and to the resulting urban distress (see Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Klein 1995; Rosenfeld et al. 1999; Wilson 1996).

The first part of our research is based on survey and in-depth interviews with 27 female gang members in St. Louis. The interviews were drawn from a larger comparative study including both gang and nongang girls in two cities (see Miller 2001). Respondents ranged in age from 12 to 20, with a mean age of 15.6. Young women were recruited for the study with the cooperation of several organizations working with at-risk youths, including a street outreach program, agencies providing drop-in programs, a local public high school serving youths suspended or expelled from other settings, and the local detention center. Interviews were voluntary and confidential, and youths were paid a nominal sum for their participation.

The sampling was purposive; thus the representativeness of the sample is unknown and the findings are best described as exploratory. Cooperation by agency personnel generally gives us access to gang members (see Bowker, Gross and Klein 1980; Fagan 1989), though these referrals pose the potential problem of targeting officially labeled gang youths. We tempered this problem through the comparative design of the research. Though the sample came from agencies working with at-risk youths, we did not attempt to generate a pool of "known" gang members. Instead we asked agency personnel to make referrals to any girls living in neighborhoods where they might have contact with gangs. Respondents then were identified as gang members through self-nomination, and were classified as gang members when they said they were.¹

We first administered the young women a survey in which gang-identified respondents were asked a series of questions about their gangs, including gang structure, activities, and delinquency. The in-depth interviews were semistructured with open-ended questions, and were audiotaped. They were organized around several groups of questions, and allowed for considerable probing. We discussed the organization and nature of the gang, the respondents' gang involvement and activities, and gender issues within the gang. We followed a basic guideline during each interview, although when additional topics arose we often departed from the interview guide to pursue them (see Miller 2001). The goal of the in-depth interviews was to gain a greater understanding of the nature and meanings of gang life from female members' viewpoint (see Glassner and Loughlin 1987).

Two limitations must be noted, however. First, our discussion is based only on interviews with young women; thus inferences about gender dynamics and young men's behavior are based only on young women's perspectives. In addition, to protect their confidentiality, we did not record the names of young women's gangs. As a result, we could not systematically compare girls' characterizations within the same gangs.

To extend our analyses, we used data from the St. Louis Homicide Project. Here we examine case records from homicides in the city from 1990 to 1996. St. Louis registers high rates of violent

¹ An extensive body of evidence addresses the robustness of self-nomination (Bjerregaard and Smith 1993; Esbensen and Huizinga 1993; Esbensen, Huizinga, and Weiher 1993; Thornberry et al. 1993; Winfree et al. 1992). Although the method is not foolproof, it is still one of the better means available. The use of multiple methods, as well as comparisons across interviews and with other available information, provided checks on the veracity of young women's accounts and their depth of knowledge. No serious contradictions arose. (For a more fully detailed discussion of sampling issues, see Miller 2001).

crime, and consistently ranks among the U.S. cities with the five highest homicide rates. The rate in St. Louis peaked at 70 per 100,000 in 1993, a time when the U.S. homicide rate approached 9 per 100,000. Although it declined by nearly 50 percent over the next five years, the St. Louis homicide rate was the highest in the nation in 1998.

Gang homicide remains a significant part of the homicide problem in St. Louis. As in many midwestern cities with emergent gang problems, the early and mid-1990s was the period of most intense gang conflict, with dramatic growth in both the number and the fraction of gang-related homicides from 1991 to the peak year, 1994. By 1994, gang homicides accounted for approximately one-quarter of the city's homicides. Evidence suggests that the patterns of gang homicide shifted in the mid-1990s: gang-motivated homicides decreased while gang member homicides continued to rise (Rosenfeld et al. 1999:503).

We use case files from the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department, but our classification of homicides as gang-related is independent of police classification schemes (see Rosenfeld et al. 1999). Although our analysis still depends on the accuracy and thoroughness of police records, we took steps to capture the broadest possible context of gang-related homicides involving women.² We employ classifications based on both gang member (e.g., at least one party involved is a known gang member) and gang motive. In this way we include homicides with a specific gang motivation (e.g., retaliation, turf protection), as well as homicides involving gang members (for instance, robbery homicides) but lacking specific gang purposes. This broad classification scheme helps us to counter the tendency of police departments, including the St. Louis Police Department, to classify gangs as primarily or exclusively a male phenomenon (Curry, personal correspondence, August 13, 1998; Curry, Ball, and Fox 1994). Therefore events that the police might not categorize as gang-related fall within our sample parameters.

One reason why gang homicides involving women have received so little attention is that there are so few. In fact, our sample of female-involved gang homicides is quite small. This point in itself is noteworthy, however, particularly in light of the increasing public debate about the "new violent female offender," as reflected particularly in discussions of young women in gangs (see Chesney-Lind 1993), and in view of our ability to triangulate these findings with interview data from the same city.

² Police data on homicide are extensive and exhaustive, and provide considerable detail.

Our discussion of homicides is based on two related sets of analyses. First, we use quantitative data to compare the characteristics of gang-related homicides involving women and men. We describe both the characteristics of the individuals involved (race, age, gender, victim-offender relationship) and attributes of the event (weapon use, number of suspects, location). The second set of analyses proceeds from an examination of the homicide narratives (see Decker 1993). The narratives provide more fully detailed descriptions of the process by which homicides unfold, and of the participants' roles. In this way we can examine in greater depth the specific circumstances of gang-related homicides involving women.

GANGS, GENDER, AND STREET OFFENDING

In view of what the literature suggests, we are not surprised that the gang girls interviewed in St. Louis reported considerable involvement in delinquency.³ Table 1 displays reports of the girls' prevalence and frequency of participation in various delinquent behaviors relevant to this study. As Table 1 shows, the majority of gang girls interviewed in St. Louis have engaged in an array of violent acts; for instance, 85 percent have hit someone with the idea of hurting them, and fully 74 percent have attacked someone with a weapon or with the intention of hurting them seriously. In addition, most of these young women have sold marijuana and crack cocaine. Moreover, except for robbery and other drug sales, a sizable minority of gang girls committed all of these offenses within the six months preceding their interviews.

The frequency of offending, however, reveals important variations in gang girls' patterns of offending in St. Louis. On the whole, these young women did not report extensive involvement in serious offenses, except for carrying a hidden weapon and selling marijuana and crack cocaine. Moreover, as noted earlier, research has found that some gang girls are quite delinquent, but others are involved only in sporadic or minor offending. This is clearly the case with these female gang members in St. Louis. Seven young women (26 percent) reported selling marijuana and/or crack more than once a week over the previous six months; combined, their sales were 96 percent of total reported drug sales during that period. The frequent drug sellers were Tonya, who primarily sold marijuana; Wanda, who primarily sold crack; and Vashelle, Toni, Yvette, Mia, and Debra, who routinely sold both drugs. In addition, Pam, Rhonda, and Cheri sold marijuana semiregularly (10 to 20 times

³ Data not presented here also show that prevalence and incident rates are much higher among these gang girls than among their nongang counterparts interviewed in St. Louis (see Miller 2001).

Table 1. Prevalence and Frequency of Self-Reported Delinquency (N = 27)

	Prevalence (Ever)	Prevalence (Last Six Months)	Frequency (Last Six Months)
Damaged/Destroyed Property	17 (63%)	8 (30%)	1.74
Threw Objects at People	20 (74%)	10 (37%)	1.48
Hit Someone With the Idea of Hurting Them	23 (85%)	18 (67%)	2.11
Carried Hidden Weapon	24 (89%)	15 (56%)	20.48
Attacked Someone With a Weapon or to Hurt Them Seriously	20 (74%)	11 (41%)	2.77
Participated in Gang Fight	23 (85%)	13 (48%)	1.33
Committed Robbery	8 (30%)	3 (11%)	.15
Sold Marijuana	17 (63%)	11 (41%)	32.48
Sold Crack Cocaine	17 (63%)	9 (33%)	31.96
Sold Other Drugs	6 (22%)	3 (11%)	.15

each in the last six months). Similarly, four young women (15 percent)—Debra, Yvette, Tonya, and Pam—accounted for the bulk (93 percent) of frequent weapons carrying. The first three of these were also among the regular drug sellers. Rhonda and Yvette also reported frequent physical confrontations in which they attacked people. Though their patterns of offending varied somewhat, these 10 young women (37 percent) constituted the regular serious offenders in the sample.⁴ On the other hand, 63 percent of the gang girls interviewed were not involved or were involved only sporadically in such offending.

Gang-Motivated Violence

These findings are clarified by an examination of the context of gang crime. Scholars who discuss gangs' facilitation on delinquency emphasize the strength of gang members' associations with peers who are also involved in delinquency, as well as gang norms and group processes that encourage youths to engage in these activities (Battin et al. 1998; Short and Strodbeck 1965; Thornberry et al. 1993). In fact, Klein and Crawford (1967) suggest that delinquency is more than an outcome of gang membership; instead it provides group cohesion for its members. Challenging and fighting with rival gangs is an important element of gang life. Youths often stake out the identity of their gang at the level of these antagonisms: the

⁴ We find less variation with regard to minor and moderate offending, in which young women also reported engaging more frequently (see Miller 2001). In addition, these data support a "facilitation" interpretation of girls' involvement in gang crime (see Thornberry 1998). Among the 10 young women who were involved regularly in serious offending, nearly all of their serious offending began after their gang involvement. The exceptions are Toni, who reported selling drugs and carrying a hidden weapon before joining her gang; Yvette, who committed a robbery and attacked someone; and Rhonda, who attacked someone before joining her gang.

presence of common enemies facilitates members' perceptions of themselves as a unified group (see Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Klein and Crawford 1967). In St. Louis in particular, strongly territorial gangs are based on long-standing neighborhood boundaries. Thus gang youths' group identity is intensified by claiming and protecting neighborhood turf; these activities often result in violence (Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Miller 2001).

In view of the ample evidence supporting these arguments, what accounts for young women's reports of limited involvement in serious violent confrontations, including gang fights? As noted above, one explanation may be reflected in the recent decline in gang-motivated homicides in St. Louis, reported by Rosenfeld and his colleagues (1999). If homicide trends represent gang conflicts in general, St. Louis witnessed shifts in the kinds of gang conflict occurring in the mid- to late 1990s. In fact, these scholars suggest that the continuing increase in gang *member* homicides may be linked to gang members' participation in drug markets (Rosenfeld et al. 1999). Young women's relatively high rates of self-reported drug sales add credence to these scholars' suggestion about possible shifts in the nature of gang activities. These rates in themselves, however, cannot explain young women's limited involvement in serious violence, particularly in light of the high risks generally associated with drug sales.

Young women's accounts of gang-related conflict help to explain this seeming contradiction. Although girls are involved in altercations with rival gangs, they rarely escalate to violence, and even more rarely to serious violence involving weapons. Opposition to rival gangs is a central theme in gang youths' cultural imagery and symbolism. Often confrontations with rivals are a consequence of these displays, particularly in conjunction with the defense of neighborhood boundaries. For instance, Crystal explained, "If a Blood come on our set and we Crips, as long as they come on our set saying, 'What's up Blood,' they. . . just gonna start a fight. 'Cause they diss [disrespect] us by coming on our set and saying 'What's up Blood.' There ain't nobody no Blood over there." Vashelle agreed: "A dude come over [to our neighborhood from a rival gang], he know what kind of 'hood it is to begin with. Any dude that come over there from a gang and know that's a Blood hood, you try to come over there Crippled out [wearing Crips colors or symbols], you know you gonna eventually have it some way."

The great majority of the girls' confrontations involved fists; occasionally they involved knives, but not guns. Most young women, however, said that when they encountered rivals, as long as they

weren't met with a direct challenge, they were willing to tolerate their presence rather than escalate into a fight. Pam explained:

We going to the show or skating, to the mall. We be seeing some of our enemies too when we do those things, clubs and stuff, we be seeing a lot of our enemies. [If] they don't say nothing to us, we don't say nothing to them. They say something to us, we say something to them. So that way everybody just go they own little way if they don't want nothing to happen.

Many young women echoed Pam's account. Although violence and confrontations with rivals were normative features of their gangs, on which gang girls placed value, young women typically did not choose to engage in these activities themselves. Instead they were often content to leave them to young men. The normative quality of these activities is reflected in the girls' discussions of status hierarchies in their groups, and in their descriptions of individuals they admired in their gangs. These included persons who "did dirt" for the gang by committing gang-motivated assaults and by confronting rivals. Status was gained in part from proving oneself in these ways. The young women's admiration of such gang members indicates their acceptance of these gang norms.

Nonetheless, most girls viewed males as the group members most likely to carry through these activities at their extreme. As Tonya exclaimed, "We ain't no supercommando girls!" Young women held males and females to different standards based on their perceptions of what "femaleness" or "maleness" brought to their interactions and behaviors. They used this difference as a basis for limiting their participation in serious gang violence, particularly gun violence. As Crystal noted, "Girls don't be up there shooting unless they really have to." Pam stated that girls don't use guns because "We ladies, we not dudes for real. . . . *we don't got to be rowdy*, all we do is fight" (our emphasis).

As Pam's comments suggest, gang girls did not avoid nor participate in certain crimes simply as a means of enacting femininity. They also used gender norms to modify their involvement in serious and dangerous gang violence. Moreover, they played on beliefs about gender in other circumstances, using their presence to divert suspicion from their gang's actions. Tonya described this function:

Like when we in a car, if a girl and a dude in a car, the police tend not to trip off of it. When they look to see if a car been stolen, police just don't trip off of it. But if they see three or four niggers in that car, the police stop you automatically, boom. . . . [Girls have] little ways that we got to get them out of stuff sometimes. We can get them out of stuff that dudes couldn't do.

Thus young women often drew on gender—and on gender stereotypes—both to negotiate and to limit their involvement in gang violence, and to facilitate the success of gang members' crimes.

Drug Sales

As stated earlier, just under two-thirds of the young women interviewed in St. Louis had sold crack and marijuana, and seven of these young women (26 percent) sold drugs regularly. Success in the drug trade also was described routinely as a quality that young women admired in gang members. Brittany, in describing a fellow member she looked up to, commented, "She's a smart gang member. She don't go out fighting and starting stuff, she just chill out and make her money." In fact, young women who reported selling drugs routinely emphasized that it was a key element of their gang activities. Tonya said, "Mostly dudes was. . .selling guns and jacking cars and stuff like that. But everybody was selling drugs." Older girls in particular emphasized the economic benefits of the gang. Latisha explained, "We don't just be standing outside, 'What's up Blood' and all that, throwing up little signs or whatever. Cars come by, they know what we claim or whatever, but we all making our money."

These comments were themes in many interviews with older girls; again, they offer support for the suggestions of Rosenfeld et al. (1999) about shifts in gang homicides in St. Louis during the mid- and late 1990s, away from gang-motivated events. Yet in light of the violence often associated with street-level crack dealing, it is notable that young women were often able to avoid participation in such violence.

Several factors appear relevant. Though young women viewed drug sales as a viable means of making money, most described their involvement as sporadic rather than an everyday activity; in this way they indicated some difference between their activities and those of young men. Shandra said, "The times when I sold, I only did it for a short while. I only did it to make a little money to do something big. I ain't never really made it a career." Similarly, Pam explained:

Some girls just sell some drugs and then they'll quit. They just sell it just to get them some money 'cause they need some. Whatever they need, they'll make they money and then probably won't sell drugs no more until they need something else. And then they'll go buy them some drugs and sell it, and that's it. The dudes, they keep on, keep on, keep on. They like to sell it and stash they money, cards and all that.

Moreover, young women typically described their suppliers as older members of the gang. Probably as a consequence of both these factors, young women were not viewed as serious competition for male drug sellers; thus they faced less risk of involvement in violent altercations in the drug marketplace.

Nonetheless, young women sometimes reported that potential predators saw female drug sellers as particularly easy marks for robbery. They described two methods of dealing with such problems. First, some young women sold with young men, and relied on these male peers to protect them. Mia said that the young men in her gang assisted in her drug sales by watching her back to "make sure don't nobody do nothing to take nothing from me when I'm on the streets." Similarly, Pam said that girls sometimes would "have somebody standing by, one of your boys or something." When young women were not involved in ongoing drug sales, young men appeared willing to assist them on those occasions when they sold.

Second, young women involved more routinely in drug sales sometimes employed more discreet methods of selling, which not only decreased their risk of violent altercations but also drew less police attention. Vashelle explained, "the police, they don't be on the girls for real, . . . but if they see a whole crowd of niggers sitting out, they gonna get down on them. But I'm saying if there are niggers out there and I'm with them too, they gonna shake me too. If I'm walking up the street by myself they ain't gonna trip off me 'cause I'm a gal." She said she avoided such scrutiny by not "sit[ting] out with a crowd. I sit out by myself . . . on the back porch." Vashelle sold drugs so as to avoid calling attention to herself, and also used beliefs about gender to conceal her activities and to avoid being caught. This approach probably reduces exposure to violence as well (also see Jacobs and Miller 1998).

GANG-RELATED VICTIMIZATION RISK

As documented above, gang girls interviewed in St. Louis moderated their involvement in serious gang violence. When involved in drug sales, they used methods to avoid exposure to violence related to drug markets. As a corollary question, how did gender shape their exposure to gang-related victimization risk?⁵ As noted earlier, strong evidence suggests that "adolescent involvement in delinquent lifestyles strongly increases the risk of both personal

⁵ We are concerned specifically about risks associated with gang-motivated violence linked to intergang conflicts, and about violence associated more generally with participation in delinquency. We do not address here gender-specific risks such as sexual abuse and exploitation, though there is evidence that this is a serious concern (see Fleisher 1998; Miller 2001).

and property victimization" (Lauritsen et al. 1991:265). In fact, Lauritsen and her colleagues found that gender, as a predictor of victimization risk, becomes less significant with controls for participation in delinquent lifestyles. That is, much of young men's greater victimization risk can be explained by their greater involvement in offending behaviors.

To be sure, young women in gangs witnessed a great deal of violence, and some were victims of serious violence themselves. Table 2 shows gang girls' reports of their exposure to a variety of violent acts, and their experiences of victimization. A sizable majority had witnessed serious violence, including shootings and homicides. In addition, nearly half had been the victims of serious violent assaults; 41 percent had been stabbed. Only one girl had been shot; this was an accidental shooting that occurred when she was a child. As evidence of the violence endemic in these young women's neighborhoods (the site of most of the violence they reported), about half of the girls who reported having seen an attack, guns shot, shootings, and drive-bys had first witnessed these events before their gang involvement.

Table 2. Prevalence of Exposure to Violence and Victimization (*N* = 27)

Exposure to Violence	
Seen Attack	24 (89%)
Seen Sexual Assault	2 (7%)
Seen Stabbing	16 (59%)
Seen Guns Shot	26 (96%)
Seen Someone Shot	24 (89%)
Seen Drive-By Shooting	16 (59%)
Seen Someone Killed	20 (74%)
Victimization	
Attacked	13 (48%)
Sexually Assaulted	12 (44%)
Threatened with a Weapon	16 (59%)
Stabbed	11 (41%)
Shot	1 (4%)

On the other hand, nearly all of the girls who had been threatened with a weapon or stabbed reported that this first occurred after they became involved in a gang, and 75 percent had first witnessed a homicide after joining their gangs. Not surprisingly, of the 11 girls who reported having been stabbed, eight were among the 10 girls most involved in serious offending (see above); Rhonda and Debra had been stabbed in multiple incidents. Half of

the girls threatened with a weapon were among these ten, including Rhonda and Toni; both reported having been threatened multiple times.⁶ These young women were living in volatile neighborhoods, as witnessed by the amount of violence they witnessed as children. Nonetheless, gang involvement itself appeared to increase their exposure to violence, specifically witnessing lethal violence and being victims of weapons threats and knife assaults. This was further exacerbated for girls involved in offending.

Because intergang rivalries and delinquency are important elements of gang activities, some risk of victimization is an expected part of gang life. Young women recognized that they might be the targets of rival gang members and were expected to "be down" for their gang at those times, even when physical harm was involved. On the other hand, many young women not only spoke of the empowerment they gained from gang involvement, but also described how the gang could offer protection, backup, and retaliation for its members, both in their day-to-day lives and when they were involved in gang-related activities or drug sales. As Tonya explained, "Shoot, you ever need to fool with anybody, you can call your homies up and they'll just be there." Moreover, as stated earlier, young women could use gender within gangs to shield and control their exposure to gang violence, at least to a certain extent. Because status hierarchies in most of their gangs were male-dominated, the young women actually seemed to enjoy greater flexibility in their gang activities than the young men (also see Miller 2001; Miller and Brunson 2000). Fewer expectations were placed on them with regard to involvement in criminal activities such as gun use, drug sales, and other serious crimes; this situation apparently limited their exposure to risk of gang-related victimization.

In addition, girls reported that young men's perceptions of females as peripheral members of gangs typically functioned to keep girls from being targets of serious physical violence at the hands of rival young men, who were concerned mainly with rival gang males.⁷ As Sheila remarked, "The dudes think they run it all."

⁶ The larger comparative study from which these data are drawn contained a sufficient number of cases to permit exploratory bivariate correlations between frequency of victimization, serious offending, and crack sales. Frequent involvement in serious delinquency was correlated significantly with being threatened with a weapon and stabbed, and with witnessing guns shot, stabbings, shootings, drive-bys, and homicides. Frequent involvement in crack sales was correlated with having been stabbed, having seen guns fired, and having witnessed drive-by shootings. Those findings suggest that girls' patterns of offending influence their exposure to violence, such that girls involved in serious offending are more likely to have been exposed to a wider variety of violent acts than girls who limit their routine offending to crack sales (Miller 2001).

⁷ Again, we focus on gang-related physical violence. We do not address young women's risk of sexual violence here, despite some evidence that gang conflict occasionally manifests itself in this way (see Miller 2001; Miller and Brunson 2000).

Consequently, in describing male-on-female gang confrontations, Pam explained, "Some dudes, they be tripping with you 'cause they know you from the other side and they be trying to slap you or something. . . . You don't want to say nothing to no dudes 'cause you know you can't beat them or nothing. So you be like, 'yeah, wait 'til my boys come, they gonna get you.'" Shawanda remarked, "A nigger and another nigger, it ain't gonna be no talk thing, you know what I'm saying, it's just some static [a confrontation] or something. But a nigger and a girl, no."

Moreover, girls' routine confrontations with rivals were typically female-on-female rather than female-on-male. Before young women were not likely to resort to serious violence (particularly gun violence), their risk of serious victimization was reduced even further. As Vashelle explained, "Most girls, they ain't gonna do nothing for real but try to stab you, cut you, or something like that. As far as coming shooting and stuff like a dude would do, no." Being stabbed, although serious, is much less likely to be lethal than being shot.

The young women agreed despite their declarations of the protections offered by the gang or their attempts to avoid risky behaviors, that belonging to a gang endangered their well-being. Because of the gendered nature of gang activities, girls generally did not believe that they faced the same threats as young men. Even so, they recognized that being with other gang members increased their chances of being present when violence broke out. For instance, Crystal said that when "you got one gang member that got a problem with another person, they'll shoot at the whole set or whatever. . . . A whole bunch of them will start shooting at people that got nothing to do with it." As her comment suggests, young women did not fear being the specific target of rival gang members who were shooting. Instead they were concerned about being shot while in a group where someone opened fire. Because young women believed that gunfire was the purview of male-on-male violence, they didn't feel that belonging to the gang was life-threatening as it was for young men, who were more likely to be targets of a rival gang. As a consequence, when young women talked about gang homicides and shootings, they spoke mostly about the worry and sorrow of seeing young men they cared about killed in gang violence.

GENDER AND GANG HOMICIDE

The homicide reports offer further support for these young women's accounts. In Table 3 we compare the characteristics of gang-related homicides involving male and female victims. Of the 229

gang homicides that occurred in St. Louis between 1990 and 1996, 19 (8 percent) involved female victims.⁸ Moreover, despite speculation that women's participation in street violence is increasing, and in keeping with young women's reports in interviews, only *one* of the gang homicides (less than 1 percent) committed during this period involved a female perpetrator. Notably, this woman did not act alone, and was not herself a gang member. The homicide was classified as gang-related because the young man she shot was a gang member.⁹ In the remaining analysis we focus on victims of gang homicide: 210 males and 19 females. The relatively small number of female homicides makes us cautious about generalizing the results of our analysis, but it is consistent with the reports by female gang members interviewed in St. Louis.

In many ways, gang homicides involving female victims were similar to those involving male victims in regard to participant and event characteristics. Because of the primarily African-American composition of St. Louis gangs, and their location in extremely racially segregated communities, it is not surprising that the great majority of gang homicide victims were African-American. Victims of both sexes also were young on average and were killed primarily by gunfire at the hands of young black men. Each of these findings is consistent with the broader literature (see Maxson and Klein 1990, 1996). Women were slightly more likely to be killed indoors rather than out (21 percent versus 14 percent for males), though this is probably an artifact of the low base rate of female victims.

Nearly all victims of gang homicide, both male and female, were killed by strangers or acquaintances rather than by their primary relations. Men, however, were much more likely to be killed by acquaintances, while women were more likely to be killed by strangers. Moreover, for the majority of male gang homicide victims (57 percent) only one suspect was identified, but the reverse was true for female victims: 74 percent involved the identification of multiple suspects.¹⁰ As we turn to the narrative analysis of police incident reports, these differences become more meaningful as

⁸ In part of the analysis not discussed here, we also compared gang homicides with nongang homicides. We found that women accounted for more than twice as great a proportion of nongang homicide victims (17 percent, or 210 of 1,242 cases) as of gang homicide victims.

⁹ The suspect was a 31-year-old woman who shot but did not deliver the fatal blow to a 16-year-old gang member in her neighborhood. According to the homicide report, the victim sold drugs in the neighborhood and had repeatedly harassed the suspect's two children over the previous two weeks, pressuring her eight-year-old son to sell drugs and threatening to rape her teenage daughter. Investigators classified the motive as "retaliation for harassment."

¹⁰ Nonetheless, female gang homicides are more similar to male gang homicides than to nongang homicides involving female victims. Comparing the two types of female homicides, we found dramatic differences in victim, offender, and event

Table 3. Gang Homicide Victim and Incident Characteristics (*N* = 229)¹

	Male Victim (<i>N</i> = 210)	Female Victim (<i>N</i> = 19)
Age		
Mean	21.9	22.9
<i>S</i>	(8.6)	(8.4)
Range	7-66	12-42
Race		
Black	202 (96.2%)	17 (89.5%)
White	8 (3.8%)	2 (10.5%)
Victim/Offender Relationship		
Strangers	49 (28.7%)	6 (42.8%)
Acquaintances	93 (54.4%)	4 (30.7%)
Family/friends	11 (6.4%)	1 (7.6%)
Unknown	18 (10.5%)	2 (15.4%)
Weapon		
Gun	205 (97.6%)	19 (100%)
Non-gun	4 (2%)	—
Location		
Inside	30 (14.3%)	4 (21.1%)
Outside	135 (64.3%)	13 (68.4)
Auto	36 (17.1%)	2 (10.5%)
Other	9 (4.3%)	—
Suspects		
One	111 (57.2%)	5 (26.3%)
Two or more	85 (43.8%)	14 (73.6%)
Gender		
Male	193 (99.5%)	19 (100%)
Female	1 (.05%)	—
Mean Age (First Named Suspect)	19.9 (<i>S</i> = 5.7)	19.5 (<i>S</i> = 3.7)

¹Numbers in the table vary according to information available in the original homicide reports.

features that seem to distinguish female gang homicides from their male counterparts.

characteristics. In comparison with female gang homicides, women killed in nongang events were older on average (with a mean age of 34), were less likely to be African-American (74 percent), and were killed by older suspects who were also less likely to be African-American and who were more likely to have committed the homicide alone (81 percent). Women killed in nongang homicides were significantly more likely to be killed by someone in a primary relationship (35 percent versus none of the female gang homicides), and much less likely to be killed by strangers (15 percent versus 46 percent). In addition, they were significantly less likely to be killed by a firearm (54 percent versus all of the female gang homicides) and were much more likely to be killed in a dwelling (59 percent versus 21 percent) rather than on the streets. These differences, coupled with the similarities in gang homicides involving male and female victims, suggest that gang homicides involving women follow the distinctive pattern of gang homicides in general.

The most striking finding from police narratives is that the great majority of women killed in gang homicides were *not* the intended targets. Fourteen of the 19 homicides (74 percent) were drive-by or walk-by shootings in which the suspect or suspects opened fire into a group of people. In 13 of these cases, the victim was not the intended target in the group; the fourteenth case was ambiguous, though the young woman was clearly not the only target.¹¹ In fact, in 10 of these 14 cases at least one additional individual was injured, including one homicide victim. In several cases, the intended target was identified among the injured; in others, no specific target was identified or the intended target escaped injury. The following examples were typical:

Case 1: The victim was a 14-year-old African-American girl, who was on the front porch of a multifamily residence when she was shot in the chest. She was with five other youths age 15 to 19 when the shooting occurred: her boyfriend, two cousins, and two friends. At this time five suspects drove up, got out of the car, fired on the group, and then fled. According to the police report, the shooting was part of an ongoing feud between two rival gangs, and the groups had engaged in numerous shootings throughout the previous few days. Other shootings had taken place over the previous few months. The victim was not the intended target.

Case 2: The victim was a 30-year-old African-American female, shot in the front yard of the multifamily residence where she lived. Her son reportedly was a gang member. At the time of the shooting, the victim was standing in the yard talking to two acquaintances: a 29-year-old male who was shot in the chest and buttocks, and a 17-year-old male who was uninjured. Four suspects fired approximately 10 shots. The report notes that the victim was not the intended target; it was unclear whether the 17-year-old witness was the target, the victim's son, or someone else. The victim's son and his friends retaliated several times over the next day, injuring one of the suspects.

Case 3: The victim was an 18-year-old African-American female, shot in the backyard of a single-family residence where she was attending a party. The victim's cousin was a 25-year-old gang member and the apparent target. The police report states that the victim's shooting was a "mistake." According to the report, "The victim's cousin and his gang had been feuding with the suspect's gang for a year.

¹¹ Of the additional five female gang homicides, one was an accidental shooting; the remaining four were committed during robberies. One was a convenience store robbery in which the victim was the clerk; a second was a highly publicized case in which two gang members carjacked, abducted, shot, and raped two college students, one of whom died; the final two were home invasions in which males present were killed as well.

There had been shootings. The victim's cousin had recently been released from jail after shooting someone in the suspect's gang. At the time in question there had been a party. The victim had been standing near her cousin when the suspect opened fire."

In contrast to these patterns reported for female gang homicides, male gang homicide victims were the intended target in 68 percent of the incidents. The circumstances varied: they included confrontations (gang-motivated and otherwise) that escalated into gun violence, retaliatory shootings targeting the individual killed, and (less often) robberies and drug disputes. An additional 23 percent of the male gang homicides occurred when the suspect or suspects fired into a group. In these cases, the victim was not singled out as a specific target but was one of a group of targets, typically identified by the suspects as rival gang members. Finally, 9 percent of the male gang homicides resulted in the killing of an individual who was not the intended target. All told, then, male victims were the intended targets in over two-thirds of the gang homicides in which they were victims. In contrast, at most, women were the intended targets in five gang homicides (26 percent), and four of these occurred during robberies. In the modal and by far predominant pattern for female gang homicides, the victim was killed when suspects opened fire into a group.

Two features in Table 3 distinguish female gang homicides from their male counterparts. Women are more likely to be killed by strangers, men by acquaintances; and gang homicides involving female victims are more likely to involve multiple suspects. Evidence from homicide narratives offers an explanation for these differences. Women are likely to be killed in gang homicide events because they are in the wrong place at the wrong time, and with the wrong people, rather than because they are the specific targets of gang retaliation or other violent confrontations. Women probably are more likely to be killed by multiple strangers because of a large proportion of female homicide victims who were not the intended targets when rival gang members opened fire into groups. The converse—that males are more likely to be killed by single perpetrators who are known to them—appears to result from the greater likelihood that they are the intended targets of rival gang violence.

DISCUSSION

We opened this paper by asking how gendered situational dynamics shape gang violence, including violent offending and violent victimization. By combining interviews with young women in St.

Louis gangs with homicide reports from the same city, we could examine these questions in depth. Much of the previous work on female gang violence either focused on young men's perspectives, highlighting their structural exclusion of young women, or explained young women's limited participation in violence in terms of gender differences in normative beliefs. Although both approaches contain some truth, neither can account fully for the complex role of gender in shaping the foreground of gang violence.

In our approach we highlight the significance of group processes in gangs, observing how gender shapes participation in risky activities as well as perceptions and experiences of threat. Moreover, by drawing on interviews with female gang members, we can address their participation in negotiating their roles and activities within these groups. Our research shows that young women in gangs in fact involve themselves in some gang-related violence as well as activities such as drug sales, which are linked to violence on the streets. Fully 74 percent of our sample had attacked someone with a weapon or with the intention of injuring them seriously, and 63 percent reported having sold crack cocaine. The majority of the young women, however, engaged regularly in neither violence nor drug sales; just over one-third of the sample committed by far most of the regular serious offenses.

Regardless of whether the young women were regular offenders, they highlighted the significance of gender in shaping and limiting their involvement in serious violence. In keeping with evidence of gender stratification in offender networks and the structural exclusion of females from gang crime, the young women observed that young men "think they run it all." In addition, they themselves held young women and young men to different standards of conduct based on their beliefs about gender. Most important, the young women used gender as a resource, both to accomplish gang crime and drug sales, and to temper their involvement in gang violence. Rather than simply using gang activities to enact normative femininity (Messerschmidt 1995), they used normative femininity to negotiate their activities in gangs. This reciprocity between gender and gang practices provides important insights into the situational dynamics that shape gang violence for young women.

Because young women choose not to be "supercommando girls" and because young men believe they "run it all," young women's risks of serious physical victimization within gangs—including shootings—are considerably less than young men's risks (also see Hagedorn 1998). According to the young women we interviewed, male gang members do not perceive females as viable targets of

gang retaliation; thus the threat of serious physical danger posed by rival gangs is much greater for young men. This is not to suggest that young women in gangs are *not* exposed to considerable amounts of violence, as evidenced in Table 2. Gender inequality in youth gangs, however, appears to protect young women in regard to the victimization risk associated with much gang violence.

Our investigation of homicides further corroborates the girls' accounts. Our evidence suggests that women not only are less likely to be homicide victims, but also, when these homicides occur, are very rarely the intended targets of lethal gang violence. Instead, young women's greatest risk of gang homicide is due to being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Thus the associational features of membership, more than the specific activities involved, place gang girls in harm's way. In contrast, young men are most often the intended targets of gang homicide.

Women's lower levels of involvement in gang homicide, as both victims and offenders, may reflect their lower rates of participation in gang life. Apparently, however, it is the *nature* of young women's gang involvement that is at issue. At the situational level, gendered group processes and stratification within gangs are key factors that help explain both violent offending and victimization risk in gangs.

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