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Center for Law & Human Behavior
The University of Texas at El Paso
500 West University Avenue
Prospect Hall, Room 226
El Paso, Texas 79968
Tel: (915) 747-5920
Email: clhb@utep.edu
Website: <http://clhb.utep.edu>
Follow us on Twitter @1CLHB

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Abstract

Is there an overlap between gang membership and terrorist groups? At first glance, these two groups seem to have much in common including high levels of crime, isolation from mainstream values, imprisonment, and strong group cohesion. This paper examines the potential overlap between such groups by focusing on the similarities and differences across gangs and extremist groups. This essay examines such issues as organizational structure, group process, social media, and imprisonment in the process of radicalization. There are points of convergence and differences between the groups. This review finds little evidence to support the contention that American street gangs are becoming increasingly radicalized or that their members are being actively recruited by terrorist groups. In large part, this conclusion draws support due to the organizational differences between gangs and terror groups.

Introduction

There is widespread concern over the sources of radicalization as a key element for recruitment into terror groups (Borum, 2011; Ashour, 2007). The distinction between radicalized beliefs and actions taken based on those beliefs is an important one (Atran, 2010). However, there is an important difference between holding radicalized beliefs and acting on such beliefs. The concern over radicalization focuses on a variety of groups including Islamic terrorist groups, right-wing extremism, religious cults, and gangs.

Schmid and Price (2011) observed that: "Surprisingly few studies compare

radicalization to terrorism to the joining of organized crime groups or religious sects." Such comparative work may pay important dividends in understanding the convergences and divergences between such groups. The conference jointly sponsored by *Google Ideas*, The Tribeca Film Festival, and the Council of Foreign Relations is an exception to this pattern. In 2011, SAVE (The Summit Against Violent Extremism) focused specifically on the role of social media in radicalizing and recruiting individuals as members of extremist groups, as well as the related role social media played in separating such individuals from these groups (Borum, 2011). Radicalization may be facilitated through technology, and web-based recruitment poses a considerable problem for the spread of radicalized beliefs that can be mobilized for terror activity (Corb, 2011).

Some have hypothesized that there is an overlap between gangs and extremist groups. Such an overlap generally takes one of two forms. The first is that there are formal linkages between gangs and extremist groups, and that such linkages involve the active recruitment of gang members and building formal alliances between terrorist groups and gangs (Bunker, 1996; Curry, 2011; Decker and Pyrooz, 2011; Sullivan, 2001). An alternative view sees similarities between the characteristics of individual gang members and political extremists. This approach focusses on individual level characteristics (demographics, behavior, and education) and structures and processes (e.g., collective action, organization, symbolic goals).

Despite this attention, there has been little solid evidence about whether such a relationship exists. Pyrooz, LaFree, Decker, and Anders (2016) argue that if it exists, such a relationship would follow one of three patterns: independence, interchangeability, and fundamental cause. In the independence model the two groups – gangs and terrorist groups – are independent of each other. That is to say, there is no relationship between terrorist groups and gangs from this perspective. The second model, interchangeability, finds that members of each group move between the two groups as a consequence of explicit linkages. The fundamental cause model finds that members of each group share many background characteristics (military service, poverty, etc.) in common, but are not formally linked.

Radicalization, Levels of Explanation, and Gang Research

Radicalization is defined by Borum (2011) as "the process of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs." Action pathways or scripts are critical to understanding how extremist ideologies and beliefs are translated into actions. Radicalization processes, extremist ideologies, and actions are multilayered. This has been a topic of interest to policy and research that has addressed gangs for nearly a century (Decker and Pyrooz, 2015). Gangs and gang violence are found throughout the world, much like radical and extremist groups (Decker and Pyrooz, 2010). The evidence supports the contention that while there is considerable support for the fundamental cause, there is little to no support for the interchangeability hypothesis.

This article emphasizes the organizational characteristics of gangs because understanding how individuals organize themselves is a key issue in the study of radicalization. Organizational structure affects the three key processes in the criminal activities of such groups: recruitment and joining, group process, and desistance. A key point in this article is that while there is some degree of convergence among groups that commit crime, there are important differences, particularly in the degree of radicalization. We argue that radicalization is important to understand in the context of its ability to encourage the behavior of members and enhance group activity.

Organizational Structure of Gangs

It is critical to understand the organizational structure of a gang for the purpose of comparing gangs with other criminal groups. The group allows us to better understand what motivates individuals to do things in a group that they would not do as individuals: better known as group process. Group process is a powerful force in motivating individuals to join terrorist groups and engage in terrorist acts. Becoming radicalized plays a key role in such motivation.

There is considerable variation in the organizational structure of gangs. Gangs can be described as highly organized groups or as ineffective social mechanisms that lack key features of organizational structure. The former are *instrumental-rational* groups that are well organized and the latter are *informal-diffuse* or disorganized. Others have characterized such groups as well-organized and

freelance (Hagedorn, 1994), and found that gang members are versatile in that they belong to many groups and participate in a variety of different crimes (Morselli, 2009). Some of their crimes stem from their involvement with a gang but not all are.

Instrumental-Rational Perspective

Instrumental-rational gangs have a strong vertical structure that enforces discipline. Gangs with such an organizational structure include age-graded levels of membership, well defined leadership roles, regular meetings, written rules and codes of conduct, and expansion into legitimate business operations (Decker, Bynum, and Weisel, 1998). Such gangs exist in several large cities such as Detroit, Chicago, and some California prison gangs (Mieczkowski, 1986). Evidence in support of this perspective is sparse and there is no evidence to suggest that this organizational structure is more likely to lead to ties with terrorist groups.

Informal-Diffuse Perspective

Gangs that have an informal-diffuse organizational structure are characterized by strong individualists. Leaders change roles frequently and membership is generally short-lived, drug distribution is done for individual, not collective goals. There is a lot of free lancing and gang membership is transitory (Krohn and Thornberry, 2008). Since most gangs lack effective mechanisms for effectively controlling group behavior these gangs have not evolved into more formal organizations that could foster terrorism or be targets for increased radicalization.

Gang Belief System and Codes

Indeed, most gang members are characterized by the lack of a political or religious orientation. This is most pronounced among the modal age categories of street gang members – teenagers - as well as older gang members, many of whom have been to prison. More organized gangs produce more crime and victimization. Membership in more organized gangs is associated with higher levels of serious crime and delinquency (Decker, Pyrooz, Moule, and Sweeten, 2014; Esbensen, Winfree, He, and Taylor, 2008; Decker, Katz, and Webb, 2008). Support for this hypothesis has been found for offenses such as drug sales, robberies, and gun carrying (Sheley, Brody, Zhang, and Wright, 1995; Watkins, Huebner, and Decker, 2008). Decker et al. (2008) found that members of more organized gangs were more likely to experience violent victimizations, and that those members of more organized gangs engaged in higher levels of violent offending and drug selling. In a cross-national analysis, based on youth gang members from twelve U.S. cities and several cities in Trinidad and Tobago, Pyrooz et al. (2016) found a modest relationship between gang organization, offending, and victimization. Though these gangs were not well-organized, even a modest level of organization produced higher levels of crime and victimization (Klein and Maxson, 2008). Because higher levels of organization among gangs produce higher levels of criminal involvement, it is useful to compare gangs with other criminal groups.

Gangs and Other Criminal Groups

Five key points serve to distinguish gangs from other criminal associations:

1. *Goals* with symbolic ends, as opposed to economic, political, or religious ends are more important to street gangs;
2. *Organizational structure* that is looser, reflecting the age structure of gangs;
3. *Short-lived cooperation*, in combination with diminished levels of leadership and structure in contrast to groups that require more organization in the pursuit of goals;
4. *Membership patterns* that are transitory, with members staying in the group on average less than two years and being weakly tied to the group; and
5. *Turf, territory, or place* that holds identifiable and defendable significance to gangs, going well beyond residential or community purposes.

In one of the few pieces to consider the topic, Curry (2010) examined the relationships between gangs and terrorist groups. While he found a number of similarities, the differences were substantial. The members of both groups are primarily male, violence is common in both groups, solidarity and elements of collective behavior operate in both groups, and the violence used by both groups often represents a form of "self-help," or attempts to redress wrongs. The differences included a profit motive for gangs that is largely absent for terrorist

groups, cross-national connections maintained by terror groups, the diversity in different types of crime that typifies gang crime, and an ideological belief among members of terror groups that is not present among gang members. Most of the similarities between the groups reflect the fact that terrorist groups are less structured than is publicly believed (Sageman, 2008; Horgan, 2008).

The Role of Prisons among Gangs and Terrorists

The impact of prison on gangs and gang members has been well documented (Fong, Vogel, and Buentella, 1995; Fleisher and Decker, 2001; Pyrooz, LaFree, and Decker, 2016). Large numbers of gang members end up in prison owing to their high levels of criminality (Curry, Decker, and Pyrooz, 2014). Prison is a particularly salient place to look for signs of radicalization among gang members. Recent work by Jasko, LaFree, and Kruglanski (2016) shows that the loss of "personal significance" may be associated with increased radicalization. This is particularly true with other individuals who have been radicalized are present. Where better than prison to find such conditions? Other work (Decker, 1996; McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008) note the role of threat in building group cohesion and identity which creates conditions where radicalization is possible. While in prison street gang members affiliate with prison gangs largely along racial and ethnic lines. Prison is a place where the code of the street, the inmate code, and gang belief systems intersect (Mitchell, Fahmy, Pyrooz, and Decker, 2016). There has been speculation that because of their insular nature the criminal backgrounds of inmates

and opposition to the government prisons may be hotbeds for recruiting individuals to extremist and terrorist groups. Such a position largely finds support among politicians and the media. For example, NPR (2015) argued that prisons in France were “incubators for Islamic extremism.” Peter King, Chairman of the US Senate Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology, and Homeland Security, believes that prisons have become “an assembly line of radicalization” (Useem, 2012). Despite such claims the evidence for radicalization within prison, at least to Islamic causes such as ISIS, Al Qaeda, and Hezbollah is quite thin. Useem’s review of terrorist attacks in the United States refutes the contention of King and the NPR report and calls the contention that prisons are a breeding ground for Islamic terrorism a “myth”. In a more systematic assessment of this contention, Jones (2014) concludes that while some radicalization may occur it is not a “given outcome”. While acknowledging the growth in Islamic conversions in prisons in the U.S. and the United Kingdom, Jones concludes that many such conversions have produced disengagement from crime rather than recruitment to terrorism.

The Emerging Role of Technology in Criminal Groups

Many groups involved in crime have access to information and technology that allows them to operate independently of larger organizational structures and avoid detection by law enforcement. It is clear that technology and social media creates opportunities for offending and recruiting in ways not available before (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1997). The “leaderless nexus” described by Dishion (2005) is a

consequence of the decentralization that characterizes activities in the information age.

Although gangs use the Internet to communicate, we have yet to see the emergence of well-coordinated criminal efforts online by gangs. Much of gang member communication on the web is symbolic, and involves the use of videos that promote toughness. While such technological mediums are available to extremist groups, for gangs, however the message typically does not involve recruitment or advancing a political agenda.

Conclusion

This review underscores several key points about the relationship between gangs and terrorist groups. First, it is important not to be guided by media or popular images in identifying new trends in gangs. The current status of information supports the view that there is considerable independence between the two groups, with some evidence of overlap in fundamental causes of membership in each group. We urge caution in conflating gangs with other types of extremist groups.

Second, group organizational structure is important. Highly structured groups can bring efficiencies to many tasks. Many groups involved in crime have a less hierarchical organizational structure. This is particularly true of street gangs.

Third, groups do not have to be radicalized to be dangerous. It is evidence that gangs lack many of the characteristics of radicalization that characterize many terror or right-wing hate groups. However, that

does not make them less violent or less involved in crime. Indeed, among crime groups, gangs may be more involved in crime on a per capita basis than any of the other groups. It is important to pay close attention to gang members who go to prison, where they come into contact with radicalized individuals and groups, and are subject to recruitment and influence.

Fourth, the Internet is of growing importance to the function of gangs. However, at this time social media does not play as large a role in gang recruitment and socialization as it does with radicalization and terrorist groups. Internet-based forms of communication play a key role in the transmission of gang symbols and fanning the flames of gang rivalries.

At this time it is not clear whether technology is facilitating new kinds of criminal activity or supporting traditional forms of criminal activity among gangs. We conclude by noting that radicalization is an extremely fluid state, one in which change is the norm. Developing fixed images of groups, their activities, structures, and processes will likely lead to errors in assessing their danger. We encourage both practitioners and researchers to work together to better understand the overlap between gangs and terrorist groups, where such exist.



About the author

Dr. Scott H. Decker is a Foundation Professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Arizona State.

For further information related to this work please contact Dr. Decker at (602) 496-2333 or at Scott.Decker@asu.edu

Follow Dr. Decker on Twitter @DeckerCrime

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