

Gangs, Violence Against Women and Medicine

A Comparison of Street Gangs and Fraternities in the United States of America: Demographics, Conduct, and Criminal Justice Perception and Responses

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ABSTRACT: Street gangs and university fraternities are both prevalent social institutions in the United States of America. Despite differences in classification and treatment, they share many of the same characteristics, particularly initiation rituals, the pervasiveness of drugs and alcohol, the emphasis placed on brotherhood and male bonding, and the ways in which misogynistic attitudes and violence are used to reinforce masculinity and dominance. Despite these similarities, offences ranging from misbehaviour to criminal activity by fraternity members are protected under the guise of "academic brotherhood", and thus go largely unpunished. On the contrary, gang members, who often come from lower-class backgrounds and are over-represented in Black and Hispanic populations, are not afforded these same benefits. I will be further exploring these double standards by examining the experiences of Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs) and how they are likened to 'educated gangs'. In this paper, I will be exploring the similarities between street gangs and fraternities in the United States in terms of demographics, conduct, and the types and prevalence of criminal offending. I will also be discussing the differences in classification and response of these two institutions by both the general public and the criminal justice system. While I am not advocating for the expansion of federal gang definitions to include fraternities, there needs to be a serious conversation regarding the types of violence that we take seriously, and the ways in which race and class factor into these decisions.

Keywords: gang, fraternity, sexual violence, alcohol, initiation, masculinity, Black Greek Letter Organizations

In 2011, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) published the National Gang Threat Assessment, which examined trends in gang membership and activity in the United States of America (USA) (National Gang Intelligence Center). The report found that there are approximately 1.4 million active gang members in over 33,000 street, prison, or Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs (OMG). Despite the prevalence of gang activity, there is currently no standardized definition of a gang in the United States. That being said, many proposed definitions employ similar features,

such as the use of a common name or hand sign, that groups are recognized as a gang by themselves and members of their community, and that they engage in criminal activity for the benefit of the gang (National Institute of Justice, 2011). Street gangs are typically less organized than prison gangs or OMGs and are more likely to include youth and young adults; therefore, this paper will be focusing on street gangs as they share the largest commonalities with fraternities in terms of hierarchy and demographics. For the purposes of this paper I will be examining research and statistics

from the United States of America, as they have the largest body of literature to draw from in this area.

Despite increased scrutiny in recent years as a result of hazing practices and a culture of binge-drinking, fraternities (and to a lesser extent, sororities) are still seen as beneficial social institutions that assist students in building leadership, interpersonal, and networking skills (Glass, 2012). It is estimated that nearly three percent of the country's population, roughly nine million people, are involved in Greek life (Glass, 2012; Chang, 2014).

Research shows that gangs and fraternities, despite differences in classification and treatment, share many of the same characteristics, especially pertaining to initiation rituals, the pervasiveness of drugs and alcohol, the emphasis placed on brotherhood and male bonding, and the ways in which misogynistic attitudes and violence are used to reinforce masculinity and dominance (Bourgois, 1996; Totten, 2003; Franklin, 2004; Bleeker & Murnen, 2005; Hunt et al., 2005; Flood, 2008; Swahn et al, 2010; Descormiers & Corrado, 2016). Despite these similarities, offences ranging from misbehaviour to criminal activity by fraternity members seem to be protected under the guise of "academic brotherhood", and thus go largely unpunished (Hughey, 2008). On the contrary, gang members, who often come from lower-class backgrounds and are over-Black represented in and Hispanic populations, are not afforded these same benefits (Schaefer, 2004). There are clear elements of racism and classism in this differentiation; as Kendi writes, "this double standard [of societal perceptions and reactions to gangs and fraternities] is both racist and elitist. After all, the stereotypical gang boy is poor and non-white. The stereotypical frat man is elite and white" (2018). I will be further exploring these double standards by examining the experiences of Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs), and the ways in which they are occasionally likened to little more than 'educated gangs' (Hughey, 2008).

In this paper, I will be exploring the similarities between street gangs and fraternities in the United States in terms of demographics, conduct, and the types and prevalence of criminal offending. I will also be discussing the differences in classification and response of these two institutions by both the general public and the criminal justice system. My paper will be organized in the following sections: the definition(s) of street gangs, and how these definitions differ from that of fraternities; the similarities between fraternity and gang members in the areas of 1) initiation and hazing practices, 2) alcohol and drug use, and 3) the use of violence to assert masculinity and status; and the way that differences in classification and response often reflect the racism and classism inherent in many of the United States of America's gang policies and practices. While I am not advocating for the expansion of federal gang definitions to include fraternities, I think there needs to be a serious conversation regarding the types of violence that we take seriously, and how race and class biases factor into our decisions about accountability. After all, even the privileged must be held accountable for their actions.

What is a Street Gang?

Definitions

There is no national consensus on what constitutes a gang in the United States of America (National Institute of Justice, 2011). This poses a problem for policy makers, law enforcement agencies, and researchers because we cannot hope to combat a problem that we cannot define (Esbensen et al., 2001). The definition used by the Department of Justice and the Department of Homeland **Immigration** Security's and Customs

Enforcement (ICE) requires, in part, "an association of three or more individuals, whose members adopt a group identity, often through a common name, clothing, or other identifying symbol, and who engage in criminal activity, violence. and/or intimidation to further the objectives of the group" (National Institute of Justice, 2011). While definitions differ by state, many include these basic principles. Law enforcement agencies in the United States rank group criminality the most important as characteristic when defining a gang, with the presence of leadership having the least importance. Researchers may also include components such as gang-identified turf, if members self-identify as part of a gang, and whether some level of organization is present. (Esbensen et al., 2001).

Demographic Characteristics

From 1996 to 2012, the National Gang Center conducted an annual National Youth Gang Survey to measure the prevalence and characteristics of youth gangs (National Gang Center, n.d). In 2011, the last year there is data, it was reported that 92.6 percent of gang members are male, and 35 percent are under eighteen years of age, with this percentage growing in smaller cities and rural counties. Further, gangs are more likely to be made up of Hispanic or Latino (46.2%) or Black (35.3%) members, with white members making up 11.5 percent of gangs. Therefore, in large cities, where there are more likely to be fraternity chapters, street gangs are predominantly made up of men of color who often occupy a low socioeconomic class.

What is a Fraternity?

Definitions

Fraternities, or Greek Letter Organizations (GLOs), are exclusive, all-male social groups with a focus on promoting leadership and interpersonal skills, brotherhood, and philanthropy (Glass, 2012).

Upon admission, these student groups provide members with the opportunity to build vast networks that can take them far in life, along with friendship, support, and personal fulfillment. Common elements of a fraternity include membership fees, a residence that members can live in, and self-governance. The North American Interfraternity Conference (NIC) represents 64 national and international fraternities, and reports that their member organizations have 6,100 chapters across 800 campuses in Canada and the United States of America (2020).

Demographic Characteristics

The NIC does not publish statistics on the makeup of the fraternities they represent, so it is difficult to know the exact breakdown. However, of the eight Ivy League universities (Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania, Princeton, and Yale) white students make up 41.7 percent of the student body on average (Data USA, 2017). Data from Princeton University shows that white students are disproportionately represented in the Greek system, with 73 percent of fraternity members being white (Chang, 2014).

Further, with undergraduate tuition averaging well over forty thousand dollars, it is unsurprising that most students come from privileged backgrounds. 70% of Ivy League students come from the richest quarter of society, and the same Princeton study found that over 25% of their Greek life members were from the top one percent (Chang, 2014). With these statistics, it is unlikely that lower-class students could afford fraternity dues on top of tuition, board, and books.

Additionally, it is advertised that "80 percent of Fortune 500 executives, 76 percent of U.S. senators and congressmen, 85 percent of Supreme Court justices, and all but two presidents since 1825 have been fraternity men" (Chang, 2014). Therefore, in contrast to

street gangs, fraternity members are likely to be elite, white men who occupy upper-class positions in society.

Street Gangs and Fraternities – Similarities in Conduct

Research has found a number of similarities between the behaviour of gangs and fraternities, most notably in the areas of hazing and initiation practices, the prevalence of alcohol and drug use, and misogynistic beliefs and violence against women (Bourgois, 1996; Totten, 2003; Franklin, 2004; Bleeker & Murnen, 2005; Hunt et al., 2005; Flood, 2008; Swahn et al, 2010; Descormiers & Corrado, 2016).

Hazing and Initiation Practices

Both fraternities and street gangs often have some sort of initiation process, in which would-be members must complete various tasks in order to be accepted into the group and gain full status. Not all gangs require initiates to undergo this 'street baptism' (Hughey, 2008). However, those that do usually focus violent acts such as beatings, tattoos or branding (being 'tagged in') or having to commit a crime against a rival gang or civilian (Descormiers & Corrado, 2016). Conversely, fraternity hazing is more likely to center on emotional or mental stress, in which pledges are made to 'serve' their superiors and engage in degrading behaviours. Additionally, they may be made to go without sleep or drink dangerous, copious amounts of alcohol (Parks & Brown, 2005). While the methods vary, both fraternities and street gangs cite similar reasons for hazing: it generates group solidarity and bonding, tests the commitment of new members, and is a method of proving one's manhood (Cimino, 2011).

Hazing generates group solidarity in two ways—first, pledges bond with each other through their similar experience of pain or discomfort, and pledges may exaggerate the positive aspects of the institution in order to justify suffering through the initiation process. (Parks & Brown, 2005). Second, the groups bonds as a whole, since all members have undergone the same hardships. This creates an 'us versus them' mentality and strengthens the ties between members and the organization. Initiation processes also tests the commitment of new members, especially if the process is uncomfortable or painful. This is especially important in street gangs, as members must be sure that initiates are willing to 'step up' in violent and dangerous situations, and defend the gang (Descormiers & Corrado, 2016). The ability to withstand or perpetrate physical violence can be seen as a way for new members to prove their masculinity, especially in street gangs, where respect is gained through one's ability to respond with violence against perceived threats to their honor and manhood (Hunt et al., 2005).

Pervasiveness of Alcohol and Drug Use

The correlation between gang involvement and drug use is well-known, as is the presence of a 'drinking culture' on many university campuses. One study on adolescent gang members found that participants who identified themselves as gang members were more likely to begin drinking before the age of 13, sell drugs, and report binge drinking and frequent drug use than non-gang affiliated students (Swahn et al., 2010). Similarly, researchers have found that students involved in Greek life are more likely to abuse alcohol than non-Greeks, and fraternity pledges significantly higher alcohol reported consumption than students who did not pledge (Hughey, 2008; Black et al., 2005). Alcohol use is used by both street gangs and fraternities as a method of affirming masculinity and maintaining group solidarity and camaraderie.

Drinking is often seen as a rite of passage into manhood and is therefore intertwined with American notions of masculinity (Hunt et al., 2005). Being able to

consume copious amounts of alcohol without getting drunk is seen as manly and is a way to gain respect, and alcohol is seen as a significant aspect of socializing (Black et al., 2005). Drinking as a group also allows for the separation of members, or the in-group, from the out-group, or non-members. These boundaries increase group cohesion in a similar way that hazing does, by creating an 'us versus them' mentality that allows the group to oppose others, such as rival gangs or non-Greek students.

Alcohol can also be a precursor to other dangerous or violent behaviours. One study of San Francisco youth gangs found that alcohol facilitated violence, with 72 percent of the respondents admitting to fighting with rival gang members while drunk, and many revealed that drinking 'pumped them up' and made them ready to fight (Hunt et al., 2005).

In fraternities, alcohol is most closely tied to the prevalence of sexual assault, with some members encouraging women to overdrink at parties to "enhance their odds of sexual compliance" (Martin, 2015, p. 34). Further, Black et al. found that fraternities that created rape-prone environments were more likely to be heavy drinkers, and that high alcohol consumption was also related to support for the sexual victimization of women (2005).

Misogynistic Attitudes, Masculinity, and Violence Against Women

The group loyalty, alcohol and drug use, and emphasis on masculinity and dominance in both fraternities and street gangs creates an environment that is conducive to violence against women (Hughey, 2008; Martin, 2015). Further, the desire for men to be considered tough by their peers may cause members to behave in ways that contradict their individual values to the point of excusing rape (Franklin, 2004, p. 26). For example, a study by Carlson found that

college men were reluctant to say they would intervene in hypothetical situations involving domestic violence and gang rape if they thought that doing so would cause other men to call their masculinity into question (2008). When studying violence perpetrated against women by gang members or fraternity men, researchers focus on two areas: domestic violence and sexual assault.

Domestic Violence. Numerous researchers have discussed how marginalized men, who are unable to access the conventional resources to succeed in the economy or education system, reassert their masculinity, dominance, and control through violence against their girlfriends or wives (Bourgois, 1996; Totten, 2003; Hunt et al., 2005). In a patriarchal society, hegemonic masculinity views the man as dominant, tough, and able to provide, while women are expected to be obedient, sexually available, and subordinate. Men who are unable to participate fully in the economy due to a marginalized status and thus lack a god job and material possessions are left with "balls and fists", as Totten's participants put it essentially the ability and desire to stand up for themselves (2003, p. 79). Since many aspects of masculinity are related to notions of respect, heterosexual men who feel that they are not respected by their girlfriends or wives lash out violently in a bid to regain their honor and reinforce their dominance. This idea of 'putting women back in their place' also allows men to reconstruct their behaviour as justified and the fault of the woman for failing to fulfill traditional gender roles (Totten, 2003). As Bourgois writes, "the fundamental status quo that enforces male domination (patriarchy) has not been altered, only [marginalized men's] ability to enforce that control" (1996, p. 425).

All of the studies referenced above discussed domestic violence as a response to being marginalized, and many participants were gang members. There is limited research specifically regarding domestic abuse by fraternity members. Instead, most available research focuses on sexual violence against women in primarily party settings, which often involve women who are not well known to perpetrators. This limitation makes it difficult to draw conclusions about the prevalence of domestic violence by fraternity men.

Sexual Assault. Sexualized violence against women, through harassment or assault, is often utilized as a means through which to maintain and regulate hierarchical power relationships and reinforce patriarchal control (Robinson, 2006). Through an emphasis on masculinity and dominance, both fraternities and gangs create environments that are conducive to misogynistic attitudes and rape. One study found that fraternity members, in contrast to non-Greek students, were more likely to believe that women liked to be 'roughed up', that women desire to be forced into sex, and that men should be in control of relationships (Black et al., 2005). Further, men involved in Greek life held more traditional attitudes towards women, a stronger belief in male dominance, and greater belief in rape myths, all attitudes that are related to an acceptance of, and a greater propensity to commit, sexual aggression (Bleecker & Murnen, 2005, p. 487). The relegation of women to sexual objects or status symbols is an effective means of othering women, which reinforces group boundaries and allows men to justify violent behaviour.

Flood (2008) discusses the ways in which men's sexual relationships with women are shaped by homosociality, or the social bonds between men. Even consensual sexual activity becomes a collective practice, as men share stories of their exploits as a way of affirming their masculinity and establishing an internal 'pecking order' (p. 353). Through

homosociality, women's bodies are used as fodder to cement the bonds between men. Men also turn sexual activity itself into a collective practice through gang rape, which serves to "construct and affirm their heterosexual masculinity and group identity" (Moolman, 2004, pp. 121-122). Gang rape, like domestic violence, is a method of reinforcing the assumption of male supremacy and ownership of women. Both fraternity and gang members perpetuate gang rape, the former usually at social events and parties, and the latter during some initiation processes (Bourgois, 1996; Moolman, 2004). This type of violence is condoned by silence and a lack of intervention by bystanders (Carlson, 2008), and by group members who fear being viewed as weak if they do not participate (Franklin, 2004).

Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs) and the 'Educated Gang' Thesis

The 'educated gang' thesis reinforces the similarities between street gangs and fraternities in terms of hierarchy, appearance and comportment, and behaviour. It is telling, however, that only members of Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs) fit Fraternities scrutiny. made up of predominantly white, upper-class members also dress in distinctive colors and logos to represent their house and engage in hazing or initiation practices, excessive drinking, and violent or misogynistic treatment of women. For example, the Yale chapter of the Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity made headlines in 2010 when new pledges marched through campus shouting "no means yes, yes means anal" (Jackson, 2018). The chapter faced a five-year suspension from the university, which is made up of a student body that is 44.3% white (Data USA, 2017); but unlike BGLOs, no comparisons were ever made between street gangs and this majority-white, Ivy League fraternity.

The construction of BGLOs as little more than 'educated gangs' acts to "equate organized blackness with deviance" and perpetuates harmful stereotypes about Black men and criminality (Hughey, 2008). In fact, research shows that BGLOs do not engage in substance abuse or risky behaviour to the extent that predominantly white fraternities do. For example, Black et al. found that due to differences in funding allotment, BGLOs were less likely to have fraternity houses on campus, which changed the structure of the organization (2005, p. 371). A lack of private housing means that BGLOs have to hold parties and events in public areas, where they are subject to supervision and campus rules. This results in BGLOs facing disciplinary sanctions for behaviour and conduct that white fraternities can engage in with impunity.

Further, when white fraternities did face consequences, they were able to leverage their economic position as large chapters with wealthy donors to minimize or erase charges, a method that may not be available to smaller, less well-funded BGLOs. In a similar vein, Schaefer found that white fraternity members received few formal sanctions due to their crimes being largely dealt with through academic judicial boards or civil lawsuits rather than criminal court (2004, p. 187). BGLOs may not be afforded the same measures of protection in these cases, nor would a member of a street gang.

While members of BGLOs should be held accountable for any wrongdoing, it is worth noting the ways in which race is used as a tool to denigrate Black fraternity members while simultaneously giving white men a getout-of-jail-free card. This phenomenon often continues after graduation as well, as seen in the differences in responses to white collar versus 'street' crime (Schaefer, 2004, p. 180). 'Street crimes', such as assault, robbery, and drug trafficking, are widely considered to be harmful and dangerous, and can carry heave

penalties in criminal courts. White collar crime is often committed by white male elites for personal or organizational gain. In contrast to 'street' crime, white collar offences are more often dealt with through the use of fines rather than criminal charges, despite causing equal or greater harm to society. If a criminal record that resulted from a party that 'got a little out of hand' could ruin the prospects of a white student, could it not have the same effect on a Black student? The answer to that depends on which types of people we believe to be deserving of punishment, and which we feel are worthy of a second chance.

Street Gangs and Fraternities – Similar but Not the Same

While street gangs and fraternities share many similarities in terms of hazing or initiation rituals, substance use and abuse, and violence against women, they are not identical and should not be treated as such. While the federal definition of a gang in the United States of America does not require gangs to exist in a distinct turf, the term 'street gangs' imply that there is a spatial element that fraternities do not satisfy. Many other definitions consider a self-identification aspect to be of importance; that is, that gang members identify themselves as being involved with a gang. Fraternities would not meet these criteria of a gang either. Finally, to be defined as a gang, criminal offending as an individual or a group that furthers the power, reputation, or resources of the organization must be an objective of the group (National Institute of Justice, 2011). While fraternity members may engage in criminal behaviour while maintaining ties to a chapter, the offending is neither a requirement nor a goal of joining Greek life.

The differences in perception and treatment of street gangs and fraternities in the United States of America illustrates the continued pervasiveness of class and racial bias in the criminal justice system and larger

society. While gang members, who are predominantly Black or Hispanic, are often over-criminalized, fraternity members are able to leverage their whiteness, higher socioeconomic statuses, and connections to face lesser charges or escape sanctions altogether.

Despite their similarities in some respects, broadening the definition of a street gang to include fraternities or similar groups would needlessly criminalize non-gang involved people. This would especially affect Black Greek Letter Organizations, who already face scrutiny increased marginalization. Instead, fraternities should be held to the same legal standards as everyone face appropriate else and repercussions for their actions, including criminal charges if necessary. Upholding the rule of law ensures that all people are held accountable for their actions, including the privileged elite.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the similarities between street gangs and fraternities in terms of hazing and initiation practices, the prevalence of alcohol and drug use, and the misogynistic behaviour and violence towards women. I also discussed the impact of masculinity and how ideas of toughness, and dominance impacted the behaviour of gang and fraternity members. I began this paper with an overview of gang statistics and demographics in the United States of America, as well as definitional characteristics. Next, I examined prevalence of fraternities, and the differences in make-up as compared to gang-involved individuals. Then, I introduced research and examples to illustrate the similarities in behavior between gangs and fraternities and examined the ways that racism and ideas of Black criminality affects the treatment of white fraternities as opposed to Black Greek Letter Organizations. I also discussed the differences between street gangs

fraternities in terms of street orientation, selfidentification, and objectives. Finally, I emphasized that while fraternities should not be treated the same as gangs, we should take the violence that they commit seriously, and hold them accountable for their actions.

Future research in this area could focus on narrowing the definition of a gang to unnecessary criminalization, particularly of minority populations. Research into whether patterns of sexual violence by fraternity members continue into domestic relationships may also be conducted, especially as compared to rates of domestic violence perpetrated by both gang-involved individuals and members of larger society. Finally, research into fraternities with lower rates of alcohol abuse and sexual violence could give us a better idea of any policies or practices that could be implemented on American campuses to decrease harms caused by fraternities and better the beliefs and actions of their members.

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