

Affiliation With Antisocial Crowds and Psychosocial Outcomes in a Gang-Impacted Urban Middle School

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Abstract

This longitudinal study examined the psychosocial adjustment of adolescents who affiliate with antisocial crowds in a gang-impacted urban environment. We followed 405 adolescents (219 boys, 186 girls; average age of 11.51 years, $SD = .61$; 84% Latino, 9% Asian, and 7% other or unclassified) for one academic year. These youth attended a middle school located in an economically distressed neighborhood with documented high rates of gang violence. We assessed crowd membership with a structured focus group procedure. In addition, we administered a peer nomination inventory to assess aggression and social standing, obtained self-reports of depressive symptoms, and derived grade point averages (GPA) directly from school records. Adolescents used gang-related imagery to describe antisocial crowds in their school, referring to “cholos” and “taggers.” Membership in these crowds was associated with aggression and low GPA but, paradoxically, predicted small decreases in depression and increases in popularity over time. Taken together, our results highlight the complex role of affiliations with antisocial crowds in high-risk settings.

Keywords

adolescence, crowds, gangs, peer relationships, depression, popularity

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Research on the organization of school peer groups during the adolescent years has often incorporated a focus on crowd structures (Brown & Klute, 2006; Sussman, Pokhrel, Ashmore, & Brown, 2007). Crowds are conceptualized as broad reputational groupings that encapsulate specific information about how an adolescent is viewed by his or her peers. From this perspective, "membership" in a crowd does not imply a specific network of social connections, but rather is an indicator of the labels and attributes peers assign a particular adolescent (Brown & Klute, 2006). Youth who are members of the same crowd do not necessarily interact on a regular basis, although they share similar social reputations. In most secondary schools, crowds are organized around defining features that might include high status (e.g., "populars," "elites"; Heaven, Ciarrochi, & Vialle, 2008), low status (e.g., "nerds," "loners"; Brown, Mounts, Lamborn, & Steinberg, 1993), academic inclination (e.g., "brains"; Prinstein & La Greca, 2002), involvement in sports (e.g., "jocks"; Sussman et al., 2007), tendencies toward antisocial behavior (e.g., "toughs," "dirts," "druggies"; Sussman, Unger, & Dent, 2004), and interest in youth culture (e.g., "goths," "emos," "skaters"; Sussman et al., 1994). Crowds are thought to play a central role in the formation of identity (Brown, Eicher, & Petrie, 1986; Dunphy, 1963) in that peer perceptions provide a powerful source of feedback guiding construction of the self (consistent with Social Identity Theory; Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004).

Crowds that emphasize deviant norms, aggression, or substance use are of particular theoretical interest. The incorporated social reputations can help identify adolescents who are on trajectories toward problematic outcomes (Sussman et al., 2007). Membership in an antisocial crowd often portends serious adjustment problems including maladaptive health-related behaviors (Clasen & Brown, 1985; Sussman, Dent, & McCullar, 2000), academic failure (Heaven et al., 2008), internalized distress (Prinstein & La Greca, 2002), and diverse forms of antisocial behavior (Michell, 1997). The underlying mechanisms are not yet clear but likely reflect complex interactions between the adolescent's own behavioral tendencies and specific socializing processes. For example, as noted above, crowd membership influences an adolescent's sense of identity and may therefore bring openness to experiences that are associated with risk (e.g., antisocial activities). Moreover, although crowds are generally not viewed as a primary context for friendship formation, shared social reputations could potentially intensify links between antisocial youth and subsequently reinforce problematic attitudes and behaviors (Urberg, Degirmencioglu, Tolson, & Halliday-Scher, 2000).

We would expect affiliation with deviant crowds to represent a particularly salient threat to functioning in settings where aggressive role models are readily available to adolescents. We specifically highlight urban neighborhoods

that are characterized by significant problems with gang conflict and other exemplars of high-amplitude youth violence (Boardman & Saint Onge, 2005; Howell & Egley, 2005). In contexts of this nature, youth who come to view themselves through the lens of an antisocial reputation will have ready opportunities to identify with overtly violent peers. Under these conditions, crowd membership could serve as an important step on the pathway toward serious maladjustment.

Previous research on secondary school peer groups has sometimes incorporated an awareness of the potential impact of gang culture on crowds and other features of peer group organization at school. For example, in a qualitative study conducted with Mexican American students attending a high school in a largely agricultural and suburban community, Matute-Bianchi (1986) identified a small “cholo” group comprised of students recognized as being gang sympathizers and having interest in gang culture. Still, there have been few systematic attempts to examine crowds in neighborhoods that have documented high levels of gang activity. Factors specific to such high-risk settings may have important implications for adjustment outcomes associated with crowd affiliations.

The current project focused on adolescents who are members of antisocial crowds in the context of a highly stressed urban community shaped by economic deprivation and violent conflicts between rival street gangs. We focused on antisocial crowds in a middle school that serves these difficult neighborhoods. Our goal was to examine links between membership in antisocial crowds and adjustment during a vulnerable developmental period. We targeted the early years of adolescence, as this stage of development is marked by instability in self-image and heightened susceptibility to peer influences (Sandstrom, 2011).

Although our central focus was on membership in antisocial crowds, we also sought to understand these effects within the context of the larger peer group structure. To this end, we conducted analyses examining associations between membership in antisocial crowds and other crowd affiliations. For comparative purposes, we also briefly examined concurrent associations between other forms of crowd membership and adjustment correlates.

One primary issue that we sought to investigate was the overlap between antisocial crowd membership and social outcomes in the larger peer group. Our objective was to shed light on the social implications of antisocial reputations for middle school students who are persistently exposed to gang imagery. As we considered this research goal, we were mindful of the distinction between popularity and social preference (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). Popularity is an indicator of social prestige and a dominant position in the peer group hierarchy. Social preference, on the other hand, reflects peer group

attitudes and is indicative of both acceptance and low levels of rejection by peers. Popularity and social preference are related, but not synonymous, dimensions of social experience. Indeed, popular youth may rely on aggression or other aversive strategies to reach prominence in the peer group and, as a result, be disliked by at least some classmates (Mayeux, Houser, & Dyches, 2011).

With regard to the antisocial reputations, popularity is likely to be the dimension of social standing that is of particular relevance in an early adolescent sample. Autonomy, in the form of independence from adult caregivers, is one of the defining tasks of the early adolescent years (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). Reflecting this developmental process, adolescents who are seen by their peers as rebellious, moving against society, and rejecting adult value systems are often rewarded with prominent positions in the peer group hierarchy (Sandstrom, 2011; Schwartz, Kelly, & Duong, 2013). We anticipated that these effects would be magnified in a gang-impacted community, with prominent role models characterized by aggressive attributes. Thus, we hypothesized that social reputations that revolve around aggression and other antisocial attributes would be predictive of increases in popularity over time.

Conversely, we did not predict a strong pattern of associations between antisocial crowd membership and social preference. Whether an adolescent is preferred by his peers is at least partially dependent on a match with the behavioral norms embedded in the microsystem (Wright, Giammarino, & Parad, 1986). Insofar as violent or aggressive behavior represents a significant divergence from the values embedded in the proximal microsystem, youth with antisocial reputations will experience peer rebuff (Downs & Rose, 1991; La Greca & Harrison, 2005). However, in settings where gang subculture is a ubiquitous presence, we would not expect antisocial adolescents to be viewed as “misfits” (Alleyne & Wood, 2014). In these high-risk communities, youth may be exposed to unique social norms that do not bring peer sanctions (in the form of low social preference) for an antisocial reputation.

A second set of research goals focuses on investigating depressive symptoms as a potential outcome of antisocial crowd membership. The idea that adolescents who affiliate with antisocial crowds are vulnerable to internalized distress has been a frequent theme in the literature (Heaven et al., 2008; Prinstein & La Greca, 2002). Essentially, youth with deviant social reputations are presumed to experience failures in key academic and social domains that, in turn, are predictive of depression (Schwartz, Gorman, Duong, & Nakamoto, 2008). An antisocial reputation may also serve as a “marker” of other developmental discontinuities that bring risk for internalized distress (Masten et al., 2005).

The findings in the extant literature notwithstanding, depression is not a likely outcome when adolescents experience the benefits of self-esteem associated with membership in socially elite crowds (Brown, Von Bank, & Steinberg, 2008). Youth who are seen as members of predominant crowds may enjoy power and influence over their peers and be the frequent recipients of positive attention. The resulting feedback from the peer group could serve to enhance youth's emerging sense of self. This hypothesized pattern is noteworthy for the current investigation given expected associations between antisocial reputations and visibility with peers. Thus, we predicted that antisocial crowd membership (and the resulting prominence in the peer group) would be associated with decreases in depressive tendencies over time.

To further investigate the adjustment correlates of deviant crowd membership, we also considered associations with aggression and poor academic competence (as indexed by grade point averages). Aggression and disengagement from adult institutions (including school) could be viewed as core features of an antisocial persona. Nonetheless, from the perspective of prevention and research on etiology, longitudinal patterns warrant further investigation. Crowd membership could exacerbate trajectories toward problematic outcomes by fostering identification with a particular value system (e.g., gang subculture), as well as exposing youth to maladaptive social influences.

As a complement to our primary study goals, we explored the potential moderating role of gender. Insofar as we are aware, there are no existing findings that would suggest gender differences in the psychosocial risks associated with a reputation as a member of the antisocial crowd. Still, a number of investigators have described main-effect gender differences with regard to crowd affiliations (Brown et al., 2008; Miller, Farrell, Barnes, Melnick, & Sabo, 2005). Not surprisingly, social reputations are influenced by gender-specific roles (e.g., boys are more likely to affiliate with jock and burnout crowds than girls; Brown et al., 2008; La Greca, Prinstein, & Fetter, 2001). There are also well-documented gender differences related to depression (Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994) and aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Thus, existing theory and empirical findings do not support *a priori* hypotheses related to crowd membership by gender interactions, but we sought to explore this possibility carefully.

Past research on gender differences in crowd affiliations emerged largely before distinctions between relational and overt aggression were well validated (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Since the publication of the early work on crowd structures, investigators have increasingly emphasized distinctions between relational (i.e., causing harm by damaging social relationships) and overt (i.e., direct harm through insults, hitting) aggression. Relational aggression has particular relevance for girls' peer groups and is also key in the

dynamics of peer group hierarchies (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). To explore potential differences in the implications of distinct subtypes of aggression for antisocial crowd membership, we included separate assessments of relational and overt subtypes.

In summary, the objective of the current project was to examine the psychosocial outcomes associated with membership in antisocial crowds for early adolescents living in gang-impacted urban neighborhoods. Our goal was to investigate the potential implications of antisocial reputations during the middle school years, for youth living in a high-risk, urban setting. To this end, we examined predictive associations between antisocial crowd membership and adjustment indicators that included popularity, social preference, depressive symptoms, relational and overt aggression, and academic competence (i.e., GPA). We expected that affiliation with antisocial crowds would incorporate risks for adjustment (i.e., aggression and deficient classroom performance) but would also bring psychosocial benefits (i.e., status with peers and low levels of depression). We also examined relations between antisocial crowd membership and affiliation with other crowds. Finally, we considered the potential moderating role of gender.

Method

Overview

This investigation was conducted as part of a larger project focusing on the academic and social adjustment of adolescents living in risky urban environments in the Los Angeles, California region. We were particularly interested in settings that are likely to be characterized by gang violence. Past research on the predictors of gang activity (e.g., Alleyne & Wood, 2014; Gilman, Hill, Hawkins, Howell, & Kosterman, 2014; Klein, 1995) has highlighted the roles of economic deprivation and potential racial discrimination. Accordingly, we established a partnership with a middle school located in an economically distressed community with documented high levels of gang activity. We recruited a cohort of youth during their first year of middle school (sixth grade), with annual follow-up for the next two consecutive school years (seventh grade and eighth grade). Past researchers have found that crowd structures tend to be unstable during the initial transition from the primary to middle school environment (Stone & Brown, 1999). Based on this pattern of findings, we focused our crowd assessments on the second and third years of middle school. Thus, our analyses targeted a 1-year period of middle adolescence, examining crowd membership in seventh grade as a predictor of psychosocial functioning in eighth grade.

Participants

All sixth-grade students in the participating school ($N = 450$) were given permission letters (in multiple languages) to be delivered to parents or legal guardians. Of these students, 405 (219 boys, 186 girls; \bar{X} age = 11.51 years, $SD = .61$) returned positive parental permission and written child assent to take part in the initial year of the project. At the first follow-up (T1), 92% (197 boys, 177 girls) of these students were retained. At the second follow-up (T2), 70% (148 boys, 137 girls) of the participants from the original sample were retained. Scores on the T1 variables were not systemically predictive of attrition from T1 to T2. Attrited and retained participants did not differ significantly on any of the T1 variables.

Attrition over the waves of data collection (i.e., over the 1 year period from T1 to T2) primarily reflected movement from the school district and was expected in light of the mobility in the surrounding neighborhoods. There were also a small number of students (10 at T1, 12 at T2) who were repeatedly absent from school and not present during the data collection. These participation and attrition rates are quite typical for school-based research in this region (Kelly, Schwartz, Gorman, & Nakamoto, 2008).

Mirroring the larger school population, the participants were predominantly from Hispanic American backgrounds with many students coming from families that had only recently immigrated to the region. The ethnic/racial composition of the sample, assessed via adolescents' self-report at T1, was as follows: 84% Latino, 9% Asian, and 7% other or unclassified (e.g., Caucasian, Armenian, mixed race/ethnicity, Native American). The ethnic composition of the sample was reflective of the surrounding neighborhood. About one third of the students were classified as "English learners" by the school district.

The school was located in an area of Los Angeles that has been targeted for special enforcement by the police department and city attorney's office as a result of aggressive conflicts between rival street gangs, gang-oriented crime, and gun-related violence (Los Angeles Police Department Gang and Narcotics Division, 2009). There are multiple gang injunction zones in the neighborhoods proximal to the school (Los Angeles Police Department, 2012). In these court-mandated "safety zones," street gangs are recognized as an imminent threat to public welfare, and restraining orders are issued to prohibit activities potentially associated with gang organization. Notably, adolescents who are known or suspected gang members are enjoined from interacting together in public. Moreover, in recognition of the extreme severity of the problem, the city of Los Angeles has established a wide series of social programs designed to suppress gang violence in these specific

neighborhoods (Dunsworth, Hayeslip, & Denver, 2011). For example, this area has been designated as a center for a “gun buyback” program, in which grocery store gift certificates are exchanged for firearms.

This community was also characterized by a high degree of economic distress (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Poverty rates in the surrounding neighborhoods (i.e., percentage of households at or below federal poverty levels) were as high as 44%. Nearly all of the students (98%) attending the school were eligible for free or reduced-cost lunch programs.

Given the difficult nature of the context, it is perhaps not surprising that the participating school has a recent history of deficient academic performance. School-wide averages on standardized achievement tests have consistently been well below the California Department of Education’s established targets. During the period of data collection, test scores were near the 10th percentile for the state (California Department of Education, 2011).

Procedures

Identical data collection procedures were used at T1 and T2. In the spring semester of each school year, the research team visited the school and conducted focus groups and interviews with a subset of the consenting students. Trained research assistants then administered a series of questionnaires to all participants in a group format, including a peer nomination inventory and a battery of self-report questionnaires. The group administration took place in two half-hour periods during the students’ homeroom class. Finally, in the summer following each wave of data collection, grade point averages were provided directly by the school.

Measures

Crowd affiliation. We assessed crowd affiliation using the modified Social Type Rating interview procedure described by Brown (1989). In both waves, we held focus group meetings with small groups of students ($n = 30$) who were identified by school personnel as representing a wide segment of the school population. During the focus group meetings, an ethnically diverse group of trained research assistants introduced the concept of a “crowd” to the participating students. Crowds were carefully defined as reputation-based groups and were distinguished from more interactional social systems (i.e., cliques or other friendship groups). That is, the participants were informed that crowd membership was an indication of shared social reputations among peers. The students were then asked to identify the main crowds at their school.

Most of the crowd labels provided by the students are similar to those that have been identified in past studies (Brown et al., 1993). For example, the students described elite groups characterized by high status and orientation toward appearance (“elites,” “popular kids,” or “pretty boys/girls”), an athletically oriented group (“athletes” or “jocks”), a low-status, academically oriented group (“nerds” or “school-boys/school-girls”), and groups marked by involvement in youth culture (“rockers” and “skaters”). As expected, the focus groups also identified antisocial or deviant crowds. One such crowd was described as incorporating students who have a strong interest in gang subculture, aspire to eventual gang membership, and frequently start fights at school or in the surrounding community. The most common label applied to this crowd were “cholo” (a slang term that denotes particular styles of dress and behavior associated with membership in Latino street gangs). These youth were also referred to as “wannabe gangsters.” A related crowd was labeled “taggers,” and their predominant characteristic was participation in gang-themed graffiti, vandalism, and other acts of group-oriented urban crime.

In the second step of the procedure, the students participating in the focus group sessions were asked to identify grademates who were the leaders of each of the crowds (excluding the low-status or marginalized crowds) or who exemplified a certain crowd very well. These peer leaders ($n = 12$) then served as expert raters in a series of one-on-one interviews. We presented the peer experts with yearbook pictures of all of their participating grademates and asked them to identify the crowds to which their grademates belonged (they could choose up to three crowds).

For each crowd, students received a proportion score based on the number of nominations they received from the expert raters. This approach preserves more variability than categorical assignments (see Brown et al., 1993; Brown et al., 2008). For later analysis, we calculated a composite antisocial crowd score that included “taggers” and “cholos” together. Membership in these conceptually related crowds was correlated at T1 ($r = .81, p = .001$) and T2 ($r = .52, p = .001$). Although the composite score was the index we relied on for all of the inferential analyses presented in this article, we also conducted exploratory analyses with the “cholo” item only. The pattern of results was identical for both indices.

Popularity, social preference, and aggression. We assessed popularity, social preference, and aggression using a peer nomination inventory. With this methodology, adolescents are asked to nominate peers on a roster sheet who fit specific descriptors. The total number of nominations received by each participant is then summed as the index of social reputation. Peer nomination

approaches yield indices with very strong psychometric properties, as multiple raters (i.e., a substantial portion of participating peers; see Terry & Coie, 1991) identify youth who fit each descriptor.

The rosters for the inventory were constructed based on a random list strategy. Random lists have emerged as a de facto standard in research with adolescents' peer groups and are, at this point, quite well validated (e.g., Gorman, Kim, & Schimmelbusch, 2002; Schwartz, Gorman, Nakamoto, & McKay, 2006). These procedures were originally developed as an alternative to the classroom-based rosters used with elementary school children because adolescents spend their days in a wider peer group (i.e., interacting in more than just one classroom).

We generated four alphabetized rosters in each year of the project. Each list contained the ID codes and alphabetized names of a random sub-sample of all of the students who had parental permission to participate in the project, with each adolescent's name appearing on only one list. The lists contained names alphabetized by first name preceded by an ID code. Each participant was given one randomly selected list of his or her grademates to serve as a stimulus for the peer nomination interview. The lists were distributed such that each participant was evaluated by approximately 25% of the consenting participants in his or her grade level.

The peer nomination inventory included items assessing popularity ("students who are popular"), unpopularity ("students who are unpopular"), liking by peers ("students who you really like"), disliking by peers ("students who you don't like"), relational aggression ("students who gossip or say mean things about other kids"), and overt aggression ("students who hit or push other kids"). Participants were asked to nominate peers from the random lists who fit these descriptors, and nominations were unlimited (i.e., participants could identify as few or as many peers as they chose for each item).

We then calculated the total number of nominations received for each item, standardized within list. For later analysis, we calculated a popularity index by subtracting the total number of unpopularity nominations received from the total number of popular nominations (as per Cillessen & Marks, 2011). In a similar manner, we generated a social preference score by subtracting the total number of disliked nominations received from the total number of liked nominations (Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982).

Adolescents who served as expert raters for the crowd proportion scores derived from the Social Type Rating also took part in the peer nomination assessment, but we did not include their nominations in the final calculations. Our goal was to minimize inflation of effects due to correlated systematic error. As one step in this direction, we wanted to use different peer informants for the crowd assessments and the peer nomination estimates.

Convergent estimates of crowd affiliation. The Social Type Rating was our primary source of data on crowd membership. Social Type Rating is a well-validated assessment approach that has been widely implemented in the extant literature. Nonetheless, the methodological assumption that a panel of peer experts can provide insight into an adolescent's reputation in the larger peer group might warrant further consideration. Accordingly, following analysis of the T1 data, we decided to expand the peer nomination inventory to include additional indices for purposes of assessing convergent validity. At T2, we added items to the peer nomination inventory that assessed crowd membership. The participants were asked to identify peers from the roster sheets who were members of the "cholo" and "tagger" crowds (labels determined from the T1 focus groups). We calculated the total number of nominations received across the two items, standardized within list. The correlation between peer nomination antisocial crowd score and corresponding score derived via Social Type Rating was $r = .58, p = .001$ at T2.

Depressive symptoms. The participants also completed the short-form of the Children's Depression Inventory (CDI; Kovacs, 1985). This frequently used and well-validated questionnaire includes 10 items assessing symptoms of depression. Items are rated on a 3-point scale (0 to 2) with higher numbers indicating increasing symptom severity. Internal consistency was acceptable in both years of the project (at T1, $\alpha = .76$ and at T2, $\alpha = .87$). For later analysis, we calculated the mean rating across the items in each year of the project.

Academic competence. Grade point averages (GPA) were obtained directly from school records in the summer following each wave of data collection. Students' GPAs were calculated by the school, and were based on the average performance across core subjects (math, science, social studies, and English) for the full school year. GPA was on a 0 to 4 scale, with higher scores indicative of superior performance.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

We examined the distribution of all variables with univariate statistics and graphical analyses. As might be expected, the distributions tended to be moderately skewed with relatively few adolescents receiving high scores. Following the recommendations of Tabachnick and Fidell (2012), we applied arcsine transformations to the crowd scores (which were distributed as positively

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the Crowd Scores, Depression, and GPA.

	\bar{X}	SD	Min.	Max.
T1 antisocial crowd	0.03	0.07	0	0.43
T2 antisocial crowd	0.03	0.07	0	0.50
T1 athlete crowd	0.10	0.17	0	0.86
T2 athlete crowd	0.14	0.22	0	1.00
T1 high-status crowd	0.13	0.17	0	0.83
T2 high-status crowd	0.06	0.13	0	0.70
T1 nerd crowd	0.14	0.20	0	1.00
T2 nerd crowd	0.25	0.25	0	1.00
T1 skater crowd	0.05	0.13	0	0.82
T2 skater crowd	0.06	0.15	0	0.92
T1 rocker crowd	0.03	0.08	0	0.60
T2 rocker crowd	0.07	0.16	0	1.00
T1 depression	0.22	0.28	0	1.80
T2 depression	0.20	0.31	0	2.00
T1 GPA	2.59	0.81	0.33	4.00
T2 GPA	2.75	0.67	1.00	4.00

Note. Crowd scores are the proportion of expert raters who identified an adolescent as member. Depression scores are a 0 to 2 rating. GPA is a 0 to 4 rating. *N* at T1 ranged from 330 to 367. *N* at T2 ranged from 275 to 301. GPA = grade point averages; T = time.

skewed proportions) and square-root transformations to the depression scores (after adding a constant of 1 to account for zero values). Skewness and kurtosis scores were in the moderate range (i.e., less than 1.0) for most variables after these transformations. However, the crowd scores remained skewed. Univariate statistics for the scores (prior to transformation) are presented in Table 1. Note that the standardized peer nomination scores (which have $\bar{X} = 0$ and $SD = 1.0$) are not reported.

Table 2 summarizes gender differences. For all gender analyses, gender was coded as a dichotomous variable (boys = 0, girls = 1). Girls received higher popularity scores, higher social preference scores, and higher GPAs than boys. Girls also had higher relational aggression scores than boys at T1, and lower overt aggression scores than boys in both waves.

We did not find large differences in antisocial crowd membership across genders. However, compared with girls, boys did have significantly higher scores for antisocial crowd membership at T1. There were also gender differences with regard to membership in other crowds. For example, girls were less likely than boys to affiliate with the athletic/jock crowd.

Table 2. Gender Differences on Crowd Scores and Psychosocial Adjustment Variables.

Variable	Gender		
	Males	Females	t score
T1 antisocial crowd	0.20 (0.37)	0.09 (0.26)	3.26**
T2 antisocial crowd	0.14 (0.32)	0.15 (0.30)	-0.36
T1 athlete crowd	0.66 (0.64)	0.05 (0.23)	12.30***
T2 athlete crowd	0.90 (0.71)	0.11 (0.37)	11.95***
T1 high-status crowd	0.40 (0.54)	0.59 (0.63)	-3.14**
T2 high-status crowd	0.18 (0.38)	0.31 (0.52)	-2.35*
T1 nerd crowd	0.48 (0.61)	0.58 (0.68)	-1.40
T2 nerd crowd	0.88 (0.69)	0.89 (0.77)	-0.13
T1 skater crowd	0.36 (0.55)	0.02 (0.15)	8.33***
T2 skater crowd	0.37 (0.61)	0.05 (0.25)	5.83***
T1 rocker crowd	0.08 (0.27)	0.15 (0.36)	-2.19*
T2 rocker crowd	0.10 (0.29)	0.45 (0.68)	-5.46***
T1 depression	1.09 (0.10)	1.11 (0.12)	-1.82
T2 depression	1.08 (0.12)	1.10 (0.13)	-1.02
T1 relational aggression	-0.09 (0.89)	0.10 (1.09)	-1.80
T2 relational aggression	-0.34 (0.88)	0.38 (0.98)	-6.53***
T1 overt aggression	0.14 (1.03)	-0.15 (0.93)	2.85**
T2 overt aggression	0.12 (1.06)	-0.12 (0.90)	2.06*
T1 GPA	2.48 (0.76)	2.70 (0.84)	-2.52*
T2 GPA	2.67 (0.66)	2.84 (0.68)	-2.22*
T1 popularity	-0.25 (0.80)	0.28 (1.12)	-5.27***
T2 popularity	-0.18 (0.95)	0.20 (1.01)	-3.34***
T1 social preference	-0.15 (0.93)	0.17 (1.05)	-3.11**
T2 social preference	-0.16 (1.06)	0.18 (0.89)	-2.90**

Note. Gender comparisons were conducted with a series of *t* tests. Crowd affiliation scores are proportion scores with arcsine transformations. Depression scores are a 0 to 2 rating, with square-root transformations applied after an added constant of 1. GPA is a 0 to 4 score. Peer nomination scores were standardized within roster list. T = time; GPA = grade point averages.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Bivariate Associations

Bivariate relations for the antisocial crowd scores and indices of psychosocial functioning are summarized in Table 3. Antisocial crowd membership was positively correlated with overt aggression, relational aggression, and popularity in both waves. Antisocial crowd membership was also negatively

Table 3. Bivariate Associations Between Antisocial Crowd Scores and Psychosocial Adjustment.

Variable	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. T1 antisocial crowd	.48***	-.07	-.14*	.19***	.14*	.14**	.15*	-.30***	-.28***	.16**	.27***	.02	-.08
2. T2 antisocial crowd	—	.00	.04	.32***	.32***	.19**	.29***	-.29***	-.40***	.21***	.32***	-.09	-.15*
3. T1 depression	—	—	.47***	.05	-.12	.02	-.10	-.11	-.06	-.06	-.18**	-.11*	-.03
4. T2 depression	—	—	—	-.09	-.05	-.01	-.06	-.02	-.08	-.04	-.13*	-.05	-.09
5. T1 relational aggression	—	—	—	—	.34***	.52***	.28***	-.21***	-.21***	.29***	.23***	-.10*	-.01
6. T2 relational aggression	—	—	—	—	—	.20***	.52***	-.09	-.18**	.31***	.37***	-.04	-.08
7. T1 overt aggression	—	—	—	—	—	—	.33***	-.19***	-.22***	.04	.01	-.29***	-.20***
8. T2 overt aggression	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	-.18**	-.23***	.14*	.15*	-.17**	-.32***
9. T1 GPA	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.76***	-.10	-.04	.08	.25***
10. T2 GPA	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	-.01	-.09	.16**	.22***
11. T1 popularity	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.52***	.21***	.16**
12. T2 popularity	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.16**	.28***
13. T1 social preference	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.28***
14. T2 social preference	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

Note. T = time; GPA = grade point averages.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

correlated with GPA at both T1 and T2, with effect sizes in the small to medium range.

Antisocial crowd membership was not strongly correlated with social preference in either year of the project. On the other hand, there were negative correlations between aggression and social preference (of a small to medium magnitude) in both years of the project. Although aggression and antisocial crowd membership were correlated, these two indices had distinct patterns of association with social preference.

Our primary focus was on membership in the antisocial crowd. However, as per our study goals, we also conducted a limited set of analyses examining other crowd membership scores. Our intent was to frame the effects for the antisocial crowd in the context of the larger peer group structure by examining the pattern for all crowds. A relevant finding that emerged from these analyses was a positive correlation between membership in the high-status and the antisocial crowds. As shown in Table 4, the expert raters viewed the antisocial and high-status crowds as partially overlapping groups.

Antisocial Crowd Membership as a Predictor of Psychosocial Adjustment

Next, we conducted a series of multiple regression analyses to examine relations between antisocial crowd membership at T1 and indicators of psychosocial adjustment at T2. A separate model was conducted for each of the six T2 adjustment indicators (i.e., popularity, overt aggression, relational aggression, social preference, depression, and GPA), with T1 antisocial crowd membership as the predictor and T2 antisocial crowd membership, gender, and T1 psychosocial adjustment as covariates. In other words, we examined relations between T1 antisocial crowd membership and T2 psychosocial adjustment after taking into account the stability of these constructs, as well as the effects of gender. As shown in Table 5, two of the six models yielded significant effects for T1 antisocial crowd membership. T1 antisocial crowd membership was negatively associated with T2 depression and positively associated with T2 popularity, although the effect sizes were small.¹ As expected, we did not find an association between antisocial crowd membership and social preference.

Gender as a Moderator

Our final set of analyses focused on exploring the potential moderating role of gender. We specified a series of regression models predicting each of the six T2 psychosocial outcome variables (the two subtypes of aggression,

Table 4. Bivariate Associations Among Crowd Scores.

	T1 athlete	T2 athlete	T1 high status	T2 high status	T1 nerd	T2 nerd	T1 skater	T2 skater	T1 rocker	T2 rocker
T1 antisocial crowd	.06	.05	.35***	.33***	-.28***	-.32***	.02	.07	-.10	-.10
T2 antisocial crowd	-.08	-.13*	.35***	.45***	-.29***	-.39***	-.10	-.13*	-.09	-.16**
T1 depression	-.20***	-.15*	-.05	-.08	.05	.17**	-.09	-.08	.17**	.15*
T2 depression	-.14*	-.13*	-.08	-.05	.04	.07	.02	.01	.00	.14*
T1 relational aggression	-.04	.06	.34***	.31***	-.20***	-.24***	-.08	-.05	-.03	-.13*
T2 relational aggression	-.15*	-.20***	.39***	.39***	-.22***	-.29***	-.14*	-.17**	.04	.01
T1 overt aggression	.00	.07	.23***	.17**	-.14**	-.17**	.05	.08	-.13*	-.16**
T2 overt aggression	.06	.02	.18**	.23***	-.20***	-.15*	.06	-.06	.01	-.17**
T1 GPA	.01	.05	-.15**	-.13*	.27***	.33***	.01	.01	.00	.12
T2 GPA	.04	.12*	-.17**	-.18**	.32***	.42***	-.03	-.02	-.04	.04
T1 popularity	-.13**	-.11	.45***	.49***	-.26***	-.27***	-.01	.04	.04	-.06
T2 popularity	-.04	-.07	.45***	.52***	-.26***	-.45***	.06	.13*	.04	-.08*
T1 social preference	-.01	.02	.08	.01	-.04	.04	-.01	.04	.03	.05
T2 social preference	.00	.09	.12*	.01	.05	-.01	-.02	.11	.13*	.08

Note. T = time; GPA = grade point averages.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 5. Regression Analyses Predicting Psychosocial Adjustment at T2 From Antisocial Crowd Membership at T1 and T2, T1 Psychosocial Adjustment, and Gender.

Outcome	T2 depression		T2 relational aggression		T2 overt aggression		T2 GPA		T2 popularity		T2 social preference	
	β	sr^2	β	sr^2	β	sr^2	β	sr^2	β	sr^2	β	sr^2
Variables in model												
T1 outcome	.46	.21***	.29	.08***	.29	.08***	.70	.42***	.43	.16***	.28	.07***
T2 antisocial crowd	.10	.01	.19	.03**	.25	.05***	-.18	.02**	.17	.02**	-.11	.01
Gender	.01	.00	.35	.12***	-.07	.00	.00	.00	.09	.01	.11	.01
T1 antisocial crowd	-.14	.01*	.05	.00	-.02	.00	.01	.00	.13	.01*	.02	.00
Full model	$R^2 = .23$, $F = 18.37***$		$R^2 = .29$, $F = 28.49***$		$R^2 = .17$, $F = 14.65***$		$R^2 = .59$, $F = 90.20***$		$R^2 = .32$, $F = 34.05***$		$R^2 = .10$, $F = 9.01***$	

Note. Gender was coded as 0 = boys and 1 = girls. T = time; GPA = grade point averages. sr^2 = squared semi-partial correlation.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

popularity, GPA, and depression) from corresponding T1 psychosocial outcome variable, gender, T1 antisocial crowd membership, and the two-way interaction between T1 antisocial crowd membership and gender. Interaction terms were calculated based on mean-centered scores (Aiken & West, 1991). However, the full pattern of findings did not provide any evidence for moderation. None of the specified interaction effects approached significance (all β s < .05, all p s > .40).

Discussion

Research on crowd structures in adolescent peer groups has frequently identified reputational groupings that are indicative of deviant norms or antisocial attributes (La Greca et al., 2001). The current article sought to extend the available work on youth who are members of antisocial crowds by focusing on a setting in which peer group dynamics are likely to be influenced by gang subculture. We recruited middle school students from neighborhoods that have been confronted by high rates of gang violence, urban crime, and marked economic distress. In this very difficult context, antisocial crowd membership was linked to adjustment problems (i.e., aggression and poor academic achievement) but also appeared to bring significant psychosocial benefits (i.e., popularity and modest decreases in depression). Taken together, our results shed new light on the complex role of crowd structures in a high-risk setting.

Consistent with past research (Sussman et al., 2007), we identified crowds that appeared to be characterized by antisocial attributes and a proclivity toward aggression. Interestingly, peer experts conceptualized these crowds using terminology and references that are associated with gang subculture. In our focus groups, adolescents labeled members of the primary antisocial crowd as “cholos” and viewed their defining features as having a strong interest in gang subculture and aspirations toward eventual gang membership. An overlapping group of adolescents, “taggers,” was identified by involvement in gang-themed graffiti, other group-oriented acts of vandalism, and petty crime. In these highly impacted neighborhoods, adolescents tended to view deviant social reputations through the lens of gang imagery.

An important aspect of our findings is that we identified crowds using descriptors derived from an open-ended focus group procedure (Brown, 1989). There are a handful of existing studies in which researchers have examined reputational labels that are defined in reference to gang membership or involvement in gang culture (Dishion, Nelson, & Yasui, 2005; Sussman et al., 2004). In these projects, the researchers generated group labels *a priori* and then asked participants to name relevant peers (e.g.,

Sussman et al., 2007). By contrast, we did not provide our participants with stimuli or prompts that would guide them toward particular conceptualizations. The terminology that these adolescents generated on their own might offer a window into their schemas regarding antisocial peers. These youth appear to implicitly view antisocial reputations in the school peer group and an orientation toward involvement with gangs as synonymous processes. Perhaps, in this specific setting, antisocial tendencies are likely to manifest through association with gangs.

Not surprisingly, affiliation with antisocial crowds was a marker of maladjustment at school (Downs & Rose, 1991; Farmer et al., 2003; Heaven et al., 2008). Youth who were viewed as being “cholos” and/or “taggers” tended to be aggressive and display poor academic performance in the classroom. Despite functioning problems, these adolescents exhibited increases in popularity over time. Thus, affiliation with antisocial crowds may have been a double-edged sword, concurrently bringing risks for dysfunction and the promise of growing status among peers.

To some extent, the association between antisocial reputations and high status harkens back to themes that are present in existing literature on popularity. Popularity researchers have noted that an aggressive or domineering disposition can be an efficient tool for achieving a high-profile position in the peer group (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004). In fact, a subgroup of highly visible youth seems to rely on aversive behavioral strategies to achieve and maintain status (Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000). Consider, for example, the student who gossips and spreads rumors about social rivals or uses physical aggression to intimidate the competition. Accordingly, it might be argued the “cholo” and/or “tagger” crowds in the current project are simply a reconceptualization of popular aggressive adolescents identified in past work (Schwartz et al., 2006). In this particular setting, however, the antisocial and high-status crowds were only partially overlapping groups, indicating that “cholo” and/or “tagger” crowds may have distinct features that impact status outcomes. That is, within this context, a reputation that includes elements of gang subculture may provide a unique boost to social visibility beyond affiliation with the high-status crowd. Simply being viewed as being on a trajectory toward a gang lifestyle could bring tangible benefits to youth who aspire to an elite position in the peer hierarchy.

In contrast to the pattern of findings for popularity, our analyses did not provide evidence of a longitudinal link between antisocial crowd membership and social preference. Previous investigators have typically portrayed members of deviant crowds as ostracized or socially rejected (La Greca & Harrison, 2005; La Greca et al., 2001). The full picture in our data highlights the potential implications of the larger social context for crowd structures. In a

community setting where gang violence is a common event and antisocial behavior represents an implicit norm, youth who are identified with the “cholo” and/or “tagger” crowds may be unlikely to experience rebuff.

Perhaps, as a partial reflection of the positive attention received from peers, membership in the antisocial crowd predicts modest decreases in depressive tendencies. The relevant effect sizes were certainly not large, but these findings underscore the challenges that interventionists face as they attempt to dissuade young people who aspire toward problematic social affiliations. It could be difficult to discourage youth from identification with antisocial peers given the probable enhancement of self-image.

We acknowledge that the small changes in depression observed in this project do not necessarily reflect the visibility associated with membership in a prominent crowd. A more parsimonious explanation might be that youth with antisocial reputations are characterized by attributes that are likely to mitigate risk for depression (e.g., inflated self-confidence). Under these conditions, crowd membership could be a marker of underlying processes rather than a unique predictor.

Regardless of the underlying mechanisms, our results with regard to depressive tendencies do offer a notable divergence from past reports. Previous investigators have consistently concluded that members of deviant or antisocial crowds are likely to be characterized by internalized distress (Prinstein & La Greca, 2002; Heaven et al., 2008). Our findings present a much different picture within the context of an urban neighborhood with high rates of gang violence, where antisocial crowd membership likely brings some psychosocial benefits.

The developmental implications of any aspect of an adolescent's social reputation may be dependent on the proximal environment. Adoption of an antisocial persona in this particular context could bring social prestige and subsequent benefits for self-esteem. Popularity requires compatibility with the norms embedded in the microsystem (Jonkmann, Trautwein, & Lüdtke, 2009), and a reputation that involves violent or aggressive attributes would have much different social implications in other communities (Bellmore, Villarreal, & Ho, 2011).

There are also inconsistencies between our findings and results that have emerged in the literature on actual gang membership. Depression has sometimes been viewed as a correlate of gang affiliation (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003), perhaps reflecting exposure to trauma and community violence (Schwartz & Proctor, 2000). There is also some evidence that the high level of violence exposure that accompanies gang involvement can have a role in suicidal ideation (Madan, Mrug, & Windle, 2011). However, it should be emphasized that our analyses focused only on the

prediction of youth's social reputation during the middle school years, and we did not attempt to directly index involvement with gangs. We expect that the early adolescents in our study are enjoying the benefits of a high-profile social reputation but have yet to experience the full intensity of a gang life-style (Gilman et al., 2014). Indeed, it is quite likely that some youth who are associated with antisocial crowds will not go on to become actual gang members.

Other ambiguities in our data relate to the role of gender. We did not find a compelling pattern of gender differences in antisocial crowd membership. We were somewhat surprised by this pattern insofar as boys engage in higher rates of physically aggressive behaviors than girls (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008; Zimmer-Gembeck, Geiger, & Crick, 2005). Likewise, our analyses of gender as a moderator failed to produce significant results. The psychosocial outcomes associated with antisocial crowd membership did not differ for boys and girls. Of course, the conservative nature of interaction effects in naturalistic designs has been well demonstrated (Aiken & West, 1991). In any case, our findings do not support strong conclusions (or even preliminary hypotheses) regarding gender and crowd affiliation.

Despite these interpretational issues, we speculate that the present research can provide some clues regarding the precursors of gang activity. The goals of this project focused on the normative structure of middle school peer groups with a specific emphasis on antisocial crowds. We made no attempt to directly assess actual gang affiliation, and we caution against generalizations that go beyond the limits of this project. High school reputational crowds and violent street gangs are not conceptually linked social structures. However, we targeted a vulnerable age group, a broader community in which there are endemic pressures toward gang involvement, and social processes that could potentially play an etiological role in eventual gang membership. Based on our findings regarding crowd structure, we may be in a position to generate some early hypotheses.

In the specific social environment that we targeted, membership in the "cholo" and/or "tagger" crowds seemed to bring increases in standing with peers. The implicit message to adolescents attending the participating school will be that association with a gang subculture is an efficient route toward prestige and high visibility in the peer group. Existing theoretical models have viewed the perceived social benefits of identification with gangs as a precursor of eventual direct involvement (Howell & Egley, 2005; Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Smith, & Porter, 2003). Thus, we can offer some speculations regarding a potential developmental progression. Youth may aspire toward a "cholo" and/or "tagger" reputation in the school peer group as a strategy for achieving visibility and prominence. The end result is crystallization of a

self-image that is organized around antisocial norms and a later openness to formal affiliation with a gang. Through these mechanisms, membership in the “cholo” and/or “tagger” crowds during the middle years emerges as an etiological factor in more problematic trajectories.

Youth in the “cholo” and/or “tagger” crowds could also gravitate toward involvement with gangs through the influence of specific affiliations with peers. Crowds are reputational structures rather than forums for social interaction (Brown, 1989). Nonetheless, shared social reputations can have a role in facilitating relational ties between youth and thus may have immediate implications for socialization (Urberg et al., 2000). In this case, membership in the antisocial crowd could bring vulnerable youth into contact with classmates who model and reinforce gang-oriented behaviors and attitudes. The risks associated with such exposure have been a persistent theme in the literature on gang involvement (Craig, Vitaro, Gagnon, & Tremblay, 2002; Sussman et al., 2004).

Limitations and Future Directions

Before we move on to our concluding comments, we pause to identify limitations of the current project. Our goal was to examine the predictors and outcomes associated with crowd identification in the specific context of an urban neighborhood characterized by the high levels of gang activity. The difficulties accessing a complex setting of this nature combined with intensive Social Type Rating data collection procedures limited our research to a single large middle school.

A related concern is that we were unable to conduct comparisons across communities of varying compositions. We can describe associations between crowd affiliation and adjustment outcomes within the targeted context. We are not in a position to make comparative statements about the social structure of schools in gang-impacted and non-gang-impacted neighborhoods.

The period of our data collection was also relatively constrained, with two waves of data collected only one year apart. Some of the phenomena of interest (i.e., academic functioning and aggression) are highly stable across time. Accordingly, a longer term design might be optimal for prediction of change in future research.

As with much of the research in this domain, questions regarding the conceptualization and assessment of crowd structure can be raised (Cross & Fletcher, 2009). Investigators have relied on a number of different methodological approaches, including self-report data, focus groups, and peer nominations (Brown, 1989; Cross & Fletcher, 2009; Sussman et al., 2004). There are theoretical and practical implications for each of these specific approaches.

Conclusions

Past research on reputational structures in adolescent peer groups has highlighted the association between identification with deviant crowds and indices of maladjustment (Sussman et al., 2007). The results of this study provide new insight into the role of these processes in the context of economically distressed urban neighborhoods with high levels of gang activity. Adolescents in this high-risk community tended to view antisocial crowds in terms of gang imagery. Moreover, we found a paradoxical pattern of associations. Antisocial crowd membership was concurrently linked with indices of maladjustment while also predictive of high standing in the peer group and decreased levels of depression. Further attention to the potential role of crowd affiliation in the prediction of adjustment outcomes in high-risk contexts appears to be warranted.

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Note

1. Antisocial crowd membership was found to be correlated with aggression in both years of the project, which may indicate that antisocial crowd membership could be viewed as a simple marker, rather than as a putative predictor, of aggression. To address this issue, we respecified the models predicting depressive symptoms and popularity with the mean of relational and overt aggression scores at T1 and T2 added as additional covariates. Results from these analyses indicated that T1 antisocial crowd membership was still significantly predictive of T2 popularity, $\beta = .14, p = .037$, and T2 depression, $\beta = -.14, p = .037$. That is, antisocial crowd membership was predictive of psychosocial outcomes independent of adolescents' own level of aggression.

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