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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND GANGS

FINAL SUMMARY OVERVIEW

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Purpose. Programs designed to counter and/or prevent violent extremism have frequently aimed at undercutting economic disadvantages of neighborhoods, group- and individual-level grievances and powerful ideologies that encourage individuals to join or form radical organizations. At the same time a long-established research tradition in criminology has emphasized community-wide programs as an effective way of reducing the attraction of gangs and countering gang-related crime and violence. Despite calls for research on the similarities and differences between terrorism and more ordinary forms of crime, there have been few studies comparing violent extremism and street gangs. The overarching purpose of this study is to provide an empirical assessment of the extent to which there are commonalities between the types of individuals who become involved in violent extremist groups and criminal gangs, as well as the processes by which individuals engage in each type of group. Following this comparison, we assess the extent to which the empirical results comparing violent extremist group members and gangs support the potential for anti-gang programs to be used more generally to bolster the resilience of communities to violent extremism and other forms of crime.

Subjects. Four subject samples were used in this study, each of which will be discussed in detail below: (1) a quantitative dataset of US-based extremists, (2) a quantitative dataset representative of adolescent and adult US gang members, (3) qualitative life histories of US-based extremists, and (4) qualitative interview data derived from current and former US-based gang members. The quantitative data of US-based extremists were drawn from the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) dataset, which at the time of analysis included individual-level information on 1,473 observed cases of US-based extremism. The PIRUS dataset was developed with support of NIJ Award #2012-ZA-BX-2012, and was collected solely using publicly available sources such as news articles, media reports, court

records, and published biographies. To be included in the PIRUS data, the individual must have either committed ideologically motivated illegal acts (violent and non-violent), joined a designated terrorist organization, or associated with organizations whose leaders have been indicted of ideologically motivated criminal behavior. Additionally, individuals must have radicalized in the United States, espoused, or currently espouse ideological motives, and have demonstrated that their behavior was linked to their respective ideological motives.

For our quantitative sample of gang members, we utilized data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97). The NLSY97 dataset is among the largest publicly available sources of data on gang members, and is representative of youth born between 1980 and 1984. The data were generated through multistage cluster probability sampling and we relied on the cross-sectional component, consisting of 6,748 persons (705 were self-reported gang members) achieving representativeness through self-weighting.

Our qualitative data on extremists were selected as a subset of the PIRUS dataset. All subjects radicalized to the point of committing violent or non-violent illegal acts in the United States between 1960 and 2013, and were publicly identified in open sources as extremists. We selected 38 individuals to produce life-course narratives based on the availability of information in public sources related to their backgrounds and entry into their respective extremist group(s), their primary ideological affiliation, status as a member of an extremist group (excluding non-group members from the sample), and gender (all male). All data were collected from unclassified sources, including court records, media accounts, and biographies.

Our qualitative data on gang members were drawn from 45 former and current gang members in Los Angeles, Phoenix, and Denver. The gang interviews were based on a purposive, field-based sampling strategy in each city. Eighteen interviews were conducted at a gang job

training/re-entry program in Los Angeles. Twelve interviews were conducted in Phoenix through contacts at a job training/re-entry center for gang members. In Denver, 15 interviews were conducted at a gang intervention program. To be eligible for an interview, individuals had to self-report current or former gang membership, have served time in prison, be male, and over 25 years of age. Gang membership was screened initially by the participation in gang programming. Consistent with inclusion criteria of prior research, current and former gang membership was operationalized using self-nomination. Interviews were based on a structured interview guide with both fixed and open responses, derived from the PIRUS coding template. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Project design and methods. To assess empirically the individual characteristics and entry processes of extremists and gang members, we relied on both quantitative and qualitative assessments. The quantitative portion of the project was based on a systematic comparison between the PIRUS dataset and the NLSY97 data. To determine whether participants in gangs and domestic extremism overlap and share similar characteristics, we conducted descriptive bivariate analyses across distinct comparative categories (described below). We assessed statistical significance using independent sample t-tests and Pearson's chi-squared tests.

The qualitative portion of the project design was based upon identifying the presence of 25 key indicators derived from four theoretical perspectives that inform initial involvement in criminal groups (rational choice, general strain theory, social control, and social learning) within each qualitative sample (described above). We employed a two-step coding procedure: (1) extremist narratives and gang interview data were first coded using a coding instrument that identified the presence of the 25 theoretical indicators, and (2) interview responses were then coded to capture emergent themes endemic to the processes of joining and participating in illegal

gang activities. Our coding scheme was transitive; that is, we applied the PIRUS concepts to the gang data, as well as gang concepts to the PIRUS data. We adopted these procedures to measure both shared and unique gang and extremist processes. All coding of the qualitative data was completed using MAXQDA software using multiple coders for each observation.

Data analysis. For the quantitative analysis between the PIRUS and NLSY datasets, we first developed a three-part comparative model that emphasizes explicit, spurious, and indirect links between the two samples: (1) extremists with and without a history of involvement in gangs (PIRUS), (2) gang extremists (PIRUS) and gang members drawn from a representative sample (NLSY97), and (3) non-gang extremists (PIRUS) and gang members drawn from a representative sample (NLSY97). Next, we identified the primary variable domains that are shared between both datasets: group involvement, demographics, family, religious, and socioeconomic status. We then used descriptive statistics to compare the sample across these multiple variable domains.

For the qualitative portion of the study, we searched for the presence of 25 key theoretical indicators across the two samples. We then measured the extent each indicator was present in members of the sample and the frequency of each indicator between the extremists and gang samples across each of the four theoretical perspectives. We conducted chi-square tests to facilitate comparisons.

Findings.

Quantitative comparison of gang members and domestic extremists.

Our comparison of the quantitative dataset generally found explicit differences between the two samples across five domains of comparison. When comparing parameters of group involvement, we found 5.6% of extremists to have a history of gang involvement. One of the

most striking differences between the samples is the age of initial group involvement. Extremists with a history of gang involvement are on average four years younger at the age of group involvement than extremists without such a history. Further, the average age of non-extremist gang members was approximately 40% younger than gang-extremists, and 45% younger than all extremists in PIRUS. In terms of basic demographics, extremists were far more likely to be male (approx. 90%) than the gang sample, which is nearly one-third female. Another key demographic distinction between the groups is that domestic extremists more closely approximate the racial/ethnic composition of the United States at large, while gang members more closely reflect the composition of millennials, another function of the age differences between the groups. Gang extremists were just as likely to be white, Hispanic, and Asian as non-gang extremists, findings that are inconsistent with the NLSY97 data, which reveals that blacks and Hispanics were overrepresented in gangs. In general, both gang and non-gang extremists in PIRUS were overwhelmingly third or more generation citizens. Gang extremists were also less likely to be first generation residents than non-gang extremists. In the NLSY97 data, 79% of adult gang members were third or more generation, but there was also a much greater representation of second generation residents in gangs.

When comparing family-related variables, domestic extremists were far more likely to be married, although this finding is naturally related to the large differences in age between the two samples. When examining religious differences, we found that extremists were less likely to be associated with “no religion” or to be Catholic or Protestant, and more likely to be Muslim or Jewish. Race/ethnicity may explain these findings in part, as a higher percentage of gang members are Black or Hispanic, groups heavily represented in Catholicism and Protestantism in the United States. Finally, extremists have more college experience than gang members and

display lower rates of poverty in both childhood and adulthood.

Qualitative comparisons of pathways into gangs and extremism.

For the qualitative portion of the project, we applied four general theories of crime to initial involvement in criminal groups: rational choice, strain, control and learning. Among theoretical perspectives which inform entry into crime and criminal groups, there appears to be some agreement regarding the importance of a variety of distal, proximal, and dynamic criminogenic factors. In support of rational choice theory, gang membership was associated with material rewards, while extremism was associated with emotional rewards. Both groups were exposed to strains from a variety of sources, although economic strains were stronger among gang members while cultural disillusionment and socially-based loss of significance among extremists. While gang members experienced strain as individuals or as a community, these circumstances were rarely extended to their entire racial or cultural identity. Extremists, on the other hand, were more frequently exposed to threats to their cultural or social identities. Our analyses showed differences with respect to the rate of loose community relations and poor family connections; gang members experienced both more often than extremists. This suggests that when parents or guardians were present in the adolescence of gang members, the interpersonal relationships themselves were often fraught, distant, or abusive. This contrasts with the experience of extremists who were more likely to experience a traumatic loss of a parent or partner. However, in both cases there was considerable evidence of weak social bonds – from parental divorces, physical and emotional abuses, and generally poor social relations. Social connections facilitated involvement in both groups, but the use of message boards, forums, or other forms of media were nearly exclusive to extremist groups. This may speak to the political nature of extremist groups and the need to adhere to such views among potential members. In contrast, pathways

into gangs are largely a local phenomenon.

Policy Implications. Both our quantitative and qualitative assessments yielded a number of important implications for criminal justice policy. First, the low level of overlap between extremists and gangs in the quantitative analysis – both in terms of sample overlap and shared characteristics on relevant variable domains – suggests limited support for directly adapting policies, programs, and intervention strategies designed for gangs to counteract the threat of domestic extremists. Perhaps most significantly, differences in age suggest that prevention, intervention, and suppression efforts used with gang members may be less effective in addressing the challenges posed by individuals engaged in political extremism. Further, these results also point to the factors that may compel people to join extremist groups or gangs at different stages of the life course. In particular, policymakers should look for older gang members as individuals who may be radicalized as they approach the prime ages for membership in extremist groups, particularly if they harbor feelings of being treated unfairly. Equally important is paying attention to younger extremists as individuals who may be vulnerable to gang membership.

The qualitative component of our study yielded a number of policy implications, which largely harmonize with the implications derived from the quantitative portion. We found a variety of risk factors that are foundational in developing resilience within individuals and communities to gang and extremist group involvement. These range from the value of family and other prosocial relationships, the provision of basic needs in disadvantaged communities, and a focus on developing cognitive resources in responding to individual crises at all stages in life. Depending upon the local circumstances, adapting programs to populations in-need is vital, as cut-and-paste efforts could be perceived by communities as insensitive and potentially

detrimental toward providing beneficial relationships. As for specific programs and resources, our study finds that the presence of affordable and culturally-cognizant counseling and mental health practitioner resources may provide a protective buffer to strains and mitigate pushes toward involvement. It is also clear that different narratives from gang and extremist groups target different vulnerabilities, and as a result the counter-narratives provided in schools and online should consider these specific contexts. Ultimately, further partnership between intervention programs, researchers, and local stakeholders ought to be pursued to maximize the targeted benefits while minimizing the harm and possibility of negative externalities.

The need for effective responses to extremism is pressing and significant. In 2015, the US Department of State reported nearly 12,000 terrorist attacks worldwide which led to over 28,000 deaths and 35,000 injuries. The collateral consequences of terrorist activity are widespread, with substantial impacts for the economy, psychological well-being, and trauma. Many observers have noted that there is neither the knowledge base nor the proven practices to respond to terrorism. This leaves a void which some have suggested could be addressed by replicating interventions from other areas. Given the apparent similarities between extremist groups and gangs, some have recommended that gang interventions may offer promise for responding to extremism.

The similarities between gangs and extremist groups suggest the potential for expropriating prevention and intervention models designed to address gang problems and applying them to extremist groups. These similarities include: (1) the group context and group processes, (2) joining, engaging and leaving, (3) organizational structures, (4) the role of women, (5) the importance of both symbolic and instrumental activities, (6) the role of oppositionality, particularly as it results in violence, in understanding the activities of these groups, and (7) the

potential role of prison in the emergence and maintenance of gangs and extremist groups. To date, however, these parallels are largely speculative despite some attempts to examine the overlap. What little work exists in studying the overlap suggests that the nature of such overlap is not straightforward.

The gang intervention paradigm (OJJDP) typically rests on four activities: prevention, intervention, suppression and re-entry. These are broad, flexible categories, certainly inclusive enough to be re-focused in a variety of ways and incorporate elements of existing efforts targeted at reducing membership in extremist groups and activities that support extremism. Prevention is the broadest activity, focusing on the larger community with a message to discourage affiliating with or acting on behalf of extremist groups, and includes both primary and secondary prevention. Intervention is more narrowly focused on individuals at elevated risk for being in extremist groups and engaging in extremist activities. Suppression specifically targets individuals who are actively involved in extremist groups and terrorist acts and relies on arrest, prosecution and imprisonment. Finally, re-entry recognizes that most individuals who go to prison will return to the community and attempts to ensure that their return is law-abiding and productive and does not include involvement in extremist activities.

We are currently developing a research paper that reviews the premise of each of the four strategies, the empirical evidence regarding its success in responding to gangs, and its likely utility in responding to extremism. This paper specifically notes the results of rigorous evaluations, attempting to extract the successful aspects of gang intervention. In addition, we put these results in the context of efforts to respond to extremism. Finally, we offer an assessment of the likely utility of gang strategies for extremist groups. This review is premised on the notion that gangs and extremist groups share a good deal in common and that responses to extremist

groups can be developed more quickly by focusing on models developed by gangs.

Project-related publications and presentations.

- Becker, M. 2018. Control, learning, or both? An integrated theoretical framework for ideologically-motivated violence. Citadel Intelligence & Cybersecurity Conference, Charleston, SC. September 25.
- Becker, M. 2018. When extremists become violent: Examining the association between social learning, social control, and engagement in violent extremism. Unpublished manuscript, University of Maryland.
- Becker, M., S. Decker, G. LaFree, D. Pyrooz, K. Ernest & P. James. 2018. Gangs and extremist groups: An examination of antecedent and involvement behaviors. American Society of Criminology, Atlanta, November 15.
- Becker, M., S. Decker, G. LaFree, D. Pyrooz, K. Ernest & P. James. 2018. General theories of crime and entry into criminal groups: A qualitative comparative study of gangs and extremists. Manuscript under review.
- Decker, Scott H., and David C. Pyrooz. 2017. Extremism, radicalization, and religious fundamentalism among gang and non-gang prison inmates. The 52nd meeting of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, Kansas City, MO.
- LaFree, G. 2018. Terrorism: Research progress and directions for the future. NIJ Day, American Society of Criminology, Atlanta, November 15.
- LaFree, G. 2018. Comparative study of gangs and extremists. CREST Conference, University of Lancaster, UK, July 11.
- LaFree, G. 2017. Studying violent political extremism, Workshop, European Society of Criminology, Les Diablerets, Switzerland, August.

- LaFree, G. 2017. Cut from the same cloth? A comparative study of gangs and extremists. invited talk, Catholic University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil, August. 2017.
- LaFree, G., K. Jasko. 2018. Leaders and followers in extremist groups. Unpublished manuscript, University of Maryland.
- LaFree, Gary, Scott H. Decker, and David C. Pyrooz. 2016. Comparative qualitative case studies of gang members and terrorist perpetrators. The 72nd meeting of the American Society of Criminology, New Orleans.
- LaFree, G., B. Jiang & L. Porter. 2018. Prisons and violent political extremism in the United States. Forthcoming: *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*.
- Pyrooz, D., G. LaFree, S. Decker & P. James. 2017. Cut from the same cloth? Comparing gangs and violent political extremists. *Justice Quarterly* 35(1): 1-32.
- Pyrooz, David C., Scott H. Decker, Gary LaFree, and Patrick James. 2016. Cut from the same cloth? A comparative study of gangs and extremists. The 16th workshop of the *Eurogang Research Program*, Gothenburg, Sweden.