

# Evidence shows which factors predict gang membership in low- and middle-income countries, but more studies needed



*Studies address the associations between life events and circumstances, and the likelihood of being a youth gang member*

## What is the aim of this review?

This Campbell systematic review examines the predictors of youth gang membership in low- and middle-income countries. The review summarises findings from eight reports from five countries and the Caribbean region.

**Youth gang membership is associated with delinquency, violent crime and trafficking. A range of individual, peer, family, school and community factors can predict the likelihood of youths getting involved with gangs. Knowledge of these factors can be helpful for reducing gang membership.**

## What did the review study?

Youth gang membership is associated with delinquency, violent crime and trafficking – and gang members are themselves frequently the victims of these offences. Yet youth gangs can also provide a form of social capital, a sense of belonging and purpose to disenfranchised youth. This review identifies the factors associated with young people joining gangs, and the differences between gang-involved and non-gang-involved youth. Understanding these associations is essential to reduce the levels of gang membership and the incidence of related violence.

## What studies are included?

Studies of youth gangs in low- and middle-income countries were included, with participants aged 10-29 years. The studies had to assess an individual predictor or correlate of youth gang membership, where the predictor or correlate is a single characteristic, not a conglomeration of multiple constructs. Included studies had designs including data on both gang-involved and non-gang-involved youth, recruited with strategies that were eligible.

Nine studies met the eligibility criteria and were included in the review. One of these studies did not report all the required data and so was not included in the analyses. The studies were conducted in Turkey, Trinidad and Tobago, the Caribbean, El Salvador, China and Brazil.

| Domain            | Significantly associated with gang membership   | No significant association with gang membership   |
|-------------------|---|---|
| <b>Individual</b> | Delinquency<br>Alcohol and soft drug use<br>Male gender<br>Risky sexual behaviours<br>Employment<br>Psychological risk factors (low self-control, impulsivity) and lack of psychological protective factors (empathy, future orientation, belief in moral order)<br>Victimisation | Age<br>Minority ethnicity<br>Protective behaviours surrounding sexual behaviour or alcohol and soft drug use. |
| <b>Peer</b>       | Socialising with delinquent peers   | Socialising with pro-social peers   |
| <b>Family</b>     | Negative family environments<br>Lack of parental monitoring<br>Middle-income families had greater odds of reporting youth gang membership than those from either high or low-income families (finding from one study)   | Parental education<br>Parental attitudes to antisocial behaviour  |
| <b>School</b>     | Low school attachment<br>Exposure to violence at school Educational difficulties<br>Opportunities for prosocial involvement   | Level of education<br>School type<br>School performance   |
| <b>Community</b>  | Exposed to neighbourhood violence   | Neighbourhood environment risk or protective factors, or geography  |

Table: Factors associated with gang membership

#### How up-to-date is this review?

The review authors searched for studies published up to September 2013. This Campbell Systematic Review was published in December 2018.

#### What is the Campbell Collaboration?

The Campbell Collaboration is an international, voluntary, non-profit research network that publishes systematic reviews. We summarise and evaluate the quality of evidence about programmes in the social and behavioural sciences. Our aim is to help people make better choices and better policy decisions.

#### About this summary

This summary was prepared by the authors of the Campbell Systematic Review 2018:11 “Factors associated with youth gang membership in low- and middle-income countries: A systematic review” by Angela Higginson, Kathryn Benier, Yulia Shenderovich, Laura Bedford, Lorraine Mazerolle and Joseph Murray (DOI 10.4073/csr.2018:11). The summary was designed, edited and produced by Tanya Kristiansen (Campbell Collaboration) Financial support from the American Institutes for Research for the production of this summary is gratefully acknowledged.

#### What are the main results in this review?

The eight studies analysed in the review address the associations between life events and circumstances, and the likelihood of being a youth gang member across five domains: individual, peers, family, school and community. Significant associations were found with factors in each domain.

#### What do the findings of this review mean?

The lack of available evidence limits the extent to which clear conclusions can be drawn about the factors associated with youth gang membership. The review is based on a very small number of studies, and has significant limitations in coverage. The limited evidence of the correlates of youth gang membership suggests factors that may drive gang membership and suggests areas where interventions may prove promising in the family, school, and community domains, as well as provide a starting point for future studies.

