

Suicide Ideation, Attempts and Abuse Among Incarcerated Gang and Nongang Delinquents

**William Evans, Ph.D., Eric Albers, Ph.D.,
Dan Macari, M.S.W., and Alex Mason, M.A.**

ABSTRACT: The present study examines suicide ideation and attempts as well as reported levels of physical and sexual abuse among gang and nongang-involved incarcerated youth. The self-report survey data were collected from 334 males and 61 females who were incarcerated in Nevada youth correctional facilities in the summer of 1994. Over half (58.3 percent) of the males and nearly half (45.2 percent) of the females reported being gang members. Surprisingly high rates of abuse (more than 70 percent for both physical and sexual abuse) were found among the incarcerated females of this study. Females reported significantly more suicide attempts and were more likely to have been physically and sexually abused than males. Nongang males reported significantly more suicide attempts and were more likely to report sexual abuse than gang-involved males. Among the gang-involved delinquents, females reported significantly more suicide attempts than males. In addition, gang members who reported sexual abuse were more likely to have higher levels of suicide ideation *and* to have attempted suicide. Implications for youth correction specialists and social workers are discussed.

During the last thirty years suicide rates for adolescents have more than doubled (Lester, 1992). In addition, recent studies have documented a dramatic increase in juvenile gang membership and gang-related activity (Spergel, 1992; Spergel & Curry, 1993). Surprisingly,

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Dr. Evans is an assistant professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Dr. Albers is an associate professor in the School of Social Work, Dan Macari is a doctoral student in the College of Education, and Alex Mason is a doctoral student in the Interdisciplinary Social Psychology Program. All authors are at the University of Nevada, Reno. Address communications to the first author at Mail Stop 140, University of Nevada, Reno, Reno, Nevada 89557-0131.

although researchers have employed a variety of methods to separately study each of these issues among adolescents, suicide among gang-involved youth has received little direct attention (Spergel, 1992). Several investigators have found suicidal ideation to be positively associated with delinquency (Kandel, Raveis, & Davies, 1991; Alessi, McManus, Brickman, & Grapentine, 1994; Battle & Battle, 1989; Kempton & Forehand, 1992). Little is known, however, regarding suicidal ideation and attempts among gang-involved delinquents.

Investigators have attempted to determine whether those adolescents who report suicidal ideation also are those who attempt suicide. Unfortunately, the findings have been mixed, with some researchers finding that adolescents who engage in suicidal ideation are quite different from those who actually engage in suicidal behavior (Carlson & Cantwell, 1982). Others believe that suicidal ideation and attempts follow a continuum and that in fact those adolescents with serious ideation are those attempting suicide (Brent, Kalis, & Edelbrock, 1986; Pfeffer, Conte, & Plutchik, 1979). As would be expected, studies of adolescents have consistently found higher percentages for self-reported suicide ideation than for attempts. For example, Dubow, Kausch, Blum, and Reed (1989) found in a survey given to junior high students that 36 percent had previously thought of suicide and 7 percent had attempted suicide. Domino, Domino, and Berry (1986-1987) report that about 20 percent of the junior high students in their study had experienced thoughts about suicide, and about a quarter of these students personally knew individuals who had completed suicide. Several recent epidemiological studies of adolescent suicide place lifetime attempt rates as high as 11 percent (Andrews & Lewinsohn, 1992; Harkavy-Friedman, Annis, Boeck, & DiFiore, 1987). In a recent in-school survey of eighth and tenth grade Nevada students ($n = 1,823$), 38 percent of the students reported some level of suicide ideation, and 19 percent reported at least one suicide attempt in the last year (Evans & Smith, 1995). Nevada has one of the highest adolescent suicide rates in the country, however, and varying definitions and methods of data collection have made adolescent suicide ideation and attempt rates difficult to compare (Boutte & Albers, 1994).

Most studies agree that depression is a major factor in almost all suicide attempts (Levy & Deykin, 1989; Bettes & Walker, 1986; Adcock, Nagy, & Simpson, 1991), however some claim that depression is only a response to other problems experienced by troubled youth (Battle, Battle, & Tolley, 1993; Dukes & Lorch, 1989; McKenry, & Tishler, 1983). Although many studies have been conducted regarding suicide

behaviors among adolescents, few have focused on suicide among adjudicated youths. Several of the studies that have been conducted on this topic have had limitations. Battle et al. (1993) interviewed 263 incarcerated youths, gathering information on demographics, suicidal ideation, level of happiness, and intelligence. The authors found that delinquents who experienced sexual abuse reported more alcohol and cocaine use, reported higher levels of unhappiness, and were at greater risk of expressing the wish to commit suicide than delinquents who were not abused. Unfortunately, the researchers were not allowed to ask the subjects about previous suicide attempts. The authors therefore noted that the data obtained in their study was limited to explaining differences between those who expressed a wish to commit suicide and those who did not. Cole (1989) found survival-coping beliefs were significantly and negatively related to past suicidal ideation, past suicide attempts, and the self reported likelihood of a future suicide attempt. Only male juvenile delinquents, however, were sampled in this study.

Previous studies also have shown a correlation among suicidal ideation and physical, sexual, and emotional abuse (Albers & Evans, 1994; de Wilde, Kienhorst, Diekstra, & Walters, 1992; Levy & Deykin, 1989). In addition, sexual and physical abuse is known to significantly contribute to youth's involvement in drug use and other delinquency (Dembo, Williams, Fagan, & Schmeidler, 1993; Watts & Ellis, 1993). Rhodes and Fischer (1993) found that females who had been sexually abused reported significantly more involvement in property offenses and drug sales, and those who had been physically abused were significantly more likely to have committed a variety of status offenses. No differences, however, were noted between gang and non-gang members. No studies known to the authors have specifically addressed the link among abuse, suicidal behavior, and gang involvement. Subsequently, the roles of sexual and physical abuse, and suicidal ideation and attempts in juvenile gang involvement remain unclear.

Although several studies suggest that suicidal ideation is positively associated with delinquency (Kandel et al., 1991; Alessi et al., 1984; Battle et al., 1989; Kempton et al., 1992), little is known about suicide among gang-involved incarcerated youth. Given the general increase in juvenile gang activity (Spiegel, 1992; Spiegel & Curry, 1993) and the often long-term influence of gang affiliation (Hagedorn, 1988), a better understanding of suicide among gang-involved juvenile offenders is needed by youth correctional specialists and social workers.

As gang membership among adjudicated youth populations increase, this information will become even more critical. The purpose of this study is to address this gap in the gang literature by investigating suicide ideation and attempts as well as reported levels of physical and sexual abuse among gang and nongang involved incarcerated youths.

Method

Subjects and Procedure

The data for this investigation were derived from a self-report survey of incarcerated youth conducted in the summer of 1994. The purpose of the survey was to better understand the relationship between drug use and delinquency. Over a period of four weeks, all incarcerated youth in Nevada state-supported facilities were administered the survey. No other studies known to the authors have surveyed an entire state's juvenile delinquent population regarding gang and suicide issues. Eight youth declined to participate and five questionnaires were not included in the data due to spurious, inconsistent or missing responses. The final study population of 395 youth included 334 males and 61 females ranging in age from 12 to 18. The approximate ethnic distribution was Caucasian/White, 41.7 percent; African-American/Black, 27.7 percent; Chicano/Latino/Hispanic, 16.7 percent; Native-American, 4.3 percent; Asian-American, .3 percent; and multi-ethnic and other, 5.9 percent.

Administration of the survey was conducted during regularly scheduled study periods. The questionnaire was pilot tested with a similar sample of adjudicated youth for comprehension and readability. The final questionnaire was at a seventh grade reading level and interpreters at each facility were provided for those youth who spoke Spanish as their primary language (nine youth requested that the survey be read to them [four in English and five in Spanish]). In addition, the authors encouraged any questions the youth had about the survey during the administration. Youth were instructed that no questionnaires were to include names and that participation was completely voluntary. Chi square analyses were used to examine differences between gang membership, suicide ideation, and physical and sexual abuse. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) procedures were conducted to compare gang and nongang youths on frequency of suicide attempts.

Measures

This study is based on youth responses to the demographic and psychosocial items contained on the survey questionnaire. All youth responded to the same survey instrument.

Suicide Ideation. Youth were asked to respond to how often they had “thoughts of ending your life” during the past thirty days. From this item’s responses, youth were then classified into Low, Medium, and High Suicide Ideation groups for analyses. Those youth who responded “Not at all (1)” were classified as Low, those who responded “A little (2)” or “Some (3)” were placed in the Medium Ideation group, and those who reported “Quite a lot (4)” and “Extremely (5)” were placed in the High Suicide Ideation group.

Suicide Attempts. Youth were asked how many times in the past 12 months they had actually attempted suicide. Answers ranged from “zero times (1)” to “six or more times (5).”

Gang Involvement. Youth were asked if they were an active member of a gang and if yes, how long they had been a member. In addition, youth were instructed that for the purposes of this study, the definition of a gang was a social peer group that engaged in illegal activities. From this item, gang-involved youth were further classified as in a gang for “two years or less” or “more than two years.”

Sexual and Physical Abuse. Youth were classified as having been sexually or physically abused if their response was yes to “Sometimes, people use force to do sexual things to others or use force to get others to do sexual things to them. Has anyone ever done this to you?” or “Have you ever been physically abused by an adult (for example, beat up, hit with an object, kicked, or some other form of physical force)?”

Results

Of 395 adjudicated youths responding to the survey, over half ($n = 194$, 58.3 percent) of the males reported being involved in a gang and 60 percent of these gang members reported being involved for more than two years. Almost half ($n = 29$, 45.2 percent) of the females reported being gang members. Interestingly, 29.5 percent ($n = 117$) of the sample reported some thoughts of ending their life in the past

thirty days and about a quarter of the sample ($n=97$, 24.4 percent) reported one or more suicide attempts in the past year. These figures are considerably lower for ideation and somewhat higher for attempts than the percentages the authors have obtained from similar items on recent in-school surveys of non-adjudicated Nevada adolescents (Evans & Smith, 1995). By gender, 28.9 percent ($n=96$) of the males reported some suicide ideation and 22.5 percent ($n=75$) reported one or more attempts in the past year. These figures were higher among the females, with 35.5 percent ($n=22$) reporting some ideation, as well as one or more attempts in the past year. In addition, slightly more than half of the youth reported physical abuse ($n=202$, 51 percent) and 19.2 percent ($n=76$) reported sexual abuse. Startling abuse differences by gender were found, however, with 46.8 percent ($n=156$) of the males reporting physical abuse and 9.9 percent ($n=33$) reporting sexual abuse. These figures jumped among females to 75.4 percent ($n=46$) for physical abuse and 71.7 percent ($n=43$) for sexual abuse.

Relationship Between Suicide Ideation and Attempts

Pearson product-moment correlations were computed for suicidal ideation and suicide attempts for the total population, gang and nongang members, and male and female groups (see Table 1). For all groups, the relationship between suicidal ideation and suicide attempts was relatively moderate in magnitude. The highest correlation obtained was for females, in which ideation accounted for 35 percent of the variance in suicide attempts. However, when the Low, Medium, and High Ideation groups were compared to those who had not attempted

TABLE 1

Pearson Product-Moment Correlations of Suicidal Ideation and Suicide Attempts

Total Population	.5289	$r^2 = .28\%$
All Males	.5051	$r^2 = .25\%$
All Females	.5922	$r^2 = .35\%$
Gang Members	.5588	$r^2 = .31\%$
Non-Gang Members	.4491	$r^2 = .20\%$

suicide and those who had attempted, the groups were significantly different ($\chi^2 = 134.22$, $df = 2$, $p < .000$), with youth more likely to report a suicide attempt as ideation increased by group. In addition, the ideation groups were compared to two groups composed of only those youth who had attempted suicide (those reporting one attempt and those reporting more than one attempt). These groups also were significantly different ($\chi^2 = 153.76$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$), with youth more likely to have attempted suicide *more than once* as suicide ideation increased by group.

Gang and Nongang Delinquent Comparisons

Although no significant differences were found between gang and nongang members in reported physical abuse or number of suicide attempts, nongang delinquent youth were more likely to report sexual abuse ($\chi^2 = 5.68$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$) and suicide ideation ($\chi^2 = 6.50$, $df = 2$, $p < .04$).

Males. Significant differences were noted between the male gang and nongang respondents of this study, with nongang members more likely to report higher levels of suicide ideation ($\chi^2 = 8.67$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$), more suicide attempts ($F = 5.826$, $p < .01$), and sexual abuse ($\chi^2 = 3.96$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$). No differences were noted between the two male groups on reported physical abuse.

Females. No significant differences were noted between female gang and nongang members on either levels of suicidal ideation or suicide attempts. Additionally, no significant differences were noted for female gang and nongang members in reported levels of physical or sexual abuse.

Male/Female Comparisons. When reported levels of suicidal ideation, attempts, and abuse were compared by gender, no significant differences were noted between the males and females of the sample for reported levels suicidal ideation. Females did, however, report significantly more suicide attempts ($F = 4.25$, $p < .05$), and were more likely to report physical ($\chi^2 = 15.48$, $df = 1$, $p < .000$) and sexual abuse ($\chi^2 = 121.13$, $df = 1$, $p < .000$) than males. This also was the pattern when the subjects were grouped according to gang membership. No significant differences were noted on suicidal ideation, however, more female gang members reported attempting suicide ($F = 11.59$, $p < .001$), and were more likely to report physical ($\chi^2 = 9.05$, $df = 1$,

$p < .002$) and sexual abuse ($\chi^2 = 78.21$, $df = 1$, $p < .000$) than male gang members. No significant gender differences were noted for non-gang members on either ideation or attempts. However, female non-gang members were more likely to report physical ($\chi^2 = 7.13$, $df = 1$, $p < .007$) and sexual ($\chi^2 = 47.15$, $df = 1$, $p < .000$) abuse than their male peers.

Gang-involved Youth Suicide and Abuse Analyses

No significant differences in level of suicidal ideation were found between gang members who reported physical abuse and those who did not. However, gang members with reported sexual abuse were more likely to have higher levels of suicidal ideation ($\chi^2 = 9.26$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$). A similar pattern was found for suicide attempts and abuse, with only *sexually* abused gang members more likely to have reported attempting suicide ($\chi^2 = 14.57$, $df = 1$, $p < .000$). When separately analyzed by gender, however, no significant differences among male gang members were found between physical abuse and suicide ideation or attempts, or sexual abuse and ideation or attempts. Among female gang members, no significant differences also were found between physical abuse and suicide ideation or attempts. However, those female gang members who reported sexual abuse were more likely to have attempted suicide ($\chi^2 = 4.21$, $df = 1$, $p < .04$). Interestingly, no significant differences among female gang members were found between sexual abuse and level of suicide ideation.

Analyses also were conducted to compare gang members who had been involved with gangs for less than two years with those members who had been involved for two years or longer. Surprisingly, no significant differences were found between the two groups on suicide ideation, suicide attempts, physical abuse or sexual abuse.

Discussion

Among the incarcerated juvenile delinquents in this study, gang-affiliated youth represent a significant proportion (57 percent reported gang involvement) of the population. It thus is becoming increasingly important for social workers and youth correction personnel to be particularly sensitive to gang-related issues as they develop prevention, education, and intervention programs among incarcerated populations. Surprisingly, almost half (45.2 percent) of the females in this study reported gang affiliation.

This study was able to compare suicide ideation with attempts to better understand their association among incarcerated delinquents. Many prior studies of adolescents have relied only on ideation as an indicator of suicidal behavior. Although correlations between ideation and attempts were found to be relatively moderate among the delinquents in this study, as *level* of suicide ideation increased, more youth reported having attempted suicide, as well as attempting suicide more than once. This supports previous studies that have found suicide ideation and attempts to follow a continuum, with those adolescents evincing serious ideation also more likely to attempt suicide (Farberow, 1991; Brent, Kalis, & Edelbrock, 1986; Pfeffer, Conte, & Plutchik, 1979). This also provides direction for social workers working with at-risk adolescents, since among the delinquents of this study, frequent ideators were much more likely to not only have attempted suicide, but to have made multiple attempts. More studies are needed, however, of youth from differing cultures and environments who express suicide ideation to better determine the actual risk associated with varying levels of ideation and suicide attempts.

No differences between the gang and nongang delinquents of this study were found for number of suicide attempts or reported physical abuse. Nongang delinquents, however, did report higher levels of suicide ideation and were more likely to have been sexually abused than their gang-involved peers. Present results also indicate that both gang and nongang females were more likely to report abuse (physical and sexual) than their male counterparts. The shockingly high rates of abuse (more than 70 percent for both physical and sexual abuse) among the incarcerated females of this study should send a strong signal to develop and provide increased counseling and support services for female delinquents during incarceration and parole. Given these rates of abuse, further research is critically needed to clarify the role of abuse to delinquency, gang-involvement, suicide behaviors and recidivism among young females.

Nongang males were more likely to report sexual abuse, higher levels of suicide ideation, and suicide attempts than gang-involved males. No significant differences, however, were found between female gang and nongang members on these variables. In addition, present results can be viewed in the context of recent national studies which have focused on general adolescent samples and indicate that females generally are more likely to attempt suicide yet males complete suicide at higher rates (Lester, 1992). Although no gender difference in suicide ideation was found among the delinquents of this

study, females did report significantly more suicide attempts than males, and female *gang members* were more likely to report higher levels of suicidal ideation and to attempt suicide than male *gang members*. These findings again endorse the critical need to develop suicide prevention and support services targeting under served female delinquent and gang populations.

Present results appear to corroborate prior studies which found an association between sexual abuse and suicidal behavior in non-delinquent samples (Albers & Evans, 1994; de Wilde et al., 1992; and Levy et al., 1992). In this study, gang members who were sexually abused were more likely to report higher levels of suicide ideation as well as more suicide attempts. This appears to be particularly important for social workers working with gang-affiliated females, since female gang members who reported being sexually abused were more likely to report attempting suicide than gang-involved peers not reporting sexual abuse. Interestingly, although sexual abuse was linked to higher levels of suicidal behavior among the gang-involved delinquents in this sample, physical abuse was not. This underscores the serious and long-term trauma associated with sexual abuse, as well as the need for screening and early identification of sexual abuse by those working with delinquent and gang populations (particularly among females). It also may be possible that because physical abuse is so common among delinquents (more than 50 percent of the present sample reported being physically abused), the association between physical abuse and suicide behaviors that may be salient in general adolescent samples becomes less so when comparing gang vs. non-gang delinquents.

Several limitations of the study should be noted. First, since the study relied on self-report data, our measures are vulnerable to over- and under-reporting biases. Self-report data among adolescents on these issues, however, has been studied by several investigators and been accepted as valid and reliable (De-Man & Leduc, 1994; Hardt & Peterson-Hardt, 1977). A second limitation is the relatively small number of females in this study. Results should thus be considered tentative until larger female delinquent and gang samples can validate present findings. Finally, it should be noted that this study focused on the link among suicide ideation, attempts and abuse among incarcerated gang members. The relationship of these variables to *completed* suicides among gang and delinquent populations may be different and is an important research topic for future investigators.

Although the high percentage of gang-involved youth in this study

indicates a need to develop more programming tailored to gang members, it also appears that (at least among males, who constitute the largest percentage of incarcerated populations) nongang delinquents may have greater mental health needs. In contrast to gang-affiliated delinquents, nongang male delinquents reported significantly more suicide attempts and sexual abuse. As incarcerated juvenile populations and juvenile gang activity increase in our society, the necessity to better understand the needs of these high-risk populations becomes critical. Although difficult to conduct, prospective longitudinal studies are needed to elucidate the causal links among abuse (particularly sexual), gang involvement, delinquency and suicide behaviors. Until such studies are undertaken, the extremely high levels of abuse among female delinquents, as well as the strong link between sexual abuse and suicidal behaviors evinced from present findings should be highlighted for social workers and other youth service providers working with delinquent and gang-involved populations. This also indicates the strong need for support groups, individual and family counseling, case management, and crisis intervention services for both males and females as they are released from their facilities and transition back into their families, communities, and often, gangs.

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