



# A Qualitative Investigation of Gang Presence and Sexual Harassment in a Middle School

Anjali J. Forber-Pratt<sup>1</sup> · Dorothy L. Espelage<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

Our goal with this qualitative case study was to explore the relationship between gang membership/presence of gangs in a middle school on the experiences of sexual harassment from the perspectives of both bullies and victims. This study sought to explore the characteristics of sexual harassment taking place in one middle school with a gang presence, the relationship of gang membership/presence to the types of sexual harassment experienced or witnessed, and student perceptions of the influence of gangs on sexual harassment. Thompson Middle School enrolls approximately 440 students. The surrounding community has more than 20 gangs with 2000 known gang members. Data were collected from 10 student interviews and unstructured observations from researcher field notes to capture experiences from one middle school. Analysis was performed using a modified van Kaam approach. Resulting themes centered on what students knew about sexual harassment, the types of sexual harassment they witnessed at their school, and reasons why they thought sexual harassment was occurring with such frequency. Sexual harassment appears to be heightened when there is a gang presence and visible gang activity. Incidents appear to happen more in the 'open' rather than hidden. The pressure to give into sexual advances by gang members appears to be especially heightened for girls. The types of sexual harassment acts described by the students as highly invasive with many classified as same-sex acts as initiated by the gang members. Sexual harassment prevention programs in schools with a gang presence need to incorporate discussions related to gang influence.

**Keywords** Perpetration · School climate · Youth violence · Qualitative · Case study

## Introduction

Sexual harassment is defined as unwanted sexual conduct, and can include unwelcome verbal, nonverbal, and physical behaviors that interfere with an individual's right to receive an equal education (American Association of University Women [AAUW] 2011; U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights 2001). Sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination and is prohibited in schools by Title IX (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights 2001). Sexual harassment can limit students' abilities to participate in or benefit from their education experiences

and can create a hostile or abusive educational environment based on severity, persistence, or pervasiveness (De La Rue and Espelage 2014; Espelage and De La Rue 2013). During adolescence, sexual harassment tends to involve unwanted sexual commentary, spreading of sexual rumors, and inappropriate touching (Espelage et al. 2012, 2016).

Although much of the research in the area of sexual violence has focused on victimization, data do suggest that sexual harassment perpetration is common among school-aged adolescents. One national study reports sexual harassment rates of 56% for females and 40% for males (AAUW 2011), which can also include being called "gay" (Rinehart and Espelage 2015). In another study of sexual harassment conducted with 3616 6th grade students across 36 middle schools in the Midwest, 7.6% of participants reported being perpetrators of at least one incident of sexual harassment and 14.8% reported being victims of at least one form of sexual harassment in the last year (Rinehart and Espelage 2015). Additionally, 33.7% of students reported calling their peers homophobic epithets with 31.3% of students identifying as targets of this language.

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✉ Anjali J. Forber-Pratt  
anjali.forber.pratt@vanderbilt.edu

<sup>1</sup> Dept. of Human & Organizational Development, Vanderbilt University, 230 Appleton Place, Nashville, TN 37203, USA

<sup>2</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Florida, 945 Center Dr., Gainesville, FL 32611-2026, USA

Gang membership has been identified as one of the peer-related predictors of youth violence (Esbensen et al. 2009; Hawkins et al. 2000; Howell and Egley 2005). Engagement in sexually harassing and homophobic teasing behavior among middle school youth involved with gangs suggests a risk that these youths may be prone to engage in behaviors that will victimize others. In alignment with social control theory, the desire to exert power over others is similar for gang-involved youths and for sexual violence perpetrators (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). Gang involvement may be perceived as a way to regain some control. Indeed, many youths report that they join gangs for protection from victimization experiences (Forber-Pratt et al. 2014); however, we know there are numerous complex ecological factors that contribute to reasons youths join gangs (Hong 2010; Merrin et al. 2015). Related, researchers often explore bullying and victimization and gang involvement through the frameworks of both social ecological theory and social control theory. Consequently, both are equally applicable for exploring sexual harassment. Social ecological theory describes the relations and processes linking the multiple, interacting elements between individuals, their social contexts and the dynamic, transactional influences one has on the other (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Previous applications of ecology theory offer an increased understanding of the phenomena of bullying and peer victimization (Espelage 2012; Garbarino 2001; Hong and Espelage 2012; Olweus 1993), youth violence (Lauritsen 2001; Sullivan et al. 2008), engagement in school (Benner et al. 2008) and motivation for gang involvement (De La Rue and Espelage 2014; Dubow et al. 2009; Espelage and De La Rue 2011; Merrin et al. 2015).

When comparing youths who are pressured to join but resist gang membership vs. those who are involved with gangs, we see that females have greater odds at resisting membership whereas youth with increased family dysfunction and/or youth with family members who are in gangs are more likely to join (Merrin et al. 2015). According to Hirschi's (1969) social control theory, healthy bonds are critical for youths within their larger social environments. Under this assumption, individuals are thought to be intrinsically delinquent and only through socialization do they engage in prosocial behaviors. Self-control is established and maintained through a socialization process by which youths form bonds with conventional society. The social bonds established with conventional society are thought to influence an individual's behavior and engagement with conventional and prosocial behaviors, these experiences shape their likelihood of engaging in delinquent and antisocial behavior. Using this theory as a theoretical lens, insights about the attraction to gang membership, the meaning behind delinquent acts and interrogate how bonds with others may or may not be predictive of whether youths will engage in aggressive acts (i.e.,

bullying) or gang related behaviors (Forber-Pratt et al. 2014) can be made. For example, Peterson et al. (2004) found across a five-year study that up to 57% of gang members indicated they joined a gang for protection. Additional studies have noted that females often join gangs to escape violent and abusive home environments (Taylor 2008). We also know that girls involved in gangs experience more sexual abuse in comparison to girls who are recruited but resist membership (De La Rue and Espelage 2014). For youth, involvement in gangs may be perceived as a way to deal with life stressors in an effort to cope with their experiences.

While youths may see gangs as a means to gain protection, evidence suggests that gang involvement does not actually offer any protection from violent victimization experiences (Peterson et al. 2004) and may in fact increase rates of victimization for youth in multiple domains (DeLisi et al. 2009). Often victimization experiences within gangs have a gender-based component, including engaging in sexually harassing behaviors. Engagement in sexually aggressive acts is commonly seen in gangs, with males often the perpetrators of these acts and girls more often the victims (Klein 2006; Totten 2003). Research has suggested that a females' risk of victimization is clearly shaped by gender roles (Gover et al. 2009). While female gang members may avoid violence associated with more traditional roles held by males like selling drugs, fighting opposing gangs, or committing violent crimes, they are at greater risk of repeated victimization within and outside of the gang (Miller 1998).

Gender roles in gangs plays out in many ways, but language appears to be particularly salient. More specifically, youths, including youths in gangs are exposed to gender-based teasing that can include homophobic language, a known precursor to sexual harassment perpetration (Espelage et al. 2015; Espelage et al. 2017). Homophobic epithets (e.g., "gay", "fag") are often overheard in middle schools (Espelage et al. 2012; Potrat 2008; Rinehart and Espelage 2015). Often these behaviors are dismissed as being due to the fact that "boys will be boys" (Klein 2006). Oftentimes, teachers and staff do not receive adequate professional development to understand the policies around student-on-student sexual harassment and their role in preventing both (Charmaraman et al. 2013). Unfortunately, this lack of intervention can convey to youth that these behaviors are tolerated, and sends the message that such actions are acceptable. In environments where heterosexuality and male dominance are encouraged, for instance in gangs, homophobic teasing may be viewed as an acceptable way to assert control and power.

While not explored in great depth within the gang literature, engagement in sexually harassing and homophobic teasing behavior among middle school youth involved with

gangs suggests a risk that these youths may be prone to engage in behaviors that will victimize others. Victimization experienced by both males and females while in a gang is compounded with the concern that many of these youths were also victims of abuse prior to joining a gang (De La Rue and Espelage 2014; Howell and Egley 2005; Merrin et al. 2015; Molidor 1996), suggesting that a cycle may be developing that warrants further exploration.

Gangs are present in U.S. public schools. A recent report, *Indicators of School Crime and Safety*, indicated that for the 2009–2010 school year, 16% of public schools reported gang activities on school property (Roberts et al. 2015). Unfortunately, the more updated report (Musu-Gillette et al. 2017) did not include principals' reporting of gang activity. However, between 2001 and 2015, the percentage of students ages 12–18 years who reported that gangs were present in their school decreased from 20 to 11%. When compared to results from the most recent National Youth Gang Survey of the National Gang Center (n.d.) (2012) that seeks information from law enforcement, these numbers show consistency as there was an overall decline in gang activity. In 2012 (National Gang Center, n.d.; Egley et al. 2014), gangs were active in slightly less than 30% of the responding jurisdictions. Gang prevalence has decreased nearly 10 percentage points since 2010 in smaller cities. Interestingly, there is a stark difference in the larger cities and suburban counties in comparison to smaller cities and rural counties in terms of adult vs. youth gang members. Larger cities and suburban counties are more likely to report more adult gang members than youth gang members. Conversely, smaller cities and rural counties, whose gang problems are relatively more recent, are more likely to report equal proportions of youth and adult gang members.

Further, during the 2009–10 school year, 9% of public schools reported weekly acts of disrespect towards teachers beyond verbal abuse. It is clear that a gang presence changes the type of violence or crimes that students experience at school. Previous data reveal that student crime victims reported a gang presence at school (39.8%) than did students who had not been victimized (19.6%) during the 2008–09 school year (DeVoe and Bauer 2011). Specifically, higher percentages of student victims of both theft (40.2%) and violence (43.2%) reported a gang presence in their schools compared to non-victimized students (19.6%). These data suggest that a gang presence at school comes with other forms of violence and crime (Espelage and De La Rue 2011; De La Rue and Espelage 2014; DeLisi et al. 2009; Huff 1998; Miller and Decker 2001). Thus, it is critical to examine how victimization experiences at school are related to other forms of violence in order to design intervention programs that address multiple forms of violence creating what Hamby and Grych (2013) refer to as a prevention approach that considers the web of violence.

Recent research finds the nature of middle school victimization to be more violent due to the presence of gangs (Forber-Pratt et al. 2014). Specifically, the incidents of victimization are more violent in nature towards both students and teachers in schools where gangs are present in comparison to schools without a gang presence. In schools with a known gang presence, fear permeates the school environment possibly paralyzing prevention efforts. Furthermore, the social structure of gangs convolutes what is known about peer influence on bullying and victimization incidents due to deeply rooted history of gang presence, a hierarchy of power, and fear from bystanders. These findings prompted us to ask the broad question, "How does sexual harassment differ in a middle school with a gang presence?" The purpose, therefore, of this study was to understand the experiences of sexual harassment from the perspectives of both perpetrators and victims in a middle school known for having a presence of gangs. Using these experiences, the intent was to describe the influence of membership in and presence of gangs might have on the types of sexual harassment taking place in this school. It is important to explore the presence and characteristics of sexual harassment in this particular setting because of the known gang presence. This study was designed to answer the following: (1) What are the characteristics of sexual harassment taking place in one middle school with a gang presence? (2) How does gang membership or a gang presence relate to the types of sexual harassment experienced and witnessed in one middle school? (3) What do middle school students think about the influence of gangs on sexual harassment?

## Method

### Participants

As part of a larger longitudinal research project designed to understand bullying behaviors and their relations to sexual violence, case studies were conducted in five Midwestern middle schools. Thompson Middle School (pseudonym) emerged as an extreme case (Gall et al. 2007) in comparison to the other four schools which we attributed to the known high gang presence among its student body and larger community. Themes from the Thompson data consistently emerged as outliers. This particular community had more than 20 known gangs with 2000 gang members. It became clear that there was a unique story to be told about sexual harassment at Thompson Middle School, therefore we decided to treat this school as a case separate from the others.

Thompson Middle School is located in the United States Midwest and enrolled approximately 440 students at the

time of this study. At the time, the demographic profile of the school shows that 85% of the student population is African American, 8% White, and 9% Latino. In 2009, Thompson Middle School had 80% of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

Thompson Middle School students have consistently struggled to meet the standards set forth by the State Board of Education. Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, all students must meet or exceed state standards in the subjects of reading and mathematics by 2014. Since 2003, the State has used Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) to determine whether students are improving their scores based on annual benchmarks. Consistently since this implementation, as shown by the School Report Card, Thompson Middle School has failed to make AYP and has been on Academic Watch Status. Failing to make any marked improvements for 7 years, despite support from the federal government with mandated restructuring, raises some concern that there might be other factors at play in this school contributing to these academic challenges.

We used a purposive sampling procedure to identify participants for this study with input from the school principal who helped to identify students who had some level of involvement with bullying as a bully, victim or bystander. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained.

A total of 10 students became part of the study and active parental permission forms were obtained. Pseudonyms and grade levels of the students included: Alyssa (8th grade), Angela (7th grade), Betty (8th grade), Darrel (7th grade), Jayla (7th grade), Jordan (7th grade), Liz (7th grade), Michael (7th grade), Peter (7th grade), Tyesha (7th grade).

## Procedures

The goal of this study was to depict the phenomenon of sexual harassment and conceptualize it by examining “the meanings that the research participants ascribe to their life and environment, contextual factors that influence their life, a series of events and their possible outcomes, or the new or unusual in society” (Gall et al. 2007, p. 451). Therefore, we utilized case study research to begin to build an understanding about sexual harassment and the influence of gangs. The data collection techniques used for this study included semi-structured interviews and observations in order to best build this understanding of sexual harassment and the influence of gangs. Because students may experience reluctance answering honestly about these topics, these methods were deemed most appropriate due to the conversational nature and the ability for researchers to probe with clarifying questions about the experiences shared.

## Measures

Two methods of data collection were used as part of the case study design: semi-structured interviews and unstructured observations from researcher field notes. Over the span of 3 days, approximately 20 h of observations were conducted. The primary purpose was to begin to gain a deeper understanding of the role that gang membership or presence of gangs on the types of sexual harassment taking place in Thompson Middle School.

A doctoral student and research scientist who were both part of a larger research team conducted interviews lasting between 1.5–2 h using a semi-structured interview guide. We asked students to talk about their experiences with gang members and to share the types of sexual harassment experiences they had as either a perpetrator or a victim or had witnessed. Sample questions to guide and start the conversation included: (1) Can you talk a little about what types of sexual harassment you have experienced or witnessed at this school? (2) What have you been taught about sexual harassment? (3) Why do you think sexual harassment happens at your school?

Students were free to choose their own specific aspects of sexual harassment to comment on by answering open-ended questions such as the ones above. Allowing students to freely comment and answer these initial questions served as a way to build rapport and trust with the students. If students mentioned aspects related to gangs or gang activity, the interviewers probed further, for example responding “That’s interesting. Tell me more about the role you think gangs have played.” All interviews were audio-recorded with permission from the students and later transcribed. Each audio recording was listened to and transcribed by a team of three different researchers and graduate assistants, which helped to ensure reliability. These resulting data were descriptive and captured the perspectives of the students.

In addition, we, the researchers, recorded field notes during the interviews and throughout data collection to capture observations from the school. To guide the process of writing field notes, we each reflected on how middle school students were interacting with one another at school. The resulting field notes included both a descriptive account capturing the setting, actions, and conversations as well as a reflective component whereby the researchers recorded thoughts, ideas, questions, and concerns to consider throughout data analysis.

Unstructured observations were conducted relying on guidelines from Mulhall (2003) that allow for the sights, sounds and essence of the happenings from within the location to be captured. Using this process, unstructured observation provides deeper insight into interactions between groups, and helps to illustrate the whole picture, and capture the underlying contexts and processes while

also informing about the influence of the physical environment. Information was garnered through these observations about how middle school students interact with each other, including gang members, as well as the influence of the physical environment on the characteristics of sexual harassment. Taken together, both of these methods (unstructured observations and field notes) of data collection contribute to the overall content validity.

## Data Analyses

We used Moustakas' (1994) modified van Kaam approach to create textural-structural descriptions for each transcript by grouping, reducing, clustering, and identifying themes. Moustakas (1994) described the steps of the modified van Kaam approach as: (a) bracketing relevant data for preliminary grouping; (b) reducing and eliminating irrelevant statements to reveal the consistencies; (c) clustering and thematizing the consistencies to develop a textual description of emerging core themes; (d) confirming and validating explicit or compatible consistencies and accompanying themes; (e) developing individual textual descriptions of the experience for each co-researcher; (f) using the imaginative variation process, construct individual structural descriptions of the experience for each co-researcher; and (g) developing a unified and composite description of the phenomenon capturing the meaning and essence of the individual textual-structural descriptions.

From these resulting descriptions, we synthesized the meanings and essences of the experiences with gangs and sexual harassment to gain an understanding of these perspectives from the students. To elaborate on how this modified van Kaam approach was carried out, we engaged in an iterative process (Starks and Trinidad 2007) to navigate this interpretive analysis. All coding took place by hand.

The first step involved initial or open coding where we independently reviewed all ten transcripts and identified key themes and subthemes. Each researcher took all transcripts and generated initial codes that reflected themes emerging from the original transcripts. Simultaneously, each researcher wrote memos or notes that allowed for elaboration on the processes defined in the initial coding stage and reasons for these decisions. Researchers used the process of memo writing to help clarify emergent categories, elaborate their conditions and consequences, and situate them within broader historical or social contexts.

Next, as a team, we came together to review all transcripts, initial codes, and memos that had been generated. We then generated the core categories (or what Charmaz (2001), called focused codes) that had emerged from this discussion. Once core categories were established, we went back to the data to review initial codes and memos to ensure

that they had adequately captured all relevant concepts and to potentially collapse or redefine categories. This process of coding and generating memos contributed to the overall credibility of the study. There are multiple ways to establish validity in qualitative research. This was ensured in part through this process of transcript analysis and having convergence of these data across transcripts, memos, field notes. Additionally, having multiple researchers triangulate their interpretations with each other helped to ensure validity.

## Results

Three clear themes surfaced as a result of our data analysis activities centered on what students knew about sexual harassment, the types of sexual harassment they witnessed or experienced at their school, and reasons why they thought sexual harassment was occurring with such frequency. This final theme gets to the essence of the influence gangs have in boosting the level of sexual harassment occurring at Thompson.

### Sexual Harassment Knowledge

Overall, all 10 students revealed an understanding of sexual harassment and what to do should it happen. When asked what sexual harassment meant to them, multiple consistent and common definitions emerged including: "being touched in places you don't want to be touched," "trying to touch other people's private parts," "boys opening their flies and sticking their stuff [penises] out," "girls lifting their shirts and bras," "hands being stuck down others' shirts, blouses, and pants," and advances of unwanted sex even after "telling them to stop." Both Darrel and Michael in particular provided more extensive descriptions:

Darrel: Well, when someone tries to do sexual things and you don't want them to do it and they just keep talking about it and trying to mess with you.

Michael: Like somebody like walk up on you, grab you or touch you when you don't want to be touched, snatch you when you like put—snatch you throw you on the wall like yell at you and stuff like that... talking about how your body looks and stuff... and putting your hands on them putting they hands on you when you don't want to.

Equally, students understood they should go tell someone (parent, teacher, principal, school security, police) in response to attempts of sexual harassment or experiences of being sexually harassed.



Darrel summed up the consequences of sexual harassment when he says, “if they keep doing it, you could, um, press charges on ‘em. If someone, like, sexual harasses you, tell your principal if your teacher don’t want to listen. And if your principal don’t want to listen, go to the police station and report.” While Michael initially said “I didn’t know it was sexual harassment, I didn’t know none of that stuff” after he touched a girl’s hair on a dare from another student, he quickly learned after being sent to the office, “it’s [sexual harassment] not a joke, they could like tell the police and they could take me to jail for sexual harassment.” Similarly, Darrel initially said, “Yeah, I don’t really know what it [sexual harassment] means,” though, he was able to provide a legitimate description and knew it had legal consequences.

While Darrel and Michael knew the consequences of sexual harassment, Jayla initially told us “they don’t say anything about sexual harassment, they don’t discuss it.” However, after being asked to say more about a particular sexual harassment act she was a victim of in class, she added, “sometimes they [teachers] talk to them [perpetrators] and like some teachers they real phony acting they say ‘well I didn’t see it.’” When asked what she thought about some of her teachers’ responses, Jayla tells us, “It makes me feel like I’m a liar...yeah they kind of believe me but they don’t care enough to do anything about it.”

The students’ responses unquestionably reveal they recognize what sexual harassment is, that sexual harassment is wrong, and serious legal consequences can result in response to someone sexually harassing another. Unfortunately, it also appears from the students’ discussion that the school’s response to such acts varies.

### Acts of Sexual Harassment by Gangs

In the next portion of the interview, we prompted students to discuss the specific acts of sexual harassment they witnessed, were familiar with, and/or experienced as carried out by the known gang members. Through our conversation with the students, we learned that sexual harassment occurs between the opposite sexes as well as the same sexes. We first present the two incidents of same-sex harassment that Angela and Darrel witness on what appears to be a regular basis. We found it interesting that when asked if they saw a lot of sexual harassment at Thompson Middle School, both students began by providing examples between same-sex students. Angela informs us:

Yes. I see, we have probably like two or three gay girls here that love feeling on girls. Um. Yesterday one of them tried to feel on me, and I told her I’m not gay so just don’t touch me, I’m not saying I don’t like the gay race. I’m friends with lot of gay people but just don’t touch me and if I don’t want to...

Darrell tells us about boys harassing other boys:

I seen some, like, [boys] walk around trying to touch other [boy’s] private parts and umm... They call that sacking. I think majority of these kids at the school is gay. That’s just my opinion. ‘Cause they [boys] walk around touching other boys’ butts, blowing kisses at ‘em. And when you bend down and tie your shoe, they um... put your head by they nuts and go (slurping sound), like you giving ‘em blow job. And then... that’s why I never bend down to tie my shoe. I always tuck my shoelaces in or put my back to a wall, put my foot up there, and tuck ‘em in.

Further, Angela, Darrel, and Jayla each provide the most descriptive accounts of sexual harassment occurring between opposite sexes. Angela tells us,

I see boys, boys like in the hallways when there’s like in the hallways where we need like more security, cuz in the hallways you see boys running around with their pants half way down and some boys they open up their flies and sticking their stuff... it’s just so nasty. And we see girls, girls try to like, they like boys so much they’re let me see, they lift up their shirts. Yesterday, no two days ago, this girl lift up her shirt and her bra, upstairs And it was only me her and a couple boys up in the hallway. When asked why she thought this girl lifted her shirt and bra, Angela responds, She liked it. Like for them boys that was watching it...

Darrel describes what he consistently witnesses: “Like after school, [boys] running around touching girls’ butts and stuff. And they [girls] be like, ‘stop it,’ and the boys keep doing it.” When asked what he thinks motivates the boys to engage in these actions, he tells us, “I think they do it ‘cause... girls think it’s funny. And they trying to say ‘that girl like me... maybe I can get with her after school. So I’m gonna do this, this, and that so I, so I... raise my odds of--’”.

Jayla describes,

Upstairs in the 8th grade hall, the boys be grabbing on the girl’s breasts and then...and they be grabbing their private parts back and then um this boy named XXX and um some other girl they was having sex behind the back stairs which they [teachers] still don’t know. [And] I was sitting down in the chair and we was in math class which is Ms. XXX when this boy came over and he had grabbed my breast...he had put his hand down my shirt...and started laughing and then he walked off.”

Jayla goes on to inform us this type of behavior “happens throughout the day.” In addition to bullying the boys, gang members also “love to bully girls about starting their period.”

[Y]esterday my friend Senesha went to the bathroom and I guess the one bathroom was locked so it took her a long time because she had to go upstairs to go to the bathroom and then this boy said in front of everybody he was like ‘she probably on her bloody mary red, on her- on her bloody red mary’ and like they be trying to talk about you if you stink or something I don’t think that’s right because if somebody stink bad enough you should be a bigger and better person and go up and let them know in their ear or off to the side and not try to put them on front because everybody has some kind of odor once in a while it’s not that one particular person and they always think that.

The influence of gang presence on sexual harassment perpetration can clearly be seen at Thompson Middle School. Once more, it is identifiable by the students who are active members of the school’s culture and appears to occur regularly.

### Gang Leaders Exerting Power

As a result of learning about the various acts of sexual harassment taking place in this school by gang members, we dug more deeply to satisfy our curiosity as to why students felt gang members had such an influence on the types of sexual harassment activities just described. Collectively, their responses painted a picture of gang members as leaders and revealed the power this leadership exerted over the school culture.

Asked why she thinks sexual harassment happens, Liz responded: “Mmm, because I guess gangs do it to other people. So I guess other people start doing it and all that.” Darrel corroborated this belief during his interview when he stated: “there’s probably a pinch full of girls that hangout with gang bangers, wannabe gang bangers... always trying to get with the gang bangers.” Liz further describes the power of the gangs when she talks about the ‘sex bracelets’ that have been initiated by the male gang members that signal what the girl wearing it will do sexually. “The boys have them so the girls can pull on them and, and the girls don’t even like to pull on them... It’s like certain colors. I don’t know, like, really. Like, I think red is to, uh... kiss on that person or something like that and blue is, for like, to have sex or something like that. I’m not sure.” When asked if the gangs were the main ones that picked on people, the majority of the students responded with “yes.”

(Field Note: It appeared to one researcher that certain students want attention from/to be connected to gang members.)

Equally important to note, two students had different perspectives *not* specifically connected to gang presence on why sexual harassment occurs at their middle school. Angela suggested: “Hormones going fast and people trying to be nasty and get you pregnant or other stuff like that” and Betty offering: “I guess because the guys feel insecure about their body and they want the girl to feel insecure about their body.” While it appears the primary driver of sexual harassment is due to the presence and influence of gangs, it is important to recognize and validate the explanations offered by other students.

While not necessarily the most extensive part of our interviews with the students, their responses do, nonetheless, provide insight as to how gang members exert control over the school environment—particularly around the sexual harassment occurring at Thompson Middle School.

## Discussion

As with bullying victimization (see Forber-Pratt et al. 2014), sexual harassment appears to be heightened when there is a gang presence and where there is visible gang activity. Sexual harassment is not something that periodically happens or happens in private. Rather, sexual harassment is a prominent component, centrally woven into the culture of Thompson Middle School. Social-ecologically, we see evidence that it has become a defining element of the school, its students, and its teachers. While all of the participants knew what sexual harassment was and knew the consequences for engaging in such acts, unfortunately the varying level of response on the part of school personnel—including dismissing the students’ report—helps to perpetuate this type of environment. It appears that students at Thompson have accepted this as the norm.

In answering research question one about the characteristics of sexual harassment seen at this school, the types of sexual harassment acts described by the students as highly invasive with many classified as same-sex acts as initiated by the gang members. Additionally, these activities appear to happen more in the ‘open’ rather than being hidden. Based on our discussions with the students, it appears that the perpetrators are very comfortable performing these acts in public. However, it appears that the culture of Thompson Middle School has helped to establish and maintain this sense of comfort due to a consistent lack of response on the part of school leaders and teachers when they witness or are told about such behaviors. This is social control theory in

action; youths engage in these behaviors and the lack of adult responses reinforces these behaviors and strengthens the bonds among the perpetrators. Charmaraman et al. (2013) found that when school administrators fail to provide professional development on *both* bullying and sexual harassment, they are unaware of policies to protect students from harmful experiences and are not likely to understand their own role in preventing them. Many teachers and administrators do not understand which actions comprise sexual harassment and many were unaware of the policies designed to protect students. This lack of awareness, coupled with an environment that due to gang presence and intimidation allows for fear to permeate (Forber-Pratt et al. 2014), these behaviors of passivity and lack of intervention continue to flourish, possibly hidden within the “boys will be boys” mindset discussed by Klein (2006).

In response to research question two about the role of gang membership or gang presence on types of sexual harassment experienced or witnessed, it is imperative to consider the social-ecological makeup of the school. With this as the theoretical lens, the pressures to give into sexual advances by gang members appears to be especially heightened for girls at this school. While wearing the sex bracelets may appear on the surface to be a choice for the girls and a clear indication of their willingness to engage in sexual acts with the boys, our data suggest they feel they do not have a choice. Further, during the time of menstruation, girls become even more vulnerable to sexual harassment. However, it does appear that while some girls attempt to avoid being sexually harassed, other purposely engage in activities to encourage and welcome it (i.e., lifting shirts and bras).

Finally, in response to research question three about student perspectives on the influence of gangs on sexual harassment and the types of sexual harassment acts, students describe the sexual harassment taking place at their school as highly invasive with many classified as same-sex acts as initiated by the gang members. We do not intend to suggest that certain acts of sexual harassment are acceptable while others are not, as all unwelcome sexual advances are violations of federal law. Rather we attempt to emphasize the severity and regularity with which these acts are occurring. Further, we highlight the fact that much of the sexual harassment happening within this environment is occurring between same-sex students. While it is not known for certain if the perpetrators and/or their victims are lesbian or gay, there is no indication based on our interviews that these same-sex acts of harassment are occurring due to a homophobic culture. These same-sex acts do not seem any more frequent or violent than those happening between opposite-sex students. Through this social-ecological lens, however, it is apparent that this warrants further exploration.

## Limitations & Future Directions

It is recommended that staff members create a clear expectation that the gang influence and presence stops at the school building doors. When explicitly talking about the acts of sexual harassment found at this school, staff members need to keep in mind that such acts are in direct violation of Title IX and one of the easiest and fastest ways of reducing such acts is by enforcing this regulation. Charmaraman et al.’s study (2013) found that a staggering number of school personnel and teachers are not aware of the translation of Title IX beyond adult-on-adult sexual harassment to include student-on-student harassment. Further training and research on the implications of Title IX in school settings will help to reduce the frequency of sexual harassment acts taking place among students and work towards establishing a zero-tolerance culture within the school. When staff and teachers treat boys and girls differently or are dismissive of sexual harassment, students report experiencing more victimization and less willingness to seek help (Charmaraman et al. 2013). Related, Rinehart and Espelage (2015) found that greater gender equity and intolerance of sexual harassment was associated with lower rates of gendered harassment among a large sample of middle school youth. We add to this literature that a culture that resists gang influence and presence is also necessary. Additionally, this study highlights the need for further research and work to better prepare teachers and school personnel to help students who may be struggling to resist gang membership to see their strengths and alternative options to gang membership. Through this mutual building of trust, students may be able to develop the self-confidence and courage and desire to desist membership. Only then can students have a safe haven where they can begin to carve a positive future outlook on life, one that might not involve gang membership.

As with all qualitative studies, some participant interviews are richer than others and lead to more comprehensive and detailed accounts of events. Several students in our study gave more descriptive details of sexual harassment acts compared to their peers, possibly leading to the capture of certain truths while limiting understanding and clarity of others. Further, it is possible that students who volunteered to participate in the interviews could have different perspectives from those who did not. Consequently, it is important to keep in mind that the accounts presented in this paper represent the truths of a specific group of students that possibly differ from others.

Interviews were conducted at one point in time and because of time constraints, follow-up interviews were not conducted, which can call the validity of the study findings into question. However, by following guidelines by Kvale (1996) for establishing trust, participants were asked during



and at the completion of their respective interviews to provide any clarifications they felt necessary and express additional thoughts about the topics that arose during the discussion, a form of informal member checking (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Our study opens the door for further exploring the influence of a gang presence on sexual harassment among middle school students. Future research involving comparisons of the types of sexual harassment across schools with and without gang presence could provide valuable insights. Further research is needed to critically examine these issues for diverse students. It is essential to consider issues of intersectionality both from the perspective of gang presence *and* from the perspective of sexual harassment in schools. For example, much of the research on gangs has focused on the who instead of the why, which results in gang members being identified because of their race/ethnicity, age, and/or socioeconomic status rather than as youths who are responding to social systems that are often skewed from a deficit-based perspective (Gass and Laughter 2015).

It is important to examine how the intersection of multiple diverse student identities influences how schools interact with gang-involved youths. For instance, the U.S. Department of Education (2014) reports that students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to be punished with out-of-school-suspension than students without disabilities. People with disabilities are also overrepresented among those arrested and incarcerated (Vallas 2016). Disability interacts with other identities including race, class, and gender, the latter of which have been frequently addressed within the gang literature. However, despite these intersections, and the overrepresentation of students with disability who are part of disciplinary procedures and in our correctional facilities, there is little to no research looking at gang-involved youths who may also have a disability.

Limited research exists that specifically explores the role of disability status and sexual harassment in adolescence in schools (Linn and Rousso 2001). In other environments, though, research shows that individuals with disabilities may be at an even greater risk for sexual harassment both as victim and as perpetrators (Sobsey 1994). In a 2008 study, special education teachers reported on observed incidents of sexual harassment which provides some background on this understudied diverse population (Young et al. 2008). Generally, special educators who worked with students with mild to moderate and combined disabilities reported significantly more verbal sexual harassment than special educators who worked with students with more severe disabilities (Young et al. 2008). This finding is corroborated with work specifically about individuals with intellectual disability (Lumley and Miltenberger 1997; Reiter et al. 2007). On the contrary, regardless of the severity of disability, participants reported incidents of physical sexual

harassment in similar proportions (Young et al. 2008). In terms of gender differences, in this study, females were as likely to be the target of sexual harassment as were males (Young et al. 2008). The dearth of literature in this area indicates that more research is needed to better understand the intersections of disability with race and sex differences pertaining to sexual harassment in schools.

Taking these issues into account, we can gain additional insight through future qualitative studies that include more participants and involve more in-depth interviews. Such studies would provide more comprehensive understanding of how gangs influence the sexual harassment. We also suggest obtaining insights on this phenomenon from teachers and school staff. Particularly interesting would be to learn why certain teachers and school staff intervene while the majority do not and what their knowledge is regarding Title IX. Woven into each of these two recommendations is to explore the power dynamics between gang members and non-gang member as well as gang members and teachers and school staff.

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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