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Victims of Violent Crimes Join Gangs

Terrance J. Taylor

In the following viewpoint, Terrance J. Taylor argues that there is an important relationship between victimization and gang membership though it has not been thoroughly studied. He notes that female gang members are more likely than nonmembers to have been the victims of violence in their homes and that seeking protection from this violence may be one of the important reasons girls join gangs. Terrance J. Taylor is an associate research professor in the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Missouri–St. Louis.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. What did a study of eighth-grade students find about the relationship between gang membership and victimization?

2. What does the author say about victimization and youths who are associated with gangs but not gang members?

3. Do boys or girls experience more violent victimization?

Recent research has begun to examine the link between youth gang membership and violent victimization. Although studies of victimization in this area are sparse relative to those examining the link between gang membership and offending, the recent expansion to include victimization may be viewed as a promising development for a number of reasons. First, gang members’ victimization has typically been hidden from public view or at least muted relative to their offending behaviors. Consequently, an entire group of victims have been virtually ignored, diminishing the impact of potentially life-changing experiences among a group of youths who disproportionately come into contact with the juvenile and adult justice systems. Second, youths who join gangs often report doing so for protection. Is this warranted? Do gangs reduce youths’ victimization? Or do gangs actually enhance youths’ victimization? Answers have real consequences for youths’ future life chances.

The current essay looks at the research examining youth gang membership and violent victimization. . . . Three specific questions are examined. First, what does the extant [existing] research show regarding the linkage between gang membership and violent victimization? In other words, what do we know about the relationships between these phenomena? The essay is grouped into three sections, consistent with stages of gang membership: (a) victimization of gang members prior to their gang entry, (b) victimization during their time in the