

CT FEATURE

By Mars Eghigian and  
Katherine Kirby

# GIRLS IN GANGS:

## On the Rise in America

Unfortunately, biases, misconceptions and a general lack of awareness in the past have led to what the authors believe to be a vast misreporting and underreporting of female crime connected to street gangs. In 1999, Chicago Crime Commission researchers put the estimated number of female gang members in the Chicago area at 16,000 to 20,000. Mostly associates in the established male street gang, girls range from hardcore members to “groupies” looking for a good time and someplace to hang out. Unfortunately, their numbers appear to be growing. Law enforcement has documented their participation in all forms of violence, and today they are appearing in “girls only” gangs. These gangs form from direct recruits or from the ranks of dissatisfied former members of male gangs looking for more opportunity.

### Why Do Girls Join Gangs?

Girls join gangs for the same reason most boys do — multiple factors and circumstances that have existed

throughout their lives: financial opportunity, identity and status, peer pressure, family dysfunction and protection. However, some girls readily admit that they join because they are bored and look to gangs for a social life; they are looking for fun and excitement and a means to find parties and meet boys. Regrettably for those who naively join expecting harmless social rewards, they may find out too late about the actual violent nature of street gang existence. Still, others join simply because gangs are there in the neighborhood and are viewed as an everyday way of life. And perhaps the most disturbing impact of female association with street gang members is that eventually the relationship results in the birth of children — children who then grow up indoctrinated into the gang way of life.

It is not unheard of for girls to slide into gang involvement as early as age 8. Those who enter at this age and up to 10 years of age often have relatives who are gang members or have experienced a strong gang presence in their neighborhoods. At this age, the girl may begin to hang around the gang, learn gang culture, experiment with drugs and engage in low-level criminal activity.

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Ages 11 and 12 represent the more likely age at which a girl may enter a gang, usually to gain recognition from older females. By then, they will begin skipping school, drinking, experimenting with drugs, performing low-level crimes and engaging in sexual activity.

The prime age at which females undergo their gang initiation appears to be around the ages of 13 and 14. Statistics show they are quite active in property crime such as larceny/theft, motor vehicle theft and burglary, as well as weapons offenses and violent assaults. They also are very likely engaging in sexual activity, and some are getting pregnant.

Ages 15 through 18 represent the hardcore years of female gang activity. Crimes committed such as robbery and aggravated assault peak at age 15 and remain consistently high through this age period. Murders peak at age 18.

From age 19 and up, the female gang member faces several options. If she has children, she may assume responsibility for paying bills and caring for them. In order to do so, she may continue to sell drugs, go into prostitution or further participate in criminal activity. Indeed, statistics show that at this time female criminal activities peak in the form of white-collar crimes such as fraud, forgery and counterfeiting, and drug violations. Another path may lead her to become a gang leader or adviser to young gang members. Younger girls will consider her to be an "OG" or "old gangster." She may be married to an active gang member and still socialize with and perform criminal acts for the gang. However, as she gets older, that activity will often dissipate. Quite possibly, an older female gang member will find legitimate employment and advance her education. Those who do usually develop different interests and friends, and as a result, they tend to drift away from their old gang and eventually leave it altogether.

## Initiation

Initiation requirements of a "wannabe" or outsider into the gang, marking full-fledged membership, may take several forms, depending on the particular gang. In some cases, the initiate may select the method; in others, it will be dictated to her. They can generally be classified into four types:

- "Violated" or "jumped in" refers to a physical beating the candidate must absorb to prove her toughness, loyalty and commitment to the gang;
- The mission method simply requires the girl to commit a criminal act, perhaps ride along on a drive-by shooting or even be dropped off deep in enemy territory and forced to get out alive;

- "Sexed in" is not the most common, but certainly the least respected initiation, in which a female may elect to participate in sex with a gang member. However, both girls and boys alike look down on this initiation, and those who elect this course are usually typecast and have extremely low status; and
- "Walked in" or "blessed in" is reserved only for those girls who have had generations of family as gang members, who have a family member in good gang standing, or who have grown up in the neighborhood, are well known, respected and have proved their loyalty beyond question.

## Roles

Functions of women in gangs vary depending on the individual's personality and the dynamics of the gang she joins. Typically, she will fall into one of four membership categories:

- Auxiliary members of male gangs;
- A female member of a coed gang;
- Members of autonomous all-female gangs; or
- A female leader in a coed gang.

In Chicago, the vast majority of female gang members may be categorized as being auxiliary members of male gangs. Although a few may rise to be marginally independent of some male authority and set rules for other girls in the gang, they are usually of lower status, subservient to male gang objectives and, depending on the gang culture, are usually treated with little respect by their male peers, who in some gangs view them as weak. Nonetheless, they perform integral gang duties such as serving as lookouts and drug and weapons couriers, luring rivals for ambushes and providing alibis. As members of a coed gang, the females may achieve much higher status because the males will entrust in them sensitive matters such as stashing drugs, weapons and money. In the latter, they may launder large amounts of cash for the gang. The females may also act as liaisons between the gang members on the streets and those in prison. Some authorities believe that they may be the primary players in bringing drugs into correctional facilities. Female leaders within coed gangs usually retain authority over the female portion of the gang and seldom rise to equal their male counterparts when it comes to making decisions. A female leader usually has a bond with a high-ranking male or may be a family member or perhaps a long-time gang member who grew up in the neighborhood and who has proved her ability and loyalty beyond question. In some cases, she may actually run the business of a male counterpart if the



latter is incarcerated. Authorities believe that autonomous all-female gangs, while more common in Los Angeles, will be the next threat to Chicago youths. Auxiliary members of male gangs may tire of subordination and strike out on their own, assuming more authoritative roles. All-female groups do exist; however, they are not yet classified as true street gangs but are headed in that direction.

The most common group of women — party crews — comprises females who socialize and party together. They are not loyal to any one gang but will go to whichever group is throwing the best parties or whomever they are most attracted to at any given moment. There are no rules, allegiances, rituals or hierarchy within the party crews. Benign as they might seem, regrettably, they put themselves in positions that may eventually provide the cohesion and tendencies common to street gangs. For example, when a party crew infringes on the territory claimed by female auxiliary members of another gang, the party crew is forced to defend itself. Retaliations ensue, thus beginning the cycle of violence. In some cases, party crews have branched out into the sale of certain drugs. Unfortunately, the trade exposes them to extreme danger with established street gangs who have long organized and tightly controlled the trade. The party crews may then be forced to commit loyalty to a gang, pay a street tax (to the gang for permission to sell drugs in its territory) or risk being killed.

Some girls appear to be gang members but are wannabes. More commonly referred to as groupies, they tag along with gang members, wear gang colors and sometimes engage in criminal activities but retain their independence and have not yet been through any formal initiation. This is usually the younger girls.

The roles that girls in gangs may play are extensive and may include:

- Holding and transporting drugs and guns, as law enforcement are less likely to search women;
- Acting as information and contraband couriers to and from prisons;
- Finding strategic employment — infiltrating law enforcement or county clerk's offices to secure intelligence on gang member targets or witnesses acting against their own members, working for law firms in order to facilitate communications with members who are incarcerated, working for temp services and a host of other companies in order to get personal information from the general public (e.g., credit card numbers) for white-collar fraud schemes, or working in bookstores in order to hide contraband (e.g., drugs) mailed to prison inmates;
- Acting as lures with rival gang members to secure information or set them up for a murder or a violent hit;
- Gangbanging and supporting criminal acts, including selling drugs, robbery, burglary, carjacking, car theft and drive-by shootings;
- Purchasing weapons;
- Hiding money; and/or
- Providing behind-the-scenes domestic support.

## Getting Out of the Gang

All sectors of society must act now to keep female gangs from following in the footsteps of the powerful male gangs. It is unacceptable to wait until there is a devastating increase in the death, injury and imprisonment of the nation's young female populations. However, it is important to note that for those seeking to sever gang ties or those helping someone to sever ties, there are several considerations to take into account:

- Anyone seeking to leave must sincerely want to leave — no one can force her to quit;
- Girls should seek help from a trusted adult or network of trusted adults such as social workers, school officials, law enforcement officers, religious leaders and nongang-affiliated family members, etc.
- No gang is an individual and, as an organization, they have their own rules of conduct — one must clearly understand these rules when developing a strategy for a girl to exit the gang life or her life or well-being could be seriously jeopardized;
- A girl leaving must understand that her former enemies will still be enemies and that she will no longer have the protection of the gang;
- As the gang may be concerned about the girl's ability to share gang intelligence, careful planning must take place so that the gang is not able to permanently "silence" her;
- The entire family of a female gang member must be committed to the exit strategy or they also may be in extreme danger when left behind;
- Once the decision is made to exit the gang, the former gang member cannot return to the gang neighborhood; and
- If a former gang member does not move far away, there is always a chance she may run into gang members who will recognize her.

Although it may appear to a girl gang member that the gang provides her with protection, the reality is that when the exit is handled well, it is always safer to be out of a gang. Researchers, law enforcement agencies, health facilities and others must take steps to improve the tracking and data collection on female gang members. It is important that social service agencies, the faith community, parents and family, and others intervene early with troubled girls to provide them with positive opportunities and fill their basic life needs before they turn to gangs for support. Social service systems and others must increase and enhance programming for girls, and education systems need to implement effective school strategies such as dress codes. With adults and youths alike working in concert, the problem of girls in gangs can be reduced or even halted.

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*Mars Eghigian is a contributing researcher and writer, and Katherine Kirby is executive vice president for the Chicago Crime Commission, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization of civic leaders committed to improving the quality of public safety and justice. For more information, visit [www.chicagocrimecommission.org](http://www.chicagocrimecommission.org). The CCC will be releasing a new 200-page report on gangs in the Chicago area in 2006.*