Gangs have risen to the level of a broad social problem, yet, to date, research has neglected the influence of school factors on gang membership. Although gang involvement leads to many negative outcomes, such as incarceration, drug and alcohol use, injury, and death, gangs may also serve a protective influence to those who join them. For this reason, it is important to take a risk and resilience framework to understanding and ultimately preventing gang involvement. By examining various theories of gang involvement, as well as the risk and protective factors identified in current literature, a model to explain gang involvement and inform school-based prevention efforts was conceptualized. We suggest that schools can compensate for the attraction of gangs by addressing the hierarchical needs of at-risk youth. Our discussion includes a focus on three critical policy issues regarding schools’ ability to implement the interventions necessary to protect youth from gang involvement: resource allocation, zero tolerance policies, and tracking.
1. Introduction

Professionals from diverse fields of study, such as law enforcement, social welfare, public health, education, and psychology, have made recent attempts to understand the causes of gang participation through a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods (Wood & Alleyne, 2010). Studies have focused on testing theories of gang formation, determining risk factors for joining, describing the experience and structure of gangs, and evaluating programs focused on amelioration. Outcomes of these studies point to complicated relations between variables that explain gang membership and behavior. Although gang membership tends to emerge in mid-adolescence, the influential risk factors present since youth were born may be viewed as stepping stones in the likelihood or behavior. Although gang membership tends to emerge in mid-adolescence (Howell & Egley, 2005). At each stage, there is a chance for risk factors to be targeted and a chance to guide a child towards a more prosocial development. Yet, to date, research across fields has neglected the influence of school factors on gang membership, instead focusing primarily on individual youths, their familial interactions, and their own community context. Even significant longitudinal studies that have examined predictors of gang involvement, such as the Pittsburgh Youth Study (Lahey, Gordon, Loebel, Stouthamer-Loebel, & Farrington, 1999), have focused on personal, criminal, family, and community variables but not school factors.

Once a child enters school, school factors have tremendous influence on youth development. Although most risk factors associated with gang involvement are not easily alterable, such as poverty, social disorganization (i.e., disadvantaged neighborhoods where delinquent behavior is acquired and approved), or poor family interactions, school factors are within the control of professionals trained to promote the learning and behavioral excellence of diverse youth. School factors, such as relationships with teachers and discipline policies, not only affect student engagement, but may also influence a variety of outcomes more significantly than individual student characteristics. Thus, it is critical to understand system (e.g., school, justice) responsibility for youth outcomes (Sander, Sharkey, Olijvarri, Tanigawa, & Mauseth, 2010). To address a dearth of research and theory applied to gangs and school systems, we synthesize existing knowledge of gang involvement with an innovative focus: how schools might compensate for and even overcome the considerable forces drawing youth into street gangs by examining the reasons why youth join gangs from a theoretical perspective. Reviewing current findings within a risk and resilience framework will not only synthesize current research from a variety of fields, but will also provide a solid framework within which to understand and compensate for the appeal of gangs.

2. Experiences of gang members

Once thought of as a predicament existing only in urban inner-city ghettos, gangs have spread to suburban areas and upper class neighborhoods across the United States (Rees, 1996). Although gang involvement declined in the late 1990s, percentage of gang problems nationally has been increasing since 2001 (Egley, Howell, Moore, & March, 2010). Most recently, the 2008 National Youth Gang Survey revealed a 15% increase in gang activity from 2002 with 774,000 gang members and 27,900 active gangs in the United States, and an estimated 32.4% of all communities from urban cities to rural towns experiencing gang problems in 2008 (Egley et al., 2010). Gangs have risen to the level of a broad social problem rather than an urban challenge—gangs are in all communities across the United States—and members by definition are involved in violence and other criminal acts that are harmful to society (Gilbertson, 2009). It is imperative that social institutions with access to at-risk youth (i.e., schools) consider their role in promoting versus preventing delinquent pathways, and ultimately, gang involvement.

A thorough definition of a gang is necessary to provide a context for discussion. Exact definitions vary from state to state but generally center on a few common components. For example, California state regulations define a criminal street gang as:

Any ongoing organization, association, or group of three or more persons, whether formal or informal, having as its primary activities the commission of one or more...criminal acts...having a common name or common identifying sign or symbol, and whose members individually or collectively engage in or have engaged in a pattern of criminal gang activity (California Penal Code, 2010, §186.22f).

Furthermore, most gang members begin their involvement in gangs as youth. Nationwide, 7% of Whites and 12% of Blacks and Latinos report current or past gang membership by the age of 17 years and most gang members join between the ages of 12 and 15 years (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Most gangs appear to have adult leaders, center their criminal activity in one geographical area, and consist of members of one racial or ethnic group (Knox, 1994).

Consequences of gang membership are fairly well known and largely debated. In the media, gangs have been determined to be responsible for the recent increase in youth crime, drug sales, and violence (Sirpal, 1997). “Media reports on juvenile activities and the perceptions held by law enforcement officers and public paint gang members as selfish, vicious, and unscrupulous juveniles—who have no aim in life but destruction of the society for personal gain” (Sirpal, 1997, p. 13). Although media reports tend to exaggerate the problem and place blame for gang criminal activity on individual children, research reports of gang activity confirm extreme behavior while recognizing the problem as societal rather than individual.

Even though the study of general delinquency is advanced with high quality longitudinal research providing support for developmental pathways to delinquency and evidence for prevention and intervention strategies that can interrupt these pathways, “any optimistic stance about progress in recent decades must be tempered by the reality of how far the field has to go, scientifically, conceptually, and therapeutically” (Hinshaw, 2002, p. 432). In his analysis of the status of externalizing behavior scholarship, Hinshaw (2002) argued that researchers still need to establish theoretical frameworks to organize extensive lists of established factors related to externalizing behavior and guide intervention efforts, identify subgroups of youths with differing patterns of externalizing behaviors, and include resilience as a critical component of any explanatory model. Gang-related delinquent activity is a pervasive yet understudied subgroup of externalizing behaviors that is particularly in need of extensive conceptual and empirical work to advance the literature.

Investigations comparing behavior of gang to nongang criminal offenders have revealed gang activity to be a distinct form of deviant behavior than cannot be explained by general delinquency theories. Research has established that gang members have significantly higher rates of delinquent behavior, are more committed to antisocial peers, are more tolerant of deviance, and are more likely to be viewed
negatively by teachers (Jenson & Howard, 1998). In addition, members are more likely to have lower levels of school involvement, are more likely to have dropped out, and have higher levels of drug use (Jenson & Howard, 1998). When joining, there are physical beatings associated with initiation, unwavering loyalty is required, and corporal punishment is given quickly and without question by an authoritarian leader (Rees, 1996). Additional disadvantages cited by gang members include causing familial alienation, at times doing things that don't feel right, and not being able to be friends with nongang members (Omizo, Omizo, & Honda, 1997). Attraction of gangs despite dire consequences of gang affiliation is important to examine. Only by understanding experiences of youth in gangs and why they join is it possible to apply an overarching theoretical orientation to guide the development and evaluation of school-based intervention programs.

3. Risk and resilience framework

Currently, there is an absence of studies examining gang behavior within the risk and resilience framework. Historically, focusing on factors that increase an individual's vulnerability to a negative outcome has been the most popular approach to investigating problem behavior. These “risk” factors have been found to be cumulative in nature, with each additional risk factor exponentially increasing the odds of a negative outcome (Garmezy, 1993). As with most areas of problem behavior, the study of gang involvement has mainly focused on risk factors for joining a gang and associated negative outcomes. For example, in the Seattle Study (Hill, Howell, Hawkins, & Battin-Pearson, 1999), risk factors measured at ages 10 to 12 years in each of five domains (individual, family, school, peer, and community) predicted gang joining at ages 13 to 18 years. Specifically, youth who possessed seven or more risk factors were significantly more likely to join a gang than children with no or only one risk indicator. Yet, researchers did not include protective factors in their investigation despite evidence that there always exists a segment of the population that functions successfully regardless of a challenging environment (Garmezy, 1993). “Protective” factors promote this “resilience.” Thus, it has been recognized that understanding outcomes (e.g., gang involvement) must involve both the study of risk and protective factors.

The study of gangs, as with any social or educational problem, involves risk and protective factors that lead to the negative outcome under study, as well as the risk and protective influences of the particular concern. In terms of gang involvement, there exists the issue of what social and developmental outcomes are likely for a youth who has joined a gang. Although gang involvement leads to many negative outcomes such as incarceration, drug and alcohol use, injury, and death, gangs may also serve a protective influence to those who join them. For this reason, it is particularly important to take a risk and resilience framework to understanding and ultimately preventing gang involvement.

Investigations within the risk and resilience framework have primarily focused on the broader realm of delinquency and violent behavior. Although violent behavior and gang involvement are highly correlated, an understanding of gang behavior cannot be generalized from the results. The construct of gang membership must be operationalized and studied in its own right as various problem behaviors associated with delinquency (e.g., gang involvement, substance use, and unprotected sexual intercourse) are each predicted by different patterns of risk and resilience factors (Stoiber & Good, 1998). By examining various theories of gang involvement, as well as the risk and protective factors that have been identified in the current literature, a model to explain gang involvement with an orientation to inform school-based prevention efforts will be conceptualized.

3.1. Risk factors—traditional gang theories

A risk and resilience framework is important to conceptualize the interactions between variables, but the selection of variables to include in a particular model must be informed by theory and research related specifically to the phenomenon of interest due to the infinite number of factors that can be selected. Several theories to explain gang involvement have been tested and empirically validated. In this section, we translate traditional gang theories into an overarching risk and resilience framework, with the premise that only by understanding explanations for gang membership can interventions be developed to counteract such behavior. In this section we describe each theory and examples of supporting empirical evidence. Table 1 provides a synthesis of risks identified and counteracting protective factors assumed by each theory.

3.1.1. Strain theory

Strain theory is one of the most popular employed to investigate gang participation. Proponents argue that people living in poverty experience strain due to the inability to achieve the American ideal of economic success; many grow to feel despair that they will never achieve prosperity through conventional avenues of employment and turn instead to lucrative criminal activities such as drug sales and robbery in order to achieve instant gratification (Anderson & Dyson, 1996). Therefore, gangs provide the perfect structure and leadership necessary to maximize criminal success. In support of strain theory, there are a multitude of community risk factors associated with gang membership including poverty, social disorganization, residential mobility, organized lower-class communities, underworld communities, and barriers to and lack of social and economic opportunities (Hawkins et al., 2000; Howell, 1998; Kallus, 2004). To test strain theory as a correlate of gang membership, Brownfield, Thompson, and Sorensen (1997) analyzed data from two large self-report studies: the Youth Data Set, which consisted of interviews with youth in custody across the nation, and the Seattle Youth Study, which included over 1600 youths with an oversampling of those with juvenile justice

Table 1
Joining a gang: theoretical risks for joining and associated protective factors of joining.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gang theory</th>
<th>Risk factor</th>
<th>Protective factor</th>
<th>Maslow’s needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strain theory</td>
<td>Inability to achieve conventional success</td>
<td>Achieve success (economic, status) through criminal means</td>
<td>Esteem: conventional pathway to achievement/success; Self-actualization: a rite of passage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social learning theory</td>
<td>Family and peers model criminal/gang behavior</td>
<td>Gang life reinforces familiar patterns of behavior</td>
<td>Love: family role modeling and belonging and identity through peers; Esteem: glamour and popularity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systems perspective</td>
<td>Family system is broken or unavailable</td>
<td>Provision of a family in terms of structure, protection, and support</td>
<td>Safety: security and protection; Love: family role modeling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social control</td>
<td>Lack of clear community expectations and reinforcement on how to achieve conventional success</td>
<td>Clear expectations and reinforcement regarding how to achieve criminal success</td>
<td>Love: family role modeling; Esteem: self-esteem and respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-control</td>
<td>Lack of self-control to delay gratification and engage in academic pursuits</td>
<td>Lack of self-control is conducive to the requirements of gang activity</td>
<td>Esteem: glamour and popularity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

J.D. Sharkey et al. / Aggression and Violent Behavior 16 (2011) 45–54
contact. They created several measures to evaluate strain theory such as an index to examine incongruity between financial ambition and educational aspirations based on high responses to “I want to make lots of money” and low responses to “How much schooling do you expect to get?” (p. 13). Results indicated a difference between financial goals and available educational means to achieve those goals was predictive of gang involvement, supporting strain theory as an explanation.

3.1.2. Social learning theory

Social learning theorists believe that people pattern their behavior after role models, with family members being most influential. Therefore, individuals tend to participate in activities and join groups that reinforce familiar behavior (i.e., differential association). If youth are involved with peers who reinforce delinquent behavior, and have weak social bonds to those who promote conventional activities, social learning theory states that they are likely to be socialized towards gang life (Thompson & Braaten-Antrim, 1998). Types of risk factors related to gang involvement support social learning theory to explain gang involvement. For example, in a review of empirically-identified risk factors, Howell (1998) found that family disorganization—including broken homes, parental drug or alcohol abuse, lack of adult male role models, lack of parental role models, low socioeconomic status, economic deprivation, and sibling antisocial behavior—was related to gang membership. During puberty, as peer groups begin to be more influential, Howell identified low commitment to positive peers, street socialization, gang members in class, friends who use drugs or who are gang members, and having friends who are drug distributors as empirically-identified risk factors for gang membership. Studies that have directly tested theoretical explanations for gang membership consistently support social learning theory, and particularly peer influences, whether through secondary analysis of large cross-sectional studies (Brownfield et al., 1997), longitudinal survey analysis (Esbensen, Huizinga, & Weiher, 1993), or a stratified random sample (Winfree, Backstrom, & Mays, 1994).

3.1.3. Systems perspective

Gangs can be viewed as social systems that imitate family. Ruble and Turner (2000) argue that it is necessary to view gangs as surrogate families because for many gang members, a gang is their only family. Therefore, gangs provide members with affection, loyalty, understanding, recognition, and emotional and physical protection that they do not get from their biological family. The gang is hierarchically organized just as a family in terms of age and experience and subsystems similar to that of the parent and sibling can be found (Ruble & Turner). Interviews with thirty-one female students in an at-risk environment revealed that family discord involving fighting, abuse, and neglect were thought by female participants to urge youth to escape and find protection and belonging in a gang (Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001). However, other studies have found that family factors such as perceived parental involvement and support (interviews with 415 youths on probation; Jenson & Howard, 1998) and having parents with criminal backgrounds or being from “broken homes” (interviews with gang members who enter prison; Rees, 1996) are not significant correlates of gang membership. Thus, research to support the systems perspective is mixed and longitudinal research with diverse samples is needed to clarify if systems perspective has merit as an explanation of gang membership.

3.1.4. Social control

Social control theory stems from the earliest studies of gang involvement by Thrasher in 1927 (Brownfield et al., 1997). Within this theory, youth are less likely to join a gang if a community’s commitment to a conventional course of development is advertised and enforced. Respected school authorities, strong attachments to family members and community members contribute to a child’s successful adaptation to community expectations. Focusing on the school as a social control system, risk factors identified in research for joining a gang include early academic failure; low bonding to school or low educational aspirations, especially among females; truancy; frequent changing of schools; and attending schools with high delinquency rates (Hawkins et al., 2000). Other factors include negative labeling by teachers, trouble at school, few teacher role models, educational frustration, and low commitment to school (Howell, 1998). These related factors suggest that low student engagement, whether due to system or individual factors, is related to gang involvement. However, research to study social control has found few aspects of the theory related to gang membership once other factors, such as social learning, are considered. In their analysis of the Youth Data Set and the Seattle Study, Brownfield et al. (1997) found that only lack of maternal monitoring, and not school commitment and attachment, was associated with gang membership once contributions from strain and social learning theories were considered. Such evidence indicates that social control theory makes a small contribution to understanding gang involvement.

3.1.5. Self-control theory

Self-control theory posits that adolescents who lack self-control will be more tolerant of peer delinquency, and therefore more likely to join in criminal activity themselves (Dukes, Martinez, & Stein, 1997). Dimensions of control include delay of gratification, persistence, caution, tendency to be cognitive, verbosity, engagement in long-term pursuits, valuing academic skills, and sensitivity to others. Specific individual risk factors indicative of self-control difficulties and associated with gang involvement include prior delinquency; deviant attitudes; being street smart; defiant and individualistic character; having a fatalistic view of the world; being aggressive; having social disabilities; illegal gun ownership; early sexual activity—especially among females; alcohol and drug use; desire for group rewards such as status, identity, self-esteem, companionship, and protection; the demonstration of problem behavior; hyperactivity; externalizing behaviors; drinking; lack of refusal skills; and victimization (Howell, 1998). In a cross-sectional study of prison inmates randomly selected from a large facility in California, Kissner and Pyrooz (2009) found that self-control was related to current but not past gang membership. They also found that differential association had a strong association with gang membership above and beyond the impact of self-control. They hypothesized that self-control is exacerbated by gang membership and may only play a small role in the explanation of why youth join gangs.

3.2. Protective influences—Maslow’s hierarchy of needs

The concept of gang members achieving a protective influence through their gang involvement is a new direction to understanding gang membership, and has not yet been studied. However, qualitative data in interviews with gang members provide some insight into perceived benefits of gang involvement. For example, Kallus (2004) produced tape-recorded interviews with gang members from a Washington, D.C. community between 1999 and 2002. Participants talked about their life histories and why some chose to be in a gang instead of seeking out other social groups. Through qualitative analysis, Kallus determined that gangs serve as a source for love, discipline, protection, and excitement for young people. In another study, Omizo et al. (1997) interviewed eight gang members from one high school and analyzed the interviews for recurring themes. They found three categories that explained the gang members’ reasons for joining. First, the gang gave these members a sense of belonging. They said things such as, “It feels great to have friends all the time” and “I like being around guys that I can count on.” Second, self-esteem was increased through gang membership, they said, “I feel important
when I’m with the gang” and “We're on top at school and around the neighborhood.” Finally, protection was a reason to join as evidenced by the following statements, “The gang won’t let anything bad happen to any member” and “No one will try to do anything to me.” Additionally, the gang members liked being able to depend on each other, helping each other out, and having fun things to participate in such as parties and sports.

Results of these studies point to Maslow's model of the hierarchy of needs as a potential framework for understanding the perceived adaptive benefits of gang membership. According to this model, people have basic hierarchical needs, which include physiological (hunger, thirst, shelter), safety (security and protection), love (affection, belonging, family, acceptance, friendship), esteem (self-esteem, achievement, status recognition, respect), and self-actualization (self-fulfillment; Maslow, 1943). There is internal motivation to satisfy lower level needs before pursuing the next higher levels (Carlie, 2002; Kolisko-Rivera, 2006; Maslow, 1943). Maslow's hierarchy of needs can conceptualize our understanding of the perceived benefits of gang membership. Consistent with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, when a need is present, gangs can be sought out, offer benefits, and satisfy those needs.

4. Joining a gang

Gangs can function as adaptive social mechanisms for satisfying needs of some youths that are not met through traditional and socially acceptable means. Gangs offer many benefits that are unmet in their homes, schools, and neighborhoods. Gangs can fulfill basic physiological needs for food and shelter through economic gains and can provide its members with a sense of safety, security, protection, and resources. In this section we summarize existing gang research within the categories suggested by our theoretical orientation: how gangs meet basic needs and thus act as a protective factor for at-risk youth within the categories suggested by our theoretical orientation: how gangs meet basic needs and thus act as a protective factor for at-risk youth who might otherwise succumb to what might be perceived as more devastating outcomes such as continuing poverty and academic failure. Table 1 links Maslow’s hierarchy of needs to gang theories by matching needs to the protective factors achieved by gangs to counteract theoretical risks. In the following sections we further detail the theoretical and empirical basis for a synthesized explanation of gang involvement through Maslow's hierarchies.

4.1. Safety needs: security and protection

The systems perspective posits that gangs provide structure, protection, and support missing in some families. Although empirical data are mixed as to the ability of the systems perspective to explain gang involvement, researchers have pointed to needs for safety and protection as motivating factors for youth gang involvement (Dukes et al., 1997; Klein, 1995). The Greater Vancouver Gang Study, which involved file reviews, participant interviews, and probation officer interviews of youth and adults on corrections caseloads, revealed that participants became involved in street gangs due to factors including the support of peer groups and escape from familial abuse (Gordon, 2000). In other research, coded interviews with at-risk girls found that gangs provided “backup” and a powerful collectivist perception that messing with one member meant having to deal with other people in the gang (Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001). Given qualitative findings, the argument that gangs provide a safety function is tentatively supported; the step to confirming relevance to this model is to examine if security and protection are evidenced in broader quantitative research.

4.2. Love and belonging needs: family role modeling

In terms of family involvement, the social learning theory, systems perspective, and social control model of gang involvement all promote family monitoring and modeling as key to understanding gang membership. Specifically, gang life may reinforce familiar patterns of behavior, provide the familiarity of family structure, and offer clear expectations and reinforcement regarding how to achieve success, respectively. However, several studies have found no or minor connections between family factors and gang involvement (Brownfield et al., 1997; Jenson & Howard, 1998; Rees, 1996). Thompson and Braaten-Antrim (1998) investigated the relation between maltreatment and gang involvement in order to clarify mixed results of previous studies that may have resulted from using criminal populations. By surveying 2358 sixth through twelfth graders, they found that parental factors of supervision, support, communication, and education were not related to gang involvement. However, being physically maltreated increased the odds of gang membership by 2.35 times, being sexually abused by 1.77 times, and being both physically and sexually abused by almost four times. They argued that lack of consideration of maltreatment as a variable has led to mixed results about the importance of parental factors. Rigorous mixed-methods research in other contexts (e.g., Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995) supports the allure of gangs as a refuge from abusive families.

4.3. Love and belonging needs: belonging and identity through peers

As they move into adolescence and peers become a primary influence, social learning theory promotes the concept that youth obtain their belonging and identity through friends. In one study, female gang members ranked friends as the biggest influence on gang involvement followed by neighborhood, family, and self, respectively (Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001). During interviews, females indicated that they felt obliged to join gangs to keep their friends and gangs offered opportunities to fit in (Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001). In general, a synthesis of extant research indicates that some youths who have experienced discrimination may join gangs to feel accepted and have a sense of belonging (Carlie, 2002). Past interviews with self-identified gang members have demonstrated that females may be drawn to gangs because of the desire for friendship, excitement, and the sense of belonging (Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Molidor, 1996) and male gang members cite companionship, excitement, and heterosexual contacts (Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Klein, 1995). Interviews with 22 inmates convicted of gang-related gun violence indicated that gangs can influence a person’s identity development and personality and loyalty is extremely important (Stretesky & Pogrebin, 2007). Members indicate that gangs provide them with companionship and support as in people to hang out with and opportunities to participate in fun social events. Some gang members feel as though they can depend on and rely on each other whenever the need arises and gang members may be willing to kill or be killed for the gang in order to sustain their self-perception as a loyal gang member. Such extreme degree of group affiliation is similar to that of armed services activities during wartime (Stretesky & Pogrebin, 2007). Overall, there is widespread support for gangs fulfilling the need for love through belonging and identity with peers.

4.4. Esteem needs: self-esteem and respect

Social control theory supports the idea that gangs provide youth with perceived esteem and respect, that is, gangs provide clear expectations and reinforcement to achieve criminal success. Survey...
research with 11,000 secondary students as well as interviews with self-identified gang members has revealed that low self-concept may be a risk factor for joining a gang, but that once in a gang, self-concept is increased through power, wealth, and status (Dukes et al., 1997; Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001). A synthesis of scholarship indicates that gang members may experience feelings of powerlessness and alienation and seek out gangs to establish a sense of power and control over one’s self, others, and life situations (Carlie, 2002). Gangs provide youth with low self-esteem an opportunity to build self-esteem through the reputation of the gang, positive association with one another in the gang, gang-related accomplishments, and by gaining power over others as a result of their gang affiliation (Carlie, 2002). Interviews with gang-involved inmates found that males join gangs to affirm their masculine status in a society that alienates them. They may seek an aggressive pursuit of respect that commands power, status, and authority in an environment with few legitimate avenues to achieve such means (Stretesky & Pogrebin, 2007). In-depth interviews and questionnaires with 141 diverse female gang members indicated that girls join gangs to establish a notion of femininity, that of the ‘bad girl,’ which creates a reputation, credibility, and translates to power and respect within the structure of the gang in a marginalized patriarchal society that provides these females with little status (Laidler & Hunt, 2001). In sum, gang scholarship to date indicates that gangs provide members of both genders with self-esteem and respect they do not receive from prosocial outlets.

4.5. Esteem needs: conventional pathways to achievement/success

When youth fail to achieve respect through conventional pathways to success, gang culture may be attractive by promoting esteem through criminal means. Survey research and interviews provide evidence that low socioeconomic status is associated with gang membership among girls and boys (Dukes et al., 1997; Molidor, 1996). Interview research suggests that gangs are attractive as they provide a sense of order, organization, and just something to do amidst social disorganization (Stretesky & Pogrebin, 2007). A synthesis of gang literature indicates that youth who are struggling in school, are frustrated with their academic failures, are in a struggling school system, or lack exposure to positive role models in the school (peers and teachers alike) may seek out gang membership to feel good about themselves, to feel as though they are successful in what they do, and to find support (Carlie, 2002). Some youths join gangs because there is a lack of legitimate free-time activities (Carlie). Gangs offer its members opportunities to find amusement, both lawfully, such as socializing, and unlawfully, such as committing crimes or looking for trouble with a rival gang (Carlie). Surveying 84 incarcerated adolescents, Negola (1998) found that youth also join gangs to achieve a sense of identity and belonging that mainstream society does not promote as well as to gain a feeling of group cohesiveness and a common identity. Given these findings, strain theory appears consistent with Maslow’s notion that esteem is an important human need, which can be obtained through criminal means when prosocial pathways are not available.

4.6. Esteem needs: glamour and popularity

Self-control and social learning theories support the attraction of glamour and popularity as motivations for gang involvement. Because illegal activities, such as selling drugs and stealing are so lucrative, those who have trouble with conventional routes to earning money, and a lack of self-control, may not be able to resist the temptation to join gangs in order to earn instant cash (Anderson & Dyson, 1996). A qualitative exploration of two Mexican American families found that if legitimate economic opportunities are not present, the gang option is seen as an alternative way of obtaining power, money, and protection (Reiboldt, 2001). Social learning theory indicates that gang members may be attractive role models to youth who are regularly exposed to active gang members. Interviews with incarcerated gang members found that youth may look up to gang members and see them as popular role models prior to joining a gang as they have better status, better clothes, and what seems like a better lifestyle. Some gang members indicated that they used the powerful reputation of the gang, to develop their own reputation, which gives them a sense of fulfillment (Stretesky & Pogrebin, 2007). Theoretical and empirical evidence suggests that obtaining glamour and popularity is another way to obtain Maslow’s identified need of esteem through gang involvement.

4.7. Self-actualization needs: a rite of passage into adulthood

Rites of passage have been present since ancient times to help people through stages in development. Without conventional pathways to success, strain theory purports, individuals fail to experience accomplishment that helps them realize their potential. With adolescence as one of the most tumultuous periods during human life course, gangs provide the initiation, structure, and rituals that meet key elements of rites of passage (Papachristos, 1998). For example, initiation involves a beating during which the initiate can fight, but not show any trepidation. The initiation process has similarities to male initiation rites of passage in ancient tribal societies (Vigil, 1996). For youth who do not meet conventional standards to achieve rites of passage through graduation or awards, gang membership might offer a formal transition into adulthood, although this application of strain theory has yet to be empirically tested.

5. Preventing gang membership: can schools protect at-risk youth?

The literature is remarkably void of validated and replicated studies showing vigorous treatment effects for gang prevention (Kodluboy, 2004). Preventing youth violence, delinquency, and gang involvement has been largely unsuccessful. Reasons for this include attention on individuals rather than the surrounding environment (Sorrentino, 1995). What interventions do exist largely exclude schools’ responsibility for preventing gang involvement and their ability to be a primary partner to intervene with youth at-risk for or who are involved with gang activities. Our proposed model for gang involvement indicates the need for an approach that acknowledges school system responsibility for treating individuals within a societal context in a way that denies some youths access to basic human needs such as security and protection, healthy adult and peer role models, belonging and identity, self-esteem and respect, and conventional pathways to success. Fortunately, despite policy and practice barriers, schools are in the position to meet the needs of at-risk youth as they hold the greatest time and programmatic responsibility for school-age children and youth outside the family.

Schools’ potential for playing a critical role in gang intervention efforts lies not only with necessary academic remediation but also as collaborators in the provision of other social services, recreational programs, and antigang and psychosocial curriculum delivery. Although many gang members are dropouts who have been long alienated from the school environment, sizable percentages of gang members are still active school participants (Spergel, 1990). Thus, gang-aware school staffs, supportive school environments, and vigorous school academic and social programs may be an essential component in prevention for many potential future gang members. Research has shown that youth who feel good about academic skills, were bonded to school, felt that education leads to a successful career, and had positive relationships with a peer social group and mentors were less likely to join a gang than youth without these protections (Crosnoe, Erickson, & Dornbusch, 2002). In this section we again apply our theoretical orientation to the existing literature,
with a focus on what can be done in the school environment to meet at-risk youth needs and thus prevent gang joining. Our goal was not to propose new or extraordinary strategies, but to identify strategies that are proven to work and apply them in a new way to address the unique needs of youth who may be involved with gangs. Table 2 summarizes this analysis.

5.1. Safety needs: security and protection

With periodic panic over youth violence in schools, school authorities are particularly worried about the safety of the student body. Unfortunately, many have responded with surveillance, security guards, perimeter fences, police presence, and separation of the at-risk students. These practices ignore the importance of school climate and create distance between students and their teachers and administrators. Students in such an atmosphere of distrust may turn away from role models at school and feel further motivation to join a gang (Brotherton, 1996). In a synthesis of gang intervention literature, Kodluboy (2004) recommends that the first step towards preventing gang activity on school campus should be to establish a school safety plan to address specific scenarios likely at any given school. In addition to basic safety issues such as access and visitation, a school safety plan should consider positive school climate student engagement. This plan should include how to effectively establish the school as a neutral territory for gang members (Thurman, Giacomazzi, Reisig, & Mueller, 1996) and other programs, such as peer mediation, that address significant gang activity on school campus. One such program is, Respect Encourages Student Participation in Empowering Communication Techniques (RESPECT), a school-based mediation program that may be successful in reducing gang tensions on campus (Tabish & Orell, 1996), although it has not been rigorously evaluated. Through RESPECT, school staff members encourage students to work out their conflicts and peers are trained to act as mediators. The program is integrated with the school culture to reduce anxiety about gang rivalry at school. Overall, the school safety plan encourages educators to proactively design school structures and routines to build a safe and healthy school climate even when faced with significant community risk factors (Kodluboy, 2004).

5.2. Love needs: family role modeling

Schools can implement strategies that essentially mimic strong and healthy family systems to provide at-risk youth with the caring and role modeling necessary to steer them away from gangs. In a review and summary of school-based interventions for gang involvement, Kodluboy (2004) suggests that schools: (a) build relationships with each student and act as positive role models, (b) communicate to staff, students, and parents that schools are neutral grounds and that gang, drug, and weapon activities will receive priority response, (c) apply discipline in a timely, firm, fair, and consistent manner, (d) institute student anti-gang education and prevention programs, and (e) establish a mechanism for student conflict mediation and cooperative relationships and communication networks amongst stakeholders. When teachers and other school professionals have high expectations for success, engage students in school, and develop relationships with students, schools can provide the “love” youth crave and may seek out through antisocial means. In recent qualitative research, youth on probation have reported that teachers who seemed to really care—by taking time to explain difficult concepts, treating students fairly, speaking pleasantly, and recognizing student effort—made the biggest difference in interrupting their delinquent trajectories (Sander et al., 2010). In the Seattle Social Development Project, a prospective longitudinal quasi-experimental study, bonding to school was critical to avoid negative outcomes such as delinquency and dropout (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004).

In another study, using California Healthy Kids Survey data in a cross-sectional analysis, school-level assets such as caring relationships and high expectations were related to student engagement above and beyond individual resiliency, regardless of level of family strengths (Sharkey, You, & Schnoebelen, 2008). Together, these studies provide strong support for the protective influence of caring relationships at school.

5.3. Love needs: belonging and identity through peers

It may be possible to develop a strong identity based on school affiliation and compete with strong in-group mentality fostered by gangs through programs such as sports, classes, or elective classes that can develop social skills, collaboration, teamwork, and enthusiasm for school. One group demonstrated the promise of an educational program named Broader Urban Involvement and Leadership Development (Thompson & Jason, 1988) for at-risk but not yet gang involved eighth grade boys. Researchers compared a control group to two intervention groups; one participated in an educational component and the other participated in both the educational component and an after school program. The after school program involved organized sports competitions that required intragroup cooperation, job skills workshops, and social/recreational activities. After one year of participation, no youth in the after school group had joined a gang, one youth in the education-only group joined a gang, and four youths in the control group joined a gang. Although group sizes were too small to show statistical

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School interventions to address needs met by gangs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Need met by gangs</th>
<th>Promoting gang membership</th>
<th>Protecting against gang membership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Safety: security and protection</td>
<td>Fences, cameras, security guards, and police presence.</td>
<td>School safety plan, neutral territory, and peer mediation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love: family role modeling</td>
<td>Maltreatment; adults who are stressed or unavailable, prejudiced and/or discriminatory; lack of adults youth can relate to.</td>
<td>High expectations for student success; student engagement; and fostering positive student-teacher relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love: belonging and identity through peers</td>
<td>Exclusionary discipline policies and separation from wholesome peer groups.</td>
<td>Promote in-group mentality in healthy way through sports, clubs, and/or elective classes. Discipline responses include restitution and rehabilitation in inclusive settings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esteem: self-esteem and respect</td>
<td>Discouraging messages for different learners, intolerance for different strengths or weaknesses.</td>
<td>Positive school climate; strong consistent discipline strategy including positive behavior support; praise for effort; value different types of success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esteem: conventional pathway to achievement/success</td>
<td>Few mastery and discovery learning approaches, material unsuitable to learner skills, rigid curriculum.</td>
<td>Teach what is relevant; engaging classes, hands on activities; consider student strengths; alternative schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esteem: glamour and popularity</td>
<td>Boring classes, lecture style teaching, employing former gang members.</td>
<td>Dynamic, participatory classes; differentiated curriculum to make lessons exciting and relevant; education on reality and consequences of gang membership.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
significance, results highlighted the promise of such school-based interventions to deter gang involvement. Overall, there is evidence that engaging rather than excluding at-risk students is important to provide them with a sense of belonging and identity.

5.4. Esteem needs: self-esteem and respect

Through gangs, members achieve a positive collective sense of self, an identity they are proud of. Thus, negative school factors such as high retention rates (i.e., holding students back), frequent use of expulsion or suspension in discipline policies, infrequent use of positive behavior strategies, ineffective classroom management (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005), and poor teacher–student relationships (Baker, Grant, & Morlock, 2008) are likely to alienate at-risk youth and promote rather than prevent gang membership. Instead, positive school climate (i.e., the quality of school life) is associated with a sense of belonging and students may be more likely to identify with school if they like it. In particular, school climate is a critical influence on the development and maintenance of students’ engagement. In a comparison of high and low performing schools in terms of academic failure, dropout, and suspension, Christle et al. (2005) found that students at schools with consistent positive disciplinary climates and high expectations for student success tend to be more engaged in school. School climate is affected by the structural (school size, ethnic diversity, student–teacher ratio) and regulatory mechanisms (organization, disciplinary beliefs, codes of conduct) that schools employ (Griffiths, Sharkey, & Furlong, 2009). Longitudinal data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health indicate that a sense of belonging and affiliation to school is associated with a decreased incidence of delinquency and violence (Wade & Pevalin, 2005). Moreover, a study of school social bonds with 754 seventh and eighth graders found that educational commitment, attachment to school, and belief in school rules are inversely correlated with school crime, misconduct, and school absences (Jenkins, 1997).

For youth who have been disenfranchised in schools, secondary prevention programs may be required to reconnect them to school. The Tabula Rasa Project attempts to persuade females away from the logical set of associations to the gang and toward other more legitimate community associations (De Zolt, Schmidt, & Gilcher, 1996). Through education, wellness coaching, and job skills training, the program aims to develop life management and problem solving skills as well as develop in girls a positive self-image and a sense of self-actualization needs: glamour and popularity

As students move from elementary classrooms to secondary settings, qualitative research demonstrates that their experiences tend towards more boring classes and lecture-style teaching (Sander et al., 2010). In order to combat the glamour and allure of the gang lifestyle, at a minimum, allowing for mastery and discovery learning approaches and differentiating curriculum to the educational needs of students are important. In addition, a gang prevention or resistance program may be considered for inclusion in the school’s or district’s comprehensive approach when the mass of gang members within or near the school becomes significant or parents, staff, or students indicate a need for gang resistance training for students. Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) is a nine-week prevention program targeting seventh graders with goals to reduce gang activity and educate youth about the consequences of gang involvement (Esbensen & Osgood, 1999). It is the largest gang prevention program in the country and is incorporated into the school curriculum of 47 states. The curriculum is designed to teach resistance to peer pressure, issues of cultural diversity, conflict resolution, the effect of drugs on the neighborhood, and responsibility. Results of the national evaluation (Esbensen & Osgood, 1999), which involved a cross-sectional design without random assignment, found that students who participated in the GREAT program reported significantly more prosocial behaviors and attitudes than nonparticipating students.

5.5. Esteem needs: conventional pathway to achievement/success

Although school factors have the power to enhance academic, behavioral, and emotional outcomes of at-risk youth through caring relationships and high expectations (Sharkey et al., 2008), Sugai and Horner (1999) summarize several factors often present in schools that encourage disruptive behavior in school: (a) ineffective instruction, (b) inconsistent and punitive discipline, (c) few opportunities to learn and practice social skills, (d) unclear rules and expectations, (e) rules not enforced, and (f) instruction not differentiated by individual needs. Schools can make an effort to teach what is relevant and enjoyable to students. For the benefit of all students, and particularly youth with emotional or behavioral difficulties, it is critical to prepare engaging classes with hands-on activities, and consider student strengths. Alternative schools, have demonstrated a small positive effect on school performance, school attitude, and self-esteem for at-risk youth (Kodluboy, 2004). In well-designed and well-supervised alternative schools, the separation of gang members may allow them to concentrate more on their studies, rather than worrying about and engaging in gang displays or challenges. Alternative schools also offer students a smaller, less anonymous setting than a traditional setting, and therefore it may be easier to find a significant adult to connect with (Kodluboy, 2004). Regardless of the setting, noting the importance and relevance of what is taught, engaging students in class, and considering student strengths are likely to encourage youth to stay in school. Further research is needed to evaluate the impact of alternative routes to educational and vocational success to engage at-risk students.

5.6. Esteem needs: glamour and popularity

As students move from elementary classrooms to secondary settings, qualitative research demonstrates that their experiences tend towards more boring classes and lecture-style teaching (Sander et al., 2010). In order to combat the glamour and allure of the gang lifestyle, at a minimum, allowing for mastery and discovery learning approaches and differentiating curriculum to the educational needs of students are important. In addition, a gang prevention or resistance program may be considered for inclusion in the school’s or district’s comprehensive approach when the mass of gang members within or near the school becomes significant or parents, staff, or students indicate a need for gang resistance training for students. Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) is a nine-week prevention program targeting seventh graders with goals to reduce gang activity and educate youth about the consequences of gang involvement (Esbensen & Osgood, 1999). It is the largest gang prevention program in the country and is incorporated into the school curriculum of 47 states. The curriculum is designed to teach resistance to peer pressure, issues of cultural diversity, conflict resolution, the effect of drugs on the neighborhood, and responsibility. Results of the national evaluation (Esbensen & Osgood, 1999), which involved a cross-sectional design without random assignment, found that students who participated in the GREAT program reported significantly more prosocial behaviors and attitudes than nonparticipating students.

5.7. Self-actualization needs: a rite of passage into adulthood

For youth who do not have access to conventional rites of passage into adulthood (i.e., getting a job, being confirmed in their faith, receiving a job promotion), gangs appear to fulfill the key elements (Papachristos, 1998). With several transitions over multiple years, schools are ideal settings for rites of passage traditions. Graduation from school is one such ritual that is embraced by families and students. However, much celebration is oriented towards the most highly academic students and not for alternative accomplishments. Schools might celebrate non-traditional accomplishments of at risk students, such as passing a difficult examination, completing a community service project, or hosting an annual art show. Research is needed to understand the impact of rites of passage on outcomes of students at-risk for gang involvement.

6. Policy development

Although a comprehensive, positive framework for determining gang involvement in the schools is an innovative approach, many appropriate school interventions to protect at-risk youth from joining gangs are not new. Strategies for positive behavior support, differentiating curriculum, and teaching in dynamic participatory classes are known successful techniques to engage students. However, neither the field of gang intervention nor schools as systems have embraced comprehensive school-based strategies to deter gang joining. Significant cultural and policy changes are needed to shift the focus away from rewarding primarily students who are the
highest achievers and largely excluding students with behavioral difficulties. The idea of schools being responsible to prevent gang joining may be anathema to a system that excludes children with “social maladjustment” from specialized services. There are three policy issues in particular that are critical to address before children at-risk for joining gangs can be given the full spectrum of services they need to overcome significant personal, family, and community risks for gang involvement: resource allocation, zero tolerance policies, and tracking.

Resources available to schools may not easily allow school officials to address the underlying social problems that encourage gang participation in the larger community. Many of the interventions best suited to intervention with at-risk youth are costly. It is tempting to exclude challenging youth, let them become a community problem, and use suppression tactics to arrest and house them in detention facilities. However, suppression strategies usually backfire, creating community hostility and training emerging delinquent youth to become hardened criminals (Thurman et al., 1996). Moreover, detention is drastically more expensive than education not only in terms of actual taxpayer dollars, but also in the loss of potentially productive members of society (Holman & Zeidenberg, 2006). Thus, school improvements to engage at-risk students should be a funding priority.

As a second policy matter, it is critical for schools to eliminate zero tolerance approaches to discipline and adopt schoolwide positive behavior support with fair, consistent, and constructive discipline procedures. Punitive and exclusionary discipline policies undermine student engagement (Skiba & Nketing, 2001). Schools that rely on involuntary transfer, suspension, expulsion, and other punitive discipline strategies also tend to have the worst rates of behavior problems (Sugai & Horner, 1999). Although typical adolescents may respond quickly to graduated levels of discipline in the regular school environment, the smaller portion of the student body who exhibit problem behaviors respond to punishment with increases, rather than decreases, in the undesired behavior with side effects including counter-aggression, habituation to stranger consequences, and reinforcement (Skiba & Nketing, 2001). These same disruptive students also miss instructional time and struggle academically. Zero tolerance policies are implemented inconsistently and affect students of minority groups and with special needs more than others (Morrison, Anthony, Storino, Cheng, Furlong, & Morrison, 2002). Many of the expelled students have been progressing down a developmental pathway towards more serious problems without being provided the necessary support services required by law (Morrison et al., 2002). Zero tolerance policies directly oppose schools’ mission to educate all children (Morrison et al., 2002).

Finally, tracking policies lead low-tracked children to associate more with each other and to grow distant from high tracked peers. Expectations for classroom behavior, attitude, aspirations, and student engagement (Skiba & Nketing, 2001). Many of the expelled students have been progressing down a developmental pathway towards more serious problems without being provided the necessary support services required by law (Morrison et al., 2002). Zero tolerance policies directly oppose schools’ mission to educate all children (Morrison et al., 2002).

7. Conclusions and future directions

The literature on gang interventions reveals significant gaps in understanding what programs are most successful to prevent gang involvement. By reviewing and integrating theories associated with gang membership, we proposed an innovative model to understand gang dynamics within the risk and resilience framework. Most existing studies investigate gang membership from the current perspective of youth who have already been involved in gang life. In this way studies are not conducive to the examination of risk and resilience as it is impossible to determine which factors lead to gang membership and which factors were caused by gang membership. Constructs such as self-concept, school bonding, family closeness, and current substance abuse may be affected by gang membership. Longitudinal studies that include school influences are necessary to examine risk and resilience factors at a time before most children have been initiated into gangs. A significant body of work is needed to test proposed relations between risk factors, protective factors, and gang involvement. Subsequent studies will need to empirically evaluate the success of school-based efforts to compensate for the allure of gangs. Although empirical evidence regarding school-based interventions to prevent gang involvement is rare, what is now clear is the need to expand the study of school-based gang prevention from a single educational intervention or strategy to a broader focus on school climate and student engagement if schools are to make significant and lasting impacts on at-risk youth development in the prevention of gang involvement.

References


