The Relationship of Students' Perceptions of School Safety

and Caring to Youth Gang Membership

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Abstract

Youth gang membership continues to be perceived as a serious threat to the safety of students attending the three high schools in Hayward, California. As a response to this problem, high school administrators have adopted no tolerance discipline policies that state that the school will automatically suspend or expel students who participate in any type of gang activity including wearing red clothing or displaying gang paraphernalia. This research explored the relationship between student perceptions of safety and caring at school and gang membership. This study hypothesized those students who have lower perceptions of safety and caring by teachers and adults at school are more likely to be members of a gang than students who feel safe and cared for, while controlling for demographic factors. This quantitative study utilized cross-sectional survey research with secondary data from 642 high school students collected for the California Healthy Kids Survey 2006 for the California Department of Education and the Hayward Unified School District. The hypothesis was partially supported. Findings from this study indicated the relationship between the Hayward students' lower feelings of safety and gang membership was not found to be significant and those students who reported lower feeling of caring by teachers and adults had only marginally significant higher levels of gang membership. This study raises questions about the relationship between students' perceived level of safety and gang membership and the potential positive effect of caring adults to prevent gang membership. School administrators may find that providing more opportunities for students to build caring relationships with teachers and adults can be more effective in deterring gang membership than no tolerance discipline policies. A social work intervention program is introduced to help students reconnect to caring teachers and culturally competent adults at their school.

Keywords: Latino youth gangs, caring school, zero tolerance, high school discipline policy, positive behavior support

Introduction

Student safety remains an important concern for every school. Preventing violence on school campuses is necessary to assure healthy youth development and learning. Students who do not feel safe either physically or psychologically at school are more likely to be truant, hold negative attitudes toward school, have lower achievement levels, and have fewer friendships (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002). Many schools have recognized that school safety includes both physical safety, where students are protected from bullying, assaults, and gang violence, as well as psychological safety, where students are protected from punitive and shaming discipline, negative enforcement, and verbal abuse (Curwin & Mendler, 1997; Nelsen, Lott & Glenn, 1993). Researchers have found that there is a strong association between students' perceptions that their school is unsafe and participation in a youth gang for protection (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001; Vigil, 1999). Providing a safe school is particularly important when a school is located in a neighborhood with active youth gangs. Gang activity on school campuses is evidenced by increased truancies, gang-related graffiti, students wearing colors (blue or red), flashing hand signs, physical confrontations and stare downs, "show-by" display of weapons by youth driving by the school, and an increasing number of racial incidents (Goldenstein & Kodluboy, 1998). From their study of gangs in a national sample of schools, Gottfredson and Gottfredson (2001) suggest that maintaining a safe school environment may be helpful in reducing gang participation among students who believe that they are vulnerable to attacks and assaults by other students.

As a response to youth gang activity and gang-related problems, many high school administrators have adopted "no tolerance" discipline policies that result in suspension or expulsion of first time offenders (Skiba & Noam, 2001). No tolerance of student gang-related

activity, including banning the wearing and displaying of gang colors, graffiti, hand signs, and harassing opposing gang members on campus, is often the primary strategy for school administrators who want to appear "tough" on youth gangs and make their schools appear "safer" (Woodson, 1989).

However, there is little or no evidence that this no tolerance strategy will make a positive contribution to school safety; instead there is a significant amount of evidence indicating that the overuse of suspension and expulsion can be detrimental to students simply because they are removed from classes where learning can take place (Ayers, Dohrn, & Ayers, 2001; Indiana Education Policy Center, 2000; Sampson, 2002; Skiba & Noam, 2001; Skiba, Reynolds, Graham, et al., 2006; Umemoto, 2006). The no tolerance strategy only temporarily suspends the problem. Suspended students return to campus and expelled students remain in the neighborhood. This punitive approach also appears to be in direct conflict with many schools' goal to provide a safe and caring school environment. Because of the inflexible nature and 'one size fits all' of no tolerance, these policies do not appear to contain any "caring" component that would contribute to any positive behavior change or the success of the expelled student. The importance of encouraging a caring school culture has reached many school campuses (Gibbs, 2001; Kneese, Fullwood, Schroth, & Pankake, 2003; McCurdy, Mannella, & Eldridge, 2003; van Gurp, 2002). Many school districts, including the district included in this study, have specific language in their overall school goals that state each school will "provide a safe and caring environment where all students can be successful" (Hayward Unified School District, 2006, p. 3). While recognizing the importance of a caring school environment, many schools maintain a no tolerance discipline policy that students may perceive as uncaring and unjust which does not contribute to feelings of safety, but instead contributes to students' feelings of powerlessness.

This quantitative research examines Hayward high school students' perceptions of their school's safe and caring environment and the high school students' involvement in a gang. The research will provide Hayward educators with a better understanding of how their tough discipline strategy on gang related conduct is affecting student's participation or non-participation in youth gangs. The three Hayward high schools in this study have high Latino/a student populations that the Hayward Police Department suspects contain students who are active in, or are associates of, either Norteño or Suereño gangs in the East Bay (SRO Raccette, personal communication, April14, 2008; McManus, 1999; National Alliance of Gang Investigators Associations, 2005). Each of the high schools has a Latino student body population of over 43% (Great Schools, 2006), so this study will explore the special characteristics of Latino youth gangs.

<div align="center">Literature Review</div>

This section reviews the literature relevant to the variables examined in this study. It is organized into four sections: (1) the history of no tolerance policies, (2) the background of caring school environments, (3) the evolution of Latino youth gangs, and (4) the community social disorganization theory explanation of gang involvement.

The History of No Tolerance Discipline Policies

No tolerance discipline is a gentler "frame" for the crime suppression strategy: zero tolerance (Lakoff, 2004). This strategy first received attention in California in 1986 as the title of a program given by U. S. Attorney Peter Nunez to impound seagoing vessels involved in drug smuggling. In 1988, U.S Attorney General Edwin Meese III brought the program with him as a member of the Reagan Administration and expanded the program nationally by ordering customs officials to "seize the vehicles and property of anyone crossing the border with even trace amounts of drugs" (Skiba & Knesting, 2001, p. 19). A year later, frightened

by a rise in youth violence, school districts in California, New York, and Kentucky adopted the zero tolerance term and mandated expulsion of students for drugs, fighting, and gang-related activity (Skiba & Knesting, 2001).

During the Clinton Administration, the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 was signed which mandated a one-year calendar expulsion for possession of a firearm on school campuses, effectively placing zero tolerance policies in all school districts (Zimring, 1998). Although the term zero tolerance, or its gentler frame no tolerance, does not appear in law it has become the label for harsh consequences for many kinds of school misconduct. The California legislature amended the Education Code to fulfill the federal gun-free mandate and added the requirement of mandatory suspension and the recommendation for expulsion of students who: possess, sell, or otherwise furnish a firearm, brandish a knife at another person, sell a controlled substance, commit or attempt to commit a sexual assault or sexual battery, or possess an explosive (California Department of Education, 2005).

There has been a general decrease in violent adult crime since the early 1990s (Ziedenberg, 2005; Sikba, 2004; Zimring, 2007) but reported crime by perceived gang members has remained steady, apparently unaffected by zero tolerance policies. "Violent crimes for which victims identified the offender to be a gang member peaked in 1996 at 10% of all violent crime and decreased until 1998 to about 6%, not significantly changing since" (Harrell, 2005, p. 1). Zero and no tolerance discipline methods remain in wide use when "there is no credible evidence that zero tolerance suspensions and expulsions are an effective method for changing student behavior" (Sikba, 2004, p. 3). However, there is data on school violence and gang involvement that supports preventive strategies as being most likely to change students' behavior to ensure school safety (Advancement Project & Civil Rights Project, 2000; Crone & Horner, 2003; Spergel, Wa, & Sosa, 2005).

Background on Caring School Environments

The preventive strategy explored in this research is caring school culture. To describe an important aspect of positive school climate, Cohen and Pickeral (2007) remind adults of childhood moments when they experienced a strong connection to a caring adult when deeply engaged in a learning experience. This positive connection with a caring adult is now recognized by researchers as an important feature of youth development (Benard, 2004; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002; Search Institute, 1997). Good schools have teachers and other adults who work to build caring relationships with students to teach effectively and provide support that addresses barriers to learning. These schools have created an atmosphere that encourages mutual support, caring and sense of community (Adleman & Taylor, 2005). A school climate that is positive is also associated with and/or predictive of academic achievement, healthy youth development and safety (Cohen & Pickeral, 2007; Kneese, Fullwood, Schroth, & Pankake, 2003; Levin-Epstein, 2004; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008; Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004). While caring schools enhance the outcomes for all students, it is especially important for students who have behavioral or emotional issues that keep them from being successful in school (Aldeman & Taylor, 2005) and Latino/a youth who may turn to gangs for support and community (Horowitz, 1983; Olsen, 1997; Tellez & Estep, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999; Vigil, 2004).

Background of Youth Gangs

In the pioneering study of 1,013 gangs in Chicago, Thrasher (1927), defines gangs as "protean manifestations: no two gangs are alike; some are good; some are bad; and each has to be considered on its own merits" (p. 5). Thrasher reminds researchers that each gang can have its own particular set of symbols, codes and purposes that can change over time which

makes defining gangs difficult and making generalizations about gangs problematic. Today, groups of young men and young women are viewed and dealt with as gang members when in fact many are not involved in criminal activities but are associates, wannabes (Goldstein & Kodluboy, 1998; National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center, 2005), or friends of gang members. In addition, misconceptions that youth gang membership is widespread and that youth violence is on the rise in the U.S. (Levin-Epstein, 2004; Thomas, 2000; Valdez, 2002) have fueled the public's fear of youth gangs. Nationally, between 1994 and 2004, violent crime has fallen by 26% and between 2003 and 2004 it has fallen another 1.7% (Uniform Crime Report, 2004). The vast majority of young victims are injured at home, on the streets, or somewhere else other than school (Kohn, 2004). Violent crimes for which the victims identified the offender as a gang member have remains about 6% of all violent crimes (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2004). Youth gang violence is not wide-spread but remains a problem in many impoverished urban areas. Unfortunately, the East Bay has seen a rise in homicides in 2006: over 145 in neighboring Oakland alone. San Francisco Chronicle staff writers Johnson and Zamora (2006) reported that nearly 30% of these Oakland homicide victims were 19 years old or younger, and the Oakland Police Department believes that most of the homicides are gang-related and involve drugs in some way (Beyers, Helander-Daugherty, Jain, & Mena, 2006). In the working paper prepared by the Rand Corporation *Reducing Violence in Hayward, California,* the researchers found that 56% of the homicides that occurred between 1998 and 2002 happened on streets or street corners, and multiple offenders perpetrated 40% of killing, which led the researchers to speculate some "form of group [gang] involvement" (Wilson, MacDonald, Grammich & Riley, 2004, p. 10).

The national leading crime indicators also suggest that gang crime is not something that is happening everywhere but is concentrated in big cities; however, "even in big cities,

gangs are concentrated in certain areas and crime does not impact everyone equally"
(Ziedenberg, 2005, p. 6). In Los Angeles, researchers have found that areas of serious gang
violence correlate with socioeconomic factors, especially with income and employment
(Kyriacou, Hutson, Anglin, Peek-Asa, & Kraus, 1999). If gang violence is most prevalent in
areas that are struggling economically, schools in these neighborhoods must be affected also.
This is particularly detrimental to Latino immigrant students who face additional difficulty in
adjusting to school because of "language problems, cultural and ethnic identity conflict,
general malaise, and discrimination" (Vigil, 2002, p. 41). Too often, impersonal and rigid no
tolerance policies appear as extensions of a non-caring attitude of the school administration
towards Latino immigrants who have "historically been pushed to the ecological,
socioeconomic and cultural margins of city life" (Vigil, 2002, p.48). This marginalization has
also been reported by Gottfredson and Gottfredson (2001) who found that school principals
are "more likely to report gang problems when the school enrolls relatively many Hispanic
students" (p. 4).

Latino gangs continue to be active in the East Bay community of Hayward, California
as the southern California gangs affiliated with the "Sureños" migrate north into the claimed
neighborhoods of the "Norteños" (National Alliance of Gang Investigators Associations,
2005). These gangs continue to be active in the East Bay and have been responsible for many
assaults and several homicides (Johnson & Zamora, 2006). In many East Bay high schools,
the Latino gangs recruit young members and continue to have a dangerous impact on the
lives of all students. Tragically, about 50% of the victims of deadly gang violence are not
gang members but innocent bystanders (California Attorney General's Office, 2003).

Community Social Disorganization Theory and Gang Involvement

Explanations of this deadly violence can be found in community social

disorganization theory. This theory has its origins in the study of ecology and basically refers to the failure of social institutions or social organizations to prevent violent crime and delinquency (Brotherton, 2003; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003; O'Conner, 2005; Papachristos & Kirk, 2006). Social disorganization criminologists theorize that youths turn to gangs as a reaction to their environment. This theory derives from the work by Chicago School criminologists Shaw and McKay (1942). The Chicago School also popularized the gang definitions contributed by Thrasher. The significant features of a gang proposed by Thrasher (1927) included group awareness, tradition, solidarity, and turf. Thrasher found that the reasons youth join a gangs was for status and belonging, "offering him what society has failed to provide" (p. 251). These features are reflected in modern gang theory. Social disorganization theory and Latino involvement in gangs has been expanded by Vigil (1999). He reminds us that, "Chicano schoolchildren [in the U.S.] have been marginalized since the aftermath of the 1846-1848 Mexican-American War" (p. 271). Latino youth continue to be marginalized and face barriers in the school environment, such as "culturally biased performance tests, political opposition to bilingual education, and teachers and administrators unfamiliar with (or even hostile toward) Chicano culture" (p. 271). Vigil sees the social disorganization of schools as a failure to address the learning needs of low-income, ethnic-minority children. These Latino children have learned from their social environments norms and values derived from survival strategies that many expelled youths "have developed to cope with the limited opportunities and extensive dangers they face in the streets" (p. 272).

Youth join gangs and learn from the gang environment by imitation, reinforcement and personal accomplishments. Moore (1978) adds to Vigil's work and proposes that there are three special Latino experiences that foster favorable conditions for the formation of gangs and recruitment of members: "barrio ethnic cohesiveness, traditions, and emphases;

institutional experiences at the barrio and the societal levels; and the tripartite economy

opportunity structure" of dead-end jobs in the poor-paying and marginal secondary economy

(p. 168). These factors also serve to remind us of the positive, albeit often dangerous and

unlawful, roles gangs play for youth who are racially and socially marginalized. Gibbs

(2000) further expands on Moore's work in Los Angeles and presents more reasons for

joining a Latino gang, such as: "friendship, surrogate family, safety, social activities, social

status, respect, excitement, income, power and just to have something to do" (p. 82). Klien

(1995) suggests other underling factors that contribute to gang membership: "Street gangs are

an amalgam of racism, of urban underclass poverty, of minority and youth culture, of

fatalism in the face of rampant deprivation, of political insensitivity, and the gross ignorance

of inner-city American on the part of most of us who don't have to survive there" (p. 234).

When gangs provide so many social and environmental supports, punitive actions are

unlikely to act as an effective deterrent because youth depend on these supports, albeit often

leading to dangerous and illegal behavior (Jankowski, 1991; Moore, 1978; Vigil, 1988; Vigil,

2002). Harsh no tolerance policies enforced by school administrators on students who are

affiliated with gangs that result in suspension and expulsion is questioned by a growing body

of research (Sampson, 2002; Schiraldi & Ziedneberg, 2001). In addition, Gilligan (2001)

makes a strong case that our criminal justice system is operating under the mistaken belief that

"punishment will deter, prevent, or inhibit violence, when in fact is the most powerful

stimulus of violence that we have yet discovered" (p. 116). Punishment also increases feelings

of shame and humiliation (Gilligan, 2001). These feelings do not increase a sense of caring.

Costenbader and Markson (1997) found that 55% of students suspended were angry at the

person who suspended them and a large majority believed that the suspension was of little

use. In the years before, during, and after this research the three Hayward schools suspended

nearly 1,200 students annually, the majority for violence and drugs (California Department of Education, 2007). Multiple suspensions will place a student at risk for graduation because they are simply not present in class. Many of these students do not have the grades or credits to graduate, find it too difficult to catch up, get discouraged and drop out of school. The less time suspended students spend in school, the less chance they will have to feel connected and cared for by teachers (Furlong, Redding, & Whipple, 2005; Olsen, 1997; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). The drop-out rate in inner-city schools is a "major cause of the persistence of the gang sub culture" (Hayden, 2004, p. 311).

In Hayward, the central city of this research, the high school students pushed-out by no tolerance policies are further frustrated by limited English skills and poverty that combine to create barriers that limit achievement. Forty-four percent of Hayward youth are Latino/a (Maxwell, 2004). The HIRE Center suggests that 6.5% of Hayward's annual drop-out rate is most likely those underperformers who have left school before the 11th grade (Maxwell, 2004). Nationally, the drop-out rate among immigrant Latinos between the age of sixteen and nineteen was 34% (Hayden, 2004). In addition, California Latino students make up more than half of the 48,000 drop-outs in grades 9-12 during the 2000-2001 school year in this state (National Council of La Raza, 2003). Latino students face multiple barriers that can keep them returning to gangs for support and belonging; the pull to gang membership is very resistant punitive school policies.

No tolerance and punitive measures are not the only tools schools have to deter youth from gangs. Significant attention needs to be focused on the factors that lead young men and women into gangs rather than programs that identify and remove suspected gang members from school campuses (Hayden, 2004; Monti, 1994).

Spergel (1995) claims that strategies developed to find answers to complex gang and

violence problems require a comprehensive approach that includes prevention, intervention and suppression measures. This program model derives from community social disorganization theory, and to some extent, theories such as differential association, opportunity, anomie and social control (Spergel, Wa, & Sosa, 2005). Successful strategies start with a community-wide assessment (National Youth Gang Center, 2002) delivered in a focused manner to obtain data on the current gang problem in the community, its potential causes, and contributing factors. Failure to assess the local gang problem, most often, leads to a "cookie cutter" approach that assumes that a standard anti-gang program will be successful in all locales. Recent evaluations of gang intervention programs in five major cities have shown that an equally faulty approach is to apply a single method or combinations of narrow programs that are not comprehensive (Spergel, et al., 2005). The introduced programs do not effectively lessen gang membership nor lower arrest rates if they do not contain prevention, intervention and suppression components. A critical component of a comprehensive program is school participation. Schools need to be persuaded to modify zero tolerance practices, and actively participate in the comprehensive program model. Ideally, a gang intervention street outreach social worker team would participate in the youths' life "in the school and assist staff in addressing gang-related issues, thereby facilitating better development and use of educational opportunities by gang youth, preferably in regular school program" (Spergel, et al., 2005, p. 13). The remaining components include community mobilization, provision of opportunities, suppression and organizational change and development (Institute for Intergovernmental Research, 2002). Interventions specific to reducing barriers in schools include; improving instruction for those students who have become disengaged from learning, support transitions as students and families negotiate grade and school changes, increase home and school partnerships, respond to and, where feasible prevent crises,

increase community support and facilitate student and family access to effective services and special assistance (Adelman & Taylor, 2005).

Hypothesis

This study hypothesized that students who have lower perceptions of safety and caring by teachers and adults have higher gang membership than students who feel safe and cared for at school, while controlling for demographic factors.

Methodology

Study Design, Sampling, and Site

This quantitative study utilized cross-sectional survey research with secondary data from 642 high school students collected for the California Healthy Kids Survey 2006, (CHKS) for the California Department of Education and the Hayward Unified School District. This convenience sample was chosen because the researcher has knowledge of the Hayward youth gang problem through employment as a high school counselor. The study also collected each participant's demographics including age, gender, and ethnicity. The CHKS is a youth self-report data collection system that provides essential and reliable health risk assessment and resilience information required for all school districts receiving Title IV Safe and Drug-free Schools and Community and Tobacco-Use Prevention Education funding (WestEd, 2006). The survey is a research-based reporting tool that provides valid indicators of drug use, violence, crime, and physical and mental health. It is used bi-annually to collect all the student data needed for compliance with the No Child Left Behind Act and allows comparison with state and national data.

The CHKS dataset was used because this researcher was denied permission by the Hayward Unified School District to survey students with an original questionnaire. The dataset was made available to this researcher through the sponsorship of the District Office of

Safe and Drug Free Schools after completion of a joint application to the California

Department of Education and the Regional California Healthy Kids Survey Center in

Oakland, CA (see Appendix A). The district sponsor and researcher agreed to requirements

for preserving anonymity and confidentiality of the data (see Appendix A).

The selected dataset includes a convenience sample of high school freshman and

juniors, between the ages of 14-18, attending three Hayward high school campuses. The

Hayward CHKS 2006 dataset include responses from 642 students. There were 298 (46.4%)

9th graders and 344 (53.6%) 11th graders included in the survey. Gender included 249

(38.8%) male and 389 (60.6%) female. Six (0.9%) students were American Indian or Alaska

Native, 181 (28.7%) were Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, or Asian, 49 (7.6%) were

African American, 245 (38.2%) were Hispanic or Latino/Latina, 32 (5.0%) were Caucasian,

and 127 (19.8%) were other ethnicities.

Variables and Measures

The independent variables studied were the level of caring and the level of safety felt

by the students surveyed. Participant's age, gender and ethnicity were used as control

variables. The dependent variable was self disclosed gang membership.

The measures were self-selected by the participants through the CHKS.

Included in the CHKS data set were responses to questions that collected student information

in five priority areas: alcohol and drug use, tobacco use, violence and school safety, physical

activity, and diet. In addition the survey included an assessment tool to measure 11 external

assets and 6 internal assets. The external assets included caring relationships, high

expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation in school. Internal assets

consisted of cooperation and communication, empathy, problem-solving self-efficacy, self-

awareness, and goals and aspirations. The survey also contained a school connectedness scale

used in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Dahlberg, Toal, Swahn, &

Behrens, 2005).

The measure for safety was the score for the question "How safe do you feel when

you are at school?"(see Appendix B, CHKS Section A, question 87) The measurement is

scored as a Likert Scale, the five point range was 1=very safe, 2=safe, 3=neither safe nor

unsafe, 4=unsafe, 5=very unsafe. The higher the score, the lower the perception of safety.

The level of caring was constructed by combining the scores from six questions about

perceived caring by a teacher or an adult on the CHKS (see Appendix B, CHKS Section B.,

questions 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11). The measurement was a four point scale ranging from 1=not

at all true, 2= a little true, 3=pretty much true, 4=very much true. The lower the score, the

lower perception of caring. The control variable age was a continuous answer to the question

"How old are you?" (see Appendix B, CHKS Section A., question 3). The control variable

gender was the categorical response to the question "What is your sex?"(see Appendix B,

CHKS Section A, question 4). The dependent variable was a yes/no categorical response to

"Do you consider yourself a member of a gang?" (see Appendix B, CHKS Section A,

question 88).

Reliability and Validity

The California Healthy Kids Survey was developed under contract by WestEd, an

educational research and development agency, in collaboration with Duerr Evaluation

Resources. The survey items were primarily drawn from two existing instruments: (1) the

state-mandated, biennial California Student Survey (CSS), sponsored by the office of the

Attorney General; and (2) the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk

Behavior Survey (YRBS) (Center for Disease Control, 2006). Both surveys have shown a

high degree of consistency and have proven reliable over many years with a wide range of

California youth. Many of the questions are comparable to those developed by the National Institute on Drug Use for The Monitoring the Future Survey (Austin & Duerr, 2005; Dahlberg, Toal, Swahn, & Behrens, 2005). Research shows that in anonymous, confidential surveys (like the CHKS) there is a high degree of validity in student answers—even with sensitive questions. The resiliency component of the CHKS (Section B) have coefficient alphas ranging from .55 to .88 with a median of .72. The field testing has continued but results are not available yet (Rhee, Furlong, Turner, & Harari, 2001; Constantine, Bernard, & Diaz, 1999). The districts using the CHKS must meet survey representativeness standards, sampling procedures, and confidentiality requirements set by the California Department of Education (Austin& Duerr, 2005).

Human Subjects

The San José State University Human Subjects-Institutional Review Board granted approval to this study on January 8, 2008 (see Appendix C).

The dataset was de-identified and no information can be connected back to any individual student. The student participants did not directly benefit from participating in this study. Indirect benefits are that the information gained from their participation will help the school administrators, teachers, and future students understand the relationship between perceived safety and perceived caring school environments and their potential link to gang involvement. The results will also be made available to the Hayward Unified School District. The potential risk is minimal given that the project is an analysis of secondary data and or direct contact with participants will occur.

Confidentiality of individuals will be maintained by not using identifiable information as part of the research study. Student names were not asked in the student questionnaires, and these surveys were completed and returned anonymously. Identification numbers have been

used to help organize the data by high school and grade but not by class. The dataset will be kept confidential and will be kept at the researcher's office in a locked filling cabinet. All data is anonymous and will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

Procedures

The dataset was obtained through an application to the Regional California Healthy Kids Survey Center in Oakland, CA. A $50.00 user fee was charged to this researcher. The dataset is available in SSPS format. This researcher used participant responses from selected questions contained in the dataset.

The CHKS data was collected from Hayward students in the fall of 2005. All students completed consent forms before participating. As outlined in the *Guidebook for the California Healthy Kids Survey Part 1.: Administration* (Austin & Duerr, 2005), CHKS staff randomly selected classrooms across the District to reach a target sample of 900. The dataset corrects itself through a variety of cross checks for inconsistencies across items, which in practice, rejects generally about 2% of the students in the sample. The dataset was further refined by this researcher to include only the participants from the three high schools which is within sampling expectations of CHKS staff (60% of targeted youth).

This study used secondary date collected from three public high school campuses. The student questionnaire provided aggregate data from the schools so individual students could not be identified. The disclosure of certain education information is safeguarded by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. The student surveys used in this project are permitted because they satisfy the requirements of anonymity and confidentiality.

This project proposal was presented to the San State José University Institutional Review Board for approval before any data was used by this author. The project proposal was also approved by the district coordinator of the Safe and Drug Free School and

Communities Program who was required to sponsor the data set application (see Appendix
C). There was no compensation for participation in this study nor did participants directly
benefit from participating in this study. Indirect benefits will help participants understand
the relationship between school discipline policy and gang involvement.

Analysis of Data

In order to test the hypothesis that youth who consider themselves gang members also
feel less safe and less cared for at school, univariate, bivariate, and multivariate statistical
tests were conducted with the CHKS dataset with SPSS 15.0 software. Independent samples
t-tests were used to compare the students' perception of safety, level of caring, and age to
gang membership. Independent samples *t*-tests were also used to compare the students'
gender to perception of safety and level of caring. Chi-squared tests for association were used
to compare the gender and ethnicity to gang membership. Finally a logistic regression with
all the independent variables was conducted to determine if the variables used in this model
could predict gang membership.

<div align="center">Results</div>

A series of univariate analyses were run to examine the characteristics of students
who participated in the CHKS. The mean number of age (in years) was 6.59 (SD = 1.13) with
6.00 = 15 years old and 7.00 = 16 years old. The mean number of safety was 2.74 (SD =
.847) and the mean level of caring was 2.85 (SD = .780) (see Table 1 in Appendix D).

A series of bivariate tests were completed to examine the students' levels of safety
and caring and gang membership. Regarding students' perception of safety for students and
gang membership, a significant difference was found (t (32.74) = -1.77, p = .043). The
students who had lower feelings of safety were more likely to be in a gang (M = 3.09, SD =
1.146) than students who had higher feelings of safety (M = 2.73, SD = .814). Students'

perception of caring by adults and teachers and membership in gangs was calculated, and a significant difference was found (t (565) = 1.670, p = .047). The students who considered themselves in a gang had a significantly lower feeling of caring by teachers and adults (M = 2.575, SD = .941) than students who did not consider themselves in gangs (M = 2.85, SD = .773). There was no significant relationship between age and gang membership (t (611) = -.990, p = .161). A significant interaction was found in the relationship between the gender of students in gangs $(x^2(1) = 4.404$, p = .036). Boys were more likely to consider themselves in a gang (7.6%) than girls (3.7%). No significant interaction was found between the ethnicity of students and gang membership ($x^2(7)$ = 5.522, p = .597) (see Table 2 in Appendix D).

Logistic regression was used to predict the likelihood that the variables chosen for this model could have significant predictive effect on students' gang membership. The model's overall ability to predict gang membership was found not significant (Cox & Snell R-Squared = .012, x^2 = 6.552, df = 5, p = .256). The predictor variable, level of safety (ß = .210, p = .204), and the control variables, age (ß = .153, p = .447), gender (ß = .069, p = .877), and ethnicity (ß = 17.988, p = .998), did not show statistically significant relationships with the dichotomous criterion variable, gang membership. However, the predictor variable, caring by teachers and adults, was marginally significant (ß = -.434, p = .057) (see Table 3 in Appendix D).

Discussion

This quantitative study hypothesized that students who have lower perceptions of levels of safety and caring by teachers and adults are more likely to be members of a gang, while controlling for age, gender and ethnicity. The hypothesis was partially supported. At the bivariate level of analysis there was a significantly lower level of feeling of safety and a significantly lower level of feeling of caring by adults for those students who reported

membership in gangs. The multivariate level of analysis examined the relationship among all the variables simultaneously and found that the variables were not significantly interrelated. The logistic regression also indicated that the model created to explore the hypothesis was not a good fit or appropriate by the Hosmer and Lemeshow test ($x^2 = 25.876$, $df = 8$, $p = .001$).

However, a student's lower level of feeling cared for by a teacher or adult, as a predictor variable that could increase gang membership was found to be marginally significant ($p = .0565$). This supports the importance of building caring relationships and challenges the assumption that no tolerance discipline policies that make no exception for individual relationships or circumstances make schools safe. The three high schools participating in this study practiced no tolerance policies and suspended many students for gang activity but students in this study who stated they were gang members reported that they felt less safe and less cared for by teachers and adults. This research calls into question the effectiveness of no tolerance policy to make a student feel safe or cared for at school, especially when there is ample research showing how caring school culture and positive behavior support can prevent the escalation of antisocial behavior (Crone & Horner, 2003; McCurdy, Mannella, & Eldridge, 2003; Sugai, Flannery, & Bohanon-Edmonson, 2004).

Control Variables

Age, gender and ethnicity were not significant predictors for gang membership in this study at the multivariate level. The students' age (14-18 years old) was not significant in gang membership. Ethnicity of the student was not found to be a significant relationship in gang membership. Gender was found to be significant at the bivariate level as males had a significantly higher rate of gang membership than females. This is consistent with national gang membership trends (National Youth Violence Prevention Center, 2005) and adolescent development (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002) that shows higher

incidents of aggressive behavior by males in this age cohort.

Limitations with Suggestions for Future Research

This research does not provide evidence for a causal relationship between perceptions of safety, perceptions of caring, no tolerance discipline and gang membership. This survey does not capture the complexity and dynamics of gang realities in the community (Hagehorn, 1990) but the CHKS does provide some insight.

Using the dataset from the CHKS precluded survey questions that may have improved the model. For example, questions may have been added to the survey to gather information on socioeconomic class, family characteristics, residence, peer pressure, adolescent development, and English language proficiency. This study could not determine if students who feel unsafe join gangs for protection or if students feel unsafe after they have joined a gang that is inherently involved in unsafe activities. The model would have been improved by a direct question: "did you join a gang because you felt unsafe?" This may have clarified the level of safety variable and made the model more appropriate.

This research was limited to the questions asked on the CHKS. The questionnaires are biased in several ways and should be interpreted with care. First, the survey only samples 9th and 11th grade students attending school the day of the survey and therefore are not representative of all the students at the high schools. Second, although the CHKS has good test-retest reliability, the extent of overreporting or underreporting of behaviors cannot be determined. Third, this is a self-administered survey so there are likely inconsistencies in how the questions were interpreted and answered. Finally, the sample sizes varied among the high schools and therefore may not be representative of the students throughout the district.

The original questionnaire developed by this researcher had included more specific questions regarding no tolerance discipline policy that may have provided more insight into

the students' perceptions of care and safety (Institute for Intergovernmental Research, 2002). While this research found a significant relationship between safety, caring and gang membership, the research is unable to determine if youth in gangs feel safe after joining a gang for protection or because now as visible members they are required to represent and defend the gang through violent means. The original questionnaire also included several open ended questions to add a qualitative component to this research that may have offered insight into students' reasons for involvement in youth gangs.

In addition, future research should include a comprehensive evaluation of each school's climate and include an assessment of the many domains of school life- safety, relationships, discipline, teaching, learning and the physical environment.

Implications for Social Work

School social workers play an important role in supporting student academic success, whether the student is a gang member or not (Schneider, 1999). Most barriers to students attaining a high school diploma can be addressed by interventions by a school social worker be it "systemic, environmental, familial, cultural, physical, or emotional" (SSWAA, 2003, p. 1). When a student faces a barrier to successful graduation, such as fear and a perceived unsafe school environment, lack of connection to caring adults, expulsion or suspension, a school social worker is in a unique position to study and introduce effective strategies to enhance the educational environment. A transcultural perspective includes aspects of power, privilege, oppression, and structural contexts, as well as cultural competency. At-risk youth, including Latinos, are less able to thrive in schools because they are further marginalized by the dynamics of power and disciplinary policies that fail to honor the strengths of students and benefits of caring relationships with adults. In addition, with the use of no tolerance policies, there is a disconnect between such discipline policies that impose expulsion or

suspension for a wide range of student misconduct and the actual needs and situations of these identified students. These problems should be addressed through lesser sanctions such as an in-school detention and culturally competent counseling interventions (Blumenson & Nilsen, 2003).

Strategies to find answers to complex gang and violence problems require a comprehensive approach that includes prevention, intervention, and suppression measures. No tolerance discipline policies are an overly simplistic approach that force administrators into a reactive position resulting in "expulsions to nowhere" (p. 88) which may even encourage gang participation among Latino youth (Vigil, 1988; Vigil, 2002). Although only partially supported by this study, social workers can access solid research on school safety that demonstrates that caring relationships by teachers and adults can deter youth gang membership (Aldeman & Taylor, 2005; Cohen & Pickeral, 2007; Kneese, Fullwood, Schroth, & Pankake, 2003; Levin-Epstein, 2004; Purnell, 1999; Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004).

One immediate strategy to increase safety and caring relationships for gang involved youth that social workers can advocate for is a school reentry policy and program that reconnects suspended youth back to the school after a no tolerance suspension. Several transition models are in effect across the country (Abrams, Shannon, & Sangalang, 2008; Eggert & Nicholas, 2008; Roy-Stevens, 2004). The ReConnect Program currently being developed by this author includes a comprehensive interview to include an academic review, review of deportment issues, a healing circle or peer mediation session, and college and career pathway assessment (Copenhagen, 2008). In addition, the youth would be assigned a culturally competent caring mentor to act as an academic tutor to help the youth develop short and long term goals. The youth would also have an opportunity to repair the harm their actions may have caused the school community through participation in community service.

In addition, attendance in a social skills class with a curriculum based on positive behavior change will be mandatory for the youth.

There is a lack of studies showing how safe and caring environments are effecting Latino student's participation in youth gangs (Tellez & Estep, 1998). This research has added to the knowledge base by studying the relationship between school environment and Latino youth gang involvement. The urgency of this and additional research is highlighted by the new study by Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova (2008) of 400 newly arrived immigrant children from the Caribbean, China, Central America, and Mexico. Their research offers disturbing realities of children who spend most their "day's energy devoted to managing fear and staying safe, with little energy to engage in learning" (p. 145). This study will help school administrators make informed decisions on discipline policy that will keep students safe and supported without placing unreasonable barriers to successful completion of high school.

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Appendix A

Agency Approval Letter and

Application for Obtaining CHKS Dataset

Appendix B

California Healthy Kids Survey

High School Questionnaire 2005-2006

Sections A and B

Appendix C

San José State University

Human Subjects – Institutional Review Board

Application and Approval Letter

Appendix D

Tables

Table 1

Sample Characteristics

Characteristics	n^a	%	Significant Differences
Gender			
[M] Male	249	38.8	F > M***
[F] Female	389	60.6	
[M] Missing	4	.6	
Grade			
[S] 9th	298	46.4	J > S*
[J] 11th	344	53.6	
Ethnicity			
[AI] American Indian	6	.9	H > AP > O***
[AP] Asian/Pacific Islander	181	28.2	
[B] African American	49	7.6	
[H] Hispanic/Latino	245	38.2	
[W] Caucasian	32	5.0	
[O] Other	127	19.8	
[M] Missing	2	.3	
Race			
[W] Caucasian	32	5.0	N > W***
[N] Non-Caucasian	608	94.7	
[M} Missing	2	.3	
Gang Membership			
[Y] Yes	32	5.0	N > Y***
[N] No	584	91.0	
[M] Missing	26	4.0	

Age (in years)	$M = 6.59$ $SD = 1.13$	Not Applicable
Level of Safety (higher score=lower safety)	$M = 2.74$ $SD = .847$	Not Applicable
Level of Caring (lower score=lower caring)	$M = 2.85$ $SD = .780$	Not Applicable

[a]Total sample N = 642

Alpha using two-tailed tests * p < .05   ** p < .01   *** p < .001
Alpha using one-tailed tests [+] p < .05   [++] p < .01   [+++] p < .001

Table 2

Gang Membership by Level of Safety, Level of Caring, and Other Characteristics

	Gang Membership		
	Yes Mean (SD)	No Mean (SD)	Significant Differences
Level of Safety (higher scores = lower perceptions of safety)	3.09 (1.146)	2.73 (0.814)	Yes < No[+]
Level of Caring (lower scores = lower perceptions of caring)	2.575 (.41)	2.859 (.773)	Yes > No[+]
Age (6=15 years old, 7= 16 years old)	6.78 (1.099)	6.58 (1.140)	Not Significant
Gender			
[M] Male	18 (7.6%)	219 (92.4%)	M > F *
[F] Female	14 (3.7%)	362 (96.3%)	
Race			Not Significant
[AI] American Indian	0 (0.0%)	4 (100.0%)	
[API] Asian/Pacific Islander	8 (4.6%)	166 (95.0%)	
[B] African American	4 (8.3%)	44 (91.7%)	
[H] Hispanic/Latino	15 (6.4%	221 (93.6%)	
[W] Caucasian	0 (0.0%)	33 (100.0%)	
[O] Other	5 (4.1%)	116 (95.9%)	

Alpha using two-tailed tests * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$
Alpha using one-tailed tests [+] $p < .05$ [++] $p < .01$ [+++] $p < .001$

Table 3

Multiple Logistic Regression: Beta Weights of Gang Membership by Perception of Safety, Perception of Caring Adults, Age, Gender, and Ethnicity.

Model	
Cox & Snell R-Squared	.012
x^2	6.552
df	5
p	.256

Predictors	Beta and Significance	
	ß	p
Levels of Safety	.210	.204
Levels of Caring	-.434	.057
Age	.153	.447
Gender	.069	.877
Ethnicity		
Caucasian vs. non-Caucasian	17.988	.998

Alpha using two-tailed tests * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$
Alpha using one-tailed tests [+] $p < .05$ [++] $p < .01$ [+++] $p < .001$