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Comparing Violent and Non-Violent Gang Incidents: An Exploration of Gang-Related Police Incident Reports

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Abstract: Prior research has established a strong link between gangs and violence. Additionally, this connection is demonstrated across multiple methodologies such as self-report surveys, qualitative interviews, as well as official records. Officially recorded gang data can be increasingly hard to obtain because data collection approaches differ by agency, county, city, state, and country. One method for obtaining official gang data is through the analysis of police incident reports, which often rely on police officers' subjective classification of an incident as "gang-related." In this study we examine 741 gang-related incident reports collected over four years from the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department. This study will explore reasons why incidents were attributed to gangs as well as compare the characteristics of violent, drug, and non-violent gang-related incidents. This work has implications for understanding the complexities associated with gang incident reports as well as for the commonality of violent gang crimes.

Keywords: gang; violence; incident reports; police data

1. Introduction

The link between gangs and violence is well-established in prior literature, which has resulted in gang researchers naming violent behavior as one of the key features of gang life (Carson et al. 2017; Decker 1996; Irwin-Rogers et al. 2019; Pyrooz et al. 2016). This strong relationship between gangs and violence persists across time, geographic location, and appears regardless of the research methodology (e.g., ethnographies, survey data, official records). Early ethnographic gang researchers identified themes surrounding violent behavior (Thrasher [1927] 1963; Yablonsky 1962) and more recent ethnographic research discusses gang-related violence in the United States (U.S.) and other countries (Andell 2019; Brenneman 2012; Decker and Winkle 1996; Densley 2013; Deuchar 2018; Garot 2010; Ward 2013; Weaver 2016). Individual-level survey data that compare violence among gang and non-gang youth find that violent offenses are overwhelmingly committed by gang youth (Esbensen et al. 2010; Melde and Esbensen 2013; Pyrooz et al. 2016; Thornberry et al. 2003). The link between gangs and violence is also echoed in the analysis of police homicide data from several cities across the United States (U.S.) (Adams and Pizarro 2014; Huebner et al. 2016; Papachristos et al. 2015; Papachristos et al. 2013; Pizarro and McGloin 2006; Pyrooz et al. 2010; Pyrooz et al. 2011; Rosenfeld et al. 1999).

While it is important to understand the violent nature of gangs, researchers often find that gangs and gang members are involved in other types of non-violent offending. The "cafeteria-style" nature of offending among gang members is largely supported in both qualitative (Decker and Winkle 1996; Fleisher 1998; Lauger 2012; Miller 2001) and survey research (Esbensen and Carson 2012; Thornberry

1998; Thornberry et al. 2003; Weerman and Esbensen 2005). However, due to the emphasis on using police data to understand gang-involved homicides, we know less about other gang-related crimes that come to the attention of the police. This gap in the literature is partially due to law enforcement practices that may limit the range of offenses that are labeled gang-related. Research by Decker and Kempf-Leonard (1991) as well as Klein and Maxson (2006) suggest that law enforcement agencies are restrictive in their definitions of gang activity and may fail to attribute non-violent crime to gangs. While the research shows that gang members may specialize in violence (Melde and Esbensen 2013; Pyrooz and Decker 2013) and that there is a benefit to understanding gang-motivated homicides, see (Rosenfeld et al. 1999), a narrow focus on violent gang incidents can reinforce the stereotype that gangs are *only* involved in violence (Klein and Maxson 2006).

In addition to a heavy focus on violent gang acts, there is a high degree of variation across cities and agencies in the identification of an incident as gang-related (Kennedy et al. 1997; Maxson and Klein 1990; Pyrooz et al. 2011). Research on gang homicides demonstrates that some law enforcement agencies label incidents as gang-motivated (i.e., those that result from gang operations such as turf wars or gang rivalries), while other agencies use a much less restrictive definition of gang-related crimes (i.e., those that involve a gang member) (Curry et al. 1996; Maxson et al. 2002; Maxson et al. 1985). Other agencies may not have clear standards on what crimes should be or are labeled as gang-related. These definitional discrepancies result in very different representations of gang crime (Maxson and Klein 1990) and make it extremely difficult to generalize research findings or policy implications to different cities and contexts.

A lack of definitional consistency and a failure to recognize the broad range of offenses that gang members are involved in has major implications for criminal justice responses as well as the social construction of gangs (Decker and Kempf-Leonard 1991; McCorkle and Miethe 1998). Additionally, attributing a crime, especially a violent crime, to a gang or gang member has implications for the prosecuting of these offenses (Pyrooz et al. 2011) and can activate gang enhancements in charging and sentencing. These enhancements can drastically change the length of a prison sentence (Hall 2019). Despite these serious implications, we have little empirical knowledge—especially for non-violent crimes—about why crime incidents are attributed to gangs.

In an attempt to build knowledge in the area, we draw data from 741 police incident reports that the reporting officer labeled as a gang-related incident. These incidents occurred in the American city of Indianapolis, Indiana from 2015 to 2019. Indianapolis is a Midwestern city located in the “Crossroads of America.” The city spans roughly 400 square miles. In 2019, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated the city population to be roughly 886,000 making it the 17th most populous city in the U.S. In 2018, driven by gun violence, Indianapolis experienced 1278 violent crimes per 100,000 people compared to the national average of 369 per 100,000 people (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2018). The Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department (IMPD) is the largest law enforcement agency in Indiana employing roughly 1700 sworn officers. IMPD is ranked consistently as one of the 30 largest police departments in the U.S.¹ Given these numbers, we believe that Indianapolis provides a suitable setting for our research goals. Our first goal is to explore the reasons why reporting officers labeled an incident as gang-related. Our second goal is to compare characteristics of violent, drug, and other non-violent gang-related incidents.

2. The Validity of Police Perceptions of Crime

The empirical use of official police data and incident reports is common practice in criminology and criminal justice literature. While use of these data are essential for improving our understanding of crime, they were not intended for research purposes and scholars using these data have pointed to a number of methodological limitations (Alison et al. 2001; Katz et al. 2012; Levitt 1998). These include

¹ <http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=6706>.

variation in the amount of detail provided based on the reporting officer (Alison et al. 2001) as well as a certain amount of reporting bias (Fisher 1993; Levitt 1998). Due in part to these limitations, police records are viewed as having a certain amount of bias (Braga et al. 1994; Goldstein 1990). While these flaws are troubling, other research suggests that police perceptions of crime and gangs in their community are valid generally, as well as for gang research (Decker and Pyrooz 2010; Katz et al. 2000). Braga et al. (1994), for instance, argue that the experiences of law enforcement cause them to develop a detailed sense of crime in certain neighborhoods and the city.

Of relevance to the current study is conceptions about who/what constitutes a gang as well as a gang crime. Difficulties surrounding defining a gang and a gang member plague both academics and practitioners alike (Curry and Decker 1997; Decker et al. 2014; Esbensen et al. 2001; Morash 1983; see, also, Andell (2019) for a broad discussion in the context of the United Kingdom). Police knowledge about gangs is often learned on the job (Decker and Kempf-Leonard 1991) and, therefore, likely to improve with time and experience (Kennedy et al. 1997). Research exploring police perceptions of gangs in their community find that law enforcement is quite knowledgeable about their local gang situation (Kennedy et al. 1997). While law enforcement in some cities have a clear definition of what constitutes gang crime (Maxson and Klein 1990), law enforcement agencies without clear definitional standards may rely on an officer's subjective classification of an incident as gang-related or not. These perceptions, especially among newer officers, may be based on stereotypical, and often inaccurate, depictions of gang-related crime presented by the media (Esbensen and Tusinski 2007; Horowitz 1990). In Kennedy et al.'s (1997) analysis of gang violence in Boston, the authors reported that police officers were quite knowledgeable about gang activity, but tended to believe that almost all homicides committed by youth were perpetrated by gang members and that all youth homicide victims were gang members. This finding indicates that law enforcement might attribute violent acts to gang activity more easily.

Overall, the limitations of data provided by law enforcement underscore the importance of the current work. The news media and policy makers lean heavily upon law enforcement perceptions of gangs and gang crime; therefore, it is exceedingly important to understand the reasons behind the classification of a crime as gang-related as well as variation across crime types. As Decker and Kempf-Leonard (1991, p. 272) note, "the formulation of effective policy responses to gangs depends on reliable and valid foundation of knowledge of the 'gang problem.'"

3. Methodology and Data

Data for this study were initially collected as part of the Southern District of Indiana Project Safe Neighborhoods² project. The data come from the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department (IMPD) incident records management system (RMS). The RMS is official police record and includes all incidents where a police officer documents an illegal or potentially illegal event (i.e., a police report). This system does not include incidents where the police were called to a scene and determined a crime had not occurred (i.e., calls for police service). When initiating a police report, the authoring officer can use a series of "check-boxes" to indicate if the report is gang-related, domestic violence-related, and/or narcotics-related. The check boxes default to 'no' therefore the reporting officer must initiate a change from 'no' to 'yes.' The sample includes all incident reports where the gang-related box was checked (i.e., indicated yes) from 1 January 2015 through 31 May 2019.³ Indiana law (IC 35-45-9-1)⁴ defines a "criminal gang" as a formal or informal group with at least three members that specifically:

² <https://www.justice.gov/psn>.

³ IMPD changed their RMS in June 2019. The new RMS did not have a similar check-box system.

⁴ <http://iga.in.gov/legislative/laws/2020/ic/titles/035#35-45-9>.

- (1) Either:
 - (A) Promotes, sponsors, or assists in;
 - (B) Participates in; or
 - (C) Has as one of its goals; or
- (2) Requires as a condition of membership or continued membership;

The commission of a felony, an act that would be a felony if committed by an adult, or the offense of battery as included in IC 35-42-2.⁵

All law enforcement agencies in Indiana are bound by this gang definition for arrest and charging purposes, however, we have no way of knowing if officers were guided by this definition when checking the gang-related box. Similarly, there was no known formal training on the use of any of the check-boxes.

Overall, incident reports designated as gang-related comprised a minute proportion of police reports for IMPD over the project period (see Table 1). The proportion of cases that were designated gang-related steadily decreases every year from 2015 to 2019. IMPD operated under two different Indianapolis mayors and three different Chiefs of Police during the study period. Differing administrative priorities leads to organizational changes which may be reflected by the decrease of gang-related incident reports (Feeley 1973; Hagan 1999; Lipsky 1980).

Table 1. Annual police incident reports.

Year	Incident Reports		Gang-Related Reports		Percent (of Total)
	n	%	n	%	
2015	127,397	23.3	266	35.9	0.05
2016	128,770	23.6	175	23.6	0.03
2017	124,725	22.8	152	20.5	0.03
2018	119,728	21.9	89	12.0	0.02
2019 *	45,961	8.4	59	8.0	0.01
Total	546,581	100.0	741	100.0	0.14

* Only includes incident reports through 31 May 2019. Source: IMPD Oversight, Audit, and Performance Division.

The majority of data collected from the reports was officer-coded at the time the report was created, for example, incident location, age, race, and gender of any individuals involved, crime type, and/or criminal charges. There is also a free text section called the “Incident Narrative.” In this section, the officer provides a summary of the incident. There is no set format for this section and narratives can vary greatly in length and detail. Police incident reports are not created for research (Alison et al. 2001) therefore we recoded fields in an attempt to address our research questions. The following sections discuss the variables used in the analyses as well as information on the coding techniques used for the gang-related reasons variables. See Table 2 for the descriptive statistics for all variables.

⁵ IC 35-42-2: Battery and Related Offenses.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for full sample and by dependent variable outcome.

Variable (1 = Yes)	Total		Violent Crime		Drug Crime		Other Non-Violent Crime		χ^2
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Crime Type	741	100	131	17.7	153	20.6	457	61.7	
Named Gang	201	27.1	40	30.5	13	8.5	148	32.4	34.026 ***
Self-Initiated	296	39.9	15	11.5	138	90.2	143	31.3	219.658 ***
Reason									
Gang Signs and Symbols	100	13.5	5	3.8	2	1.3	93	20.4	48.375 ***
Self-identify	61	8.2	17	13.0	1	0.7	43	9.4	16.375 ***
Associates with Gangs	161	21.7	38	29.0	4	2.6	119	26.0	41.944 ***
Law Enforcement Intelligence	227	30.6	11	8.4	109	71.2	107	23.4	160.426 ***
Unknown or Unclear	261	35.2	68	51.9	39	25.5	154	33.7	22.802 ***
Firearm	327	44.4	58	44.3	82	53.6	187	40.9	6.919 *
	M (SD)		M (SD)		M (SD)		M (SD)		F-Statistic
Number of Victims	0.70 (0.86)		1.4 (1.1) ^{b,c}		0.14 (0.40) ^{a,c}		0.68 (0.76) ^{a,b}		94.432 ***
Number of Suspects	1.2 (1.3)		2.1 (1.7) ^{b,c}		1.0 (1.2) ^a		0.94 (1.2) ^a		38.855 ***

* $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$; ^a = significant difference from violent crime ($p < 0.05$); ^b = significant difference between drug crime ($p < 0.05$); ^c = significant difference from non-violent crime ($p < 0.05$).

3.1. Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is a categorical measure of crime type (1= violent crime; 2 = drug crime; 3 = other non-violent crime). For each incident report, the reporting officer designates one or more “incident offenses” that specify which state laws have been violated.⁶ Each offense designation includes the corresponding Indiana Code.⁷ We grouped these into one of three Crime Types (1 = violent crime; 2 = drug crime; 3 = other non-violent crime). In cases where the officer indicated more than one crime type, we coded one crime type in order of severity (violent, drug, other non-violent). ‘Violent crimes’ included homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, and sex crimes. ‘Drug crimes’ included possession of paraphernalia, possession, dealing, and cultivation of marijuana, possession or dealing of cocaine, methamphetamine, or other controlled substance, and visiting or maintaining a common nuisance. Any crime that did not fit into one of the first two categories was classified as ‘other non-violent crime.’ Of the incidents that were labeled as gang-related, the majority were other non-violent crimes followed by drug crimes and violent crimes.

3.2. Explanatory Variables

We used the narrative portion of the incident report to try and determine the reason the reporting officer indicated the incident was gang-related. Gang-related reasons were not determined a priori; we instead used an iterative modified grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 2009) looking for themes to emerge and also with the understanding that each incident report could have more than one reason for being considered gang-related. We finalized on four possible reasons that the incident was gang-related. Each of the following reasons is a binary variable (0 = no; 1 = yes) and gang-related reasons are not mutually exclusive. Incident reports could have more than one reason for being labeled gang-related. Gang Signs and Symbols: The report writer indicated the presence of gang signs and/or symbols which could include gang tattoos, graffiti, and the display of colors and/or signs. Self Identifies: At least one individual listed in the police report self-identifies as a gang member. Associates with Known Gang Members: At least one individual listed in the report associates with or is related to a known gang member. Law Enforcement Intelligence: Law enforcement intelligence would indicate the incident is gang-related. While we may not know the exact intelligence, the nature of the incident including the units or outside agencies involved would indicate the incident is gang-related.

⁶ Incident offenses do not represent prosecutorial charging decisions.

⁷ See <http://iga.in.gov/legislative/laws/2020/ic/titles/001>.

We coded the reason as Unknown or Unclear if we were unable to determine the reason the incident was gang-related. Law enforcement intelligence was the most common reason a report was labeled gang-related—coded in 30% of incident reports (see Table 2). That said, there were a fair number of reports, just more than one-third, for which we were not able to determine why the officer labeled the incident gang-related. At least one reason was identified in 56% of reports. The remaining 10% of reports had two or more reasons identified.

We read each report narrative to determine if the reporting officer recorded a specific gang name (0 = no named gang; 1 = named gang). Just greater than 25% of incident reports included a Named Gang. Report Initiation is the activity that prompted the police report. Report Initiation was categorized according to whether the activity was self-initiated or not (0 = not self-initiated, 1 = self-initiated). Reports that are the result of a ‘call for service’ (CFS) or reactive police activity can be inherently different than a report that results from self-initiated police activity or proactive activity (Cordner 1979) in that an officer can choose what self-initiated activity to document. Reports that result from a CFS are influenced by the wants or needs of another individual (e.g., a community member) and therefore the officer has less discretion about what is documented in the incident report. Incident reports resulting from a community member’s call for assistance (call for service) or from the request of another agency were classified as ‘not self-initiated.’ In these cases, a police officer in the field was responding to a request for service and therefore has less control over documentation. Responding field officers may not have the same level of working intelligence about the incident as an investigative officer who is working an incident as part of an investigation or self-initiated activity. Self-initiated activity included undercover operations or investigations, search warrant service, person warrant service, and activities where the officer was not dispatched or requested to the location. The majority of police reports (60%) were result of calls for service/not self-initiated.

The number of individual victims and suspects listed in the report were coded as continuous variables. If the only victim listed was an organization and not a specific person, we coded that as zero (i.e., no victim). Fifty-three percent of incidents included at least one victim however the average number of victims per incident was less than one (mean = 0.70, SD = 0.86). More than one-half of incident reports included at least one suspect (65%). The average number of suspects per incident report was just greater than one (mean = 1.2, SD = 1.3). Firearms drive violence in Indianapolis as well as in most urban cities across the United States. We coded ‘yes’ if the officer listed a firearm in the property section of the report meaning at least one firearm was confiscated or taken into protective custody at the incident scene. About 44% of incidents involved a firearm.

4. Results

The focus of this analysis is two-fold. We are interested in incident characteristics that (1) influence the reporting officer’s categorization of that incident as gang-related and (2) differentiate between violent, drug, and other non-violent crimes. Bivariate analyses revealed several differences in crime type across the explanatory variables (see Table 2). In terms of the reasons why these crimes were labeled as gang-related, violent crime incidents were significantly more likely to be labeled as gang-related due to self-identification as a gang member, but it was also more likely that the reason for the gang-related label was unclear. Non-violent crimes were more likely to include the presence of signs and symbols for gang membership. Drug crimes were less likely to involve a named gang and be classified as gang-related because of gang associations. However, drug crimes were significantly more likely to be labeled as gang-related due to law enforcement intelligence. When looking at other characteristics the data show that incidents involving violent crimes were the least likely to result from self-initiated activity, violent crimes were significantly more likely to include multiple victims and offenders, and officers were least likely to confiscate a weapon during other non-violent crime incidents.

Given the established difference in reactive versus proactive self-initiated police activity, it is important to examine these results more closely. Within the non-violent crime incident reports, more than two-thirds of these reports resulted from a call for service (i.e., self-initiated = no). The majority

of incidents categorized as violent crimes resulted from non-self-initiated officer activity, meaning the officer was responding to a call for service from a community member or other law enforcement unit or agency. Only a small proportion of violent crime incident reports resulted from officer-initiated activity. In contrast, the majority (90%) of drug crime incidents were the result of self-initiated officer activity. These differences are significant ($\chi^2 = 219.657$; $p < 0.000$). These findings may suggest several things. First, when gang activity is violent, law enforcement is summoned; it is rare that law enforcement will find violent gang-related activity on their own. Despite this finding, the majority of incidents where officers are responding to a call for service are still non-violent, non-drug related incidents. These data also demonstrate it is uncommon for an incident that was self-initiated by an officer to be a violent incident, that is, gang-related violent incidents almost came to the attention of law enforcement via a third party call for service.

Multivariate Analysis

Given our interest in crime type, we next performed a multinomial logistic regression to determine if we could predict crime type using the explanatory variables. Multinomial regression is appropriate due to the categorical nature of the dependent variable. Table 3 presents the comparison of violent crimes and drug crimes with other non-violent crimes (reference category). The reference category was changed to violent crime (see Table 4) in order to make comparisons between drug and violent crimes.

Table 3. Multinomial logistic regression for violent crime and drug crimes compared with other non-violent crimes.

(n = 741)					[Exp(b)]	95% Confidence Interval	
Variable		β	SE	Sig	Odds Ratio	Lower	Upper
Dependent	Independent (0 = No)						
Violent Crime	Named Gang	−0.039	0.306	0.898	0.962	0.528	1.752
	Self-Initiated	0.909	0.345	0.008 *	2.483	1.263	4.883
	Firearm	0.496	0.246	0.044	1.642	1.013	2.662
	Number of Victims	0.737	0.147	0.000 ***	2.089	1.565	2.788
	Number of Suspects	0.468	0.078	0.000 ***	1.597	1.37	1.863
	Reason						
	Gang Signs and Symbols	1.372	0.547	0.012 *	3.944	1.351	11.513
	Self-identify	−0.411	0.526	0.434	0.663	0.237	1.857
	Associates with Gangs	−0.332	0.496	0.504	0.718	0.271	1.898
	Law Enforcement Intelligence	0.087	0.599	0.885	1.091	0.337	3.532
	Unknown or Unclear	−0.915	0.569	0.108	0.400	0.131	1.223
Drug Crime	Named Gang	−0.159	0.419	0.704	0.853	0.375	1.937
	Self-Initiated	−1.951	0.331	0.000 ***	0.142	0.074	0.272
	Firearm	0.07	0.235	0.765	1.073	0.677	1.701
	Number of Victims	−0.639	0.258	0.013 *	0.528	0.319	0.875
	Number of Suspects	0.197	0.102	0.054 *	1.218	0.997	1.489
	Reason						
	Gang Signs and Symbols	1.058	0.871	0.225	2.88	0.522	15.889
	Self-identify	1.417	1.192	0.234	4.126	0.399	42.655
	Associates with Gangs	0.875	0.667	0.190	2.399	0.649	8.874
	Law Enforcement Intelligence	−1.445	0.662	0.029	0.236	0.064	0.863
	Unknown or Unclear	−0.627	0.682	0.358	0.534	0.140	2.035

The reference category is Other Non-violent Crime. * $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.

The full model fit was significantly improved with the addition of the predictors ($\chi^2 (20) = 417.606$, $p < 0.000$) when compared to the intercept only model. Because we conducted a multinomial regression, we use the odds ratios (ExpB) to examine the effect of the explanatory variables on the dependent variable. We first examine the reasons the report was labeled gang-related. The presence of gang signs and symbols increases the odds of the incident being a violent crime rather than a non-violent crime by 3.9. No other gang-related reasons varied across crime type when controlling for other crime characteristics. The number of victims and suspects documented in the incident report is also important for crime type categorization. As the number of victims in the report increases by one, the odds of the incident being a violent crime versus a non-violent crime increases by 2.1. Conversely, as the number

of victims in the report increases by one, the odds of the report being a drug crime versus a non-violent crime decreases by 0.5. For suspects, as the number of suspects increases by one, the odds that the incident report includes a violent crime versus a non-violent crime increases by 1.6. An increase in the number of suspects increases the odds that the incident report includes a drug crime by 1.2.

Table 4. Multinomial logistic regression for drug crimes compared with violent crimes.

(n = 741)					[Exp(b)]	95% Confidence Interval	
Variable		β	SE	Sig	Odds Ratio	Lower	Upper
Dependent	Independent (0 = No)						
Drug Crime	Named Gang	−0.12	0.498	0.809	0.887	0.334	2.353
	Self-Initiated	−2.861	0.443	0.000 ***	0.057	0.024	0.136
	Firearm	−0.426	0.325	0.190	0.653	0.346	1.235
	Number of Victims	−1.375	0.283	0.000 ***	0.253	0.145	0.440
	Number of Suspects	−0.271	0.116	0.020 *	0.763	0.607	0.958
	Reason						
	Gang Signs and Symbols	−0.314	1.016	0.757	0.730	0.100	5.353
	Self-identify	1.829	1.285	0.155	6.226	0.502	77.197
	Associates with Gangs	1.207	0.815	0.139	3.342	0.677	16.513
	Law Enforcement Intelligence	−1.532	0.868	0.078	0.216	0.039	1.184
	Unknown or Unclear	0.289	0.866	0.739	1.334	0.244	7.290

The reference category is Violent Crime. * $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Next, we explore differences in crime characteristics across violent and drug crimes when compared with non-violent crimes. An officer responding to a call for service (i.e., not self-initiated) decreases the odds of the incident involving a drug crime versus a violent crime by only a small margin (OR = 0.06). Here again, the number of victims and suspects listed in the incident report is important to crime type categorization. As the number of victims in the report increases by one, the odds of the report being a drug crime versus a violent crime decreases by 0.2. For suspects, as the number of suspects increases by one, the odds that the incident report includes a drug crime versus a violent crime decreases by 0.8.

5. Discussion

Gang members participate in more than their fair share of violent offending but are also involved in other less serious criminal activities. This statement is supported by both qualitative and quantitative research but has not been adequately explored through official records such as police incident reports. Rather, prior work drawing on law enforcement data sources focuses heavily upon violent crime, in particularly gang homicide. This gap in the literature may be due to law enforcement definitions of gangs, gang members, and crimes that limit the range of offenses that are labeled gang-related. Given that news media and policy makers rely upon law enforcement perceptions of these activities, a focus on violence can lead to the misperception that gangs and gang members are *only* involved in violent criminal behavior. This misperception can result in moral panic and the creation of highly punitive policies targeted at gang members (e.g., gang enhancements and injunctions). Moreover, the belief, whether accurate or not, that gangs drive urban violence can influence whether or not a law enforcement agency maintains a gang unit despite the actual existence of documented gang violence (Katz 2001). In this manuscript, we examined four years and five months worth, of violent, drug, and non-violent gang related incidents from IMPD to determine why they were labeled as gang-related as well as what characteristics differentiate incident types.

During these years, very few incident reports were labeled as gang-related and even fewer were considered violent incidents. In fact, non-violent crimes made up the bulk of the gang-related incidents, followed by drug and then violent crimes. These findings indicate that IMPD officers are not simply choosing violent incidents to label as gang-related. Similarly, less than 50% of the incidents labeled gang-related involved an officer confiscating a gun and the majority of those incidents were categorized as non-violent. Only 60% of gang-related incident reports were the result of reactive police activity; the remaining incident reports were the result of proactive police activity and were overwhelmingly non-violent in nature.

Our work revealed that law enforcement intelligence is the primary reason incident reports were labeled gang-related but beyond that, it was common for the reporting officer to not articulate a reason, especially if the incident involved a violent crime. However, after controlling for other characteristics of the incident, officers were more likely to document the presence of gang signs or symbols for violent crime incidents than for non-violent crimes. This finding is consistent with prior literature that indicates that officers rely upon the presence of gang signs and symbols when identifying gang members (Densley and Pyrooz 2020; Scott 2020). Violent crimes were also distinguishable from drug and non-violent crimes by the presence of multiple co-offenders/suspects as well as the presence of multiple victims—a finding which is also consistent with prior research (Pyrooz et al. 2011). Our results also indicate that violent crime incidents were more likely to be brought to attention of the police through a call for service. This finding suggests that when gang activity is violent, law enforcement is called; it is rare that law enforcement will find violent gang-related activity during routine patrol or other unit specific activity.

Our findings indicate that drug crimes were likely to be labeled as gang-related due to law enforcement intelligence and that they were likely to be self-initiated by officer. This finding is most likely indicative of the routine activity of specialty units whose missions are highly focused and driven by unit assignment. That is, we can make the assumption, for example, that the activity of the gang unit is associated with gang-related crime without knowing the exact reason for the relationship.

While these findings contribute to the criminological literature on gangs and policing, there are several limitations. First, police incident reports are not created for research which, therefore, limited what variables we were able to code, how they were coded, as well as the analyses we were able to conduct. For example, the reporting officer knows why he or she considered the incident gang-related and our interpretation may or may not align with the reporting officer's creating threats to internal validity. We were also unable to determine a reason the incident was labeled gang-related for 35% of the sample. Police incident reports are public record and law enforcement agencies must provide access to these reports upon request (see Indiana Code 5-14-3). Investigatory records are excluded from disclosure rules and, therefore, this type of information—which would provide more detail as to why an incident is gang-related—is usually not found in police incident reports. We encourage future researchers to engage with reporting officers to gather their perceptions on why incidents were labeled as gang-related.

Second, we focus on one Midwestern, American law enforcement agency. Police incident reports and how they are written are influenced by myriad factors that vary across time and space. The reports used in this work are limited to information gathered by the reporting officer at the time of the incident. While informative, these findings are only generalizable to Indianapolis during the study period. We encourage similar work in other jurisdictions, states, and countries in order to build the knowledge-base and allow for comparisons. Third, incidents were identified as gang-related through the reporting officer's use of "check-boxes" while filling out the incident report. We were not able to determine what, if any, training officers received regarding when to check and when not to check the box. There also may be error associated with officers who checked the boxes in error or unintentionally. Moreover, the identification and labeling of the gang-related reasons was based on a thematic analysis of the incident reports, not the officer's perception of why he or she labeled an incident gang-related. Future research would benefit from a more in-depth analysis of officers' perceptions of these incidents. Finally, we were unable to differentiate between violent acts that serve a functional or expressive role in gang crime, (see Andell 2020 as well as Decker and Pyrooz 2015). Other research should compare police incidents for different forms of violence.

Despite these limitations, our findings provide insight into gang incident reports and have implications for gang research using official police records. While it is difficult to know exactly why officers consider some incidents gang-related and others not, our findings indicate that the majority (62%) of gang-related incident reports involve non-violent crimes. This finding is important for policy

makers and local agencies working with gang members in that it demonstrates programming should address more than just violence.

6. Conclusions

While modest, these results are novel and have implications for research as well as policy. Our research supports the idea that official records of gang-related crimes or gangs may not be generalizable across cities, see (Maxson and Klein 1990) and, as our data indicate, may be dependent on the type of law enforcement activity. The presence of a gang unit at the local level and/or other state and federal units that focus on gang violence (e.g., Violent Gang Safe Streets Task Force)⁸ influences related law enforcement activity. More specifically, it influences self-initiated officer activity. Documenting gang-related crimes is important for prevention, intervention, and suppression; therefore, it is imperative that there are “best practices” for documenting these types of crime. Consistent measurement of gang crimes across jurisdictions can only result in improved knowledge and better policy.

The results show that despite an urban setting and frequent violent crime, very few incidents are labeled as gang-related by law enforcement and that the prevalence is decreasing yearly. This fact could be as a result of a movement away from a specialized gang unit as well as a deprioritization of gang crime in Indianapolis. IMPD’s new records management system and coinciding removal of the gang-related check box from incident reports may also indicate less emphasis on gang violence and more emphasis on violence in general. The elimination of the gang-related label means that it may be difficult for prosecutors to identify opportunities to use and apply Indiana gang enhancement code as well as charge individuals with participating in criminal gang activity. In fact, these statutes are invoked very infrequently in Indianapolis. We found only two instances of this charge (see Indiana Code 35-45-9-3) in our entire multi-year sample of gang-related police incident reports and other research indicates that gang enhancements are used infrequently in Indiana, especially in Marion County where Indianapolis is located (Hall 2019). Additionally, a movement away from a focus on gangs can result in a lack of guidance on how to work with and address gangs (Andell 2019) for a discussion of this issue in the context of the United Kingdom).

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⁸ <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/violent-crime/gangs/violent-gang-task-forces>.

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