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Motives and methods for leaving the gang: Understanding the process of gang desistance

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Abstract

Purpose

This study examined the process of leaving the gang. Gang membership was conceptualized in a life course framework and the motives for why and methods for how one leaves the gang were analyzed.

Methods

Data were gathered from a sample of 84 juvenile arrestees in Arizona, all of whom left their gang. Motives for leaving the gang were organized into factors internal (push) and external (pull) to the gang, while methods for leaving the gang were organized into hostile and non-hostile modes of departure. Motives and methods were cross-classified and their correlates were examined, notably in relation to gang ties’ persisting social

and emotional attachments to the gang.

Results

Push motives and non-hostile methods were the modal responses for leaving the gang. While it was not uncommon to experience a hostile departure from the gang, most former gang members reported walking away without ritual violence or ceremony. This method was conditional on the motive for departure, however. None of the individuals leaving the gang for pull or external reasons experienced a hostile departure. While gang ties persisted regardless of motive or method, retaining such ties corresponded with serious consequences.

Conclusions

A life course framework is capable of organizing similarities between leaving the gang and desistance from other forms of crime and deviant groups. The process of gang desistance is consistent with asymmetrical causation. Due to limited attention to this process, a typology is introduced as a basis for understanding leaving the gang in relation to desisting from crime.

Highlights

- Modal responses for motives and methods for leaving the gang were internal pushes and non-hostile departures.
- For one out of every five former gang members, the method of departure involved hostility or ritual violence.
- Leaving the gang was not met with hostility so long as the motive is for reasons external to the gang.
- Motives surrounding the key life course parameters of gang membership are consistent with asymmetrical causation.



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