# Leaving the Gang

## Logging Off and Moving On

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Google ideas

## About the Authors

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*INTRODUCTION*

Why do people leave a group that they have been a member of? What do they do to leave their group? What role, if any, do the use of social media and the Internet play in this process? These are central questions that motivate our interest in desistance. In criminology the focus on desistance has been a part of the life course study of crime. This approach examines involvement in crime across the life span, and pays particular attention to initial involvement in crime during adolescence as well as declines in crime that tend to occur beginning in the early twenties. This latter process is referred to as desistance from crime and tends to occur rather rapidly, usually starting in the late teens. This is typically a period of considerable maturation, marked by the movement from adolescence into adulthood and the increasing involvement in family and the labor market. Social media play an increasingly important role in the lives of adolescents as they transition to adulthood.

We provide the graph of the age crime curve below in Figure 1 based on the number of arrests per age group. While much of criminology appropriately focuses on the dramatic upswing in arrests and offending in the mid-to-late teens, there is growing emphasis on understanding the declines in involvement. In particular, criminologists have worked to expand their understanding of the motives and methods behind desistance. A better understanding of the processes and factors that produce this decline in involvement in crime can lead to more effective intervention strategies.

**Figure 1. Number of Arrests by Age in the United States**



*N* = 12,371 law enforcement agencies
Source: Uniform Crime Report, 2009
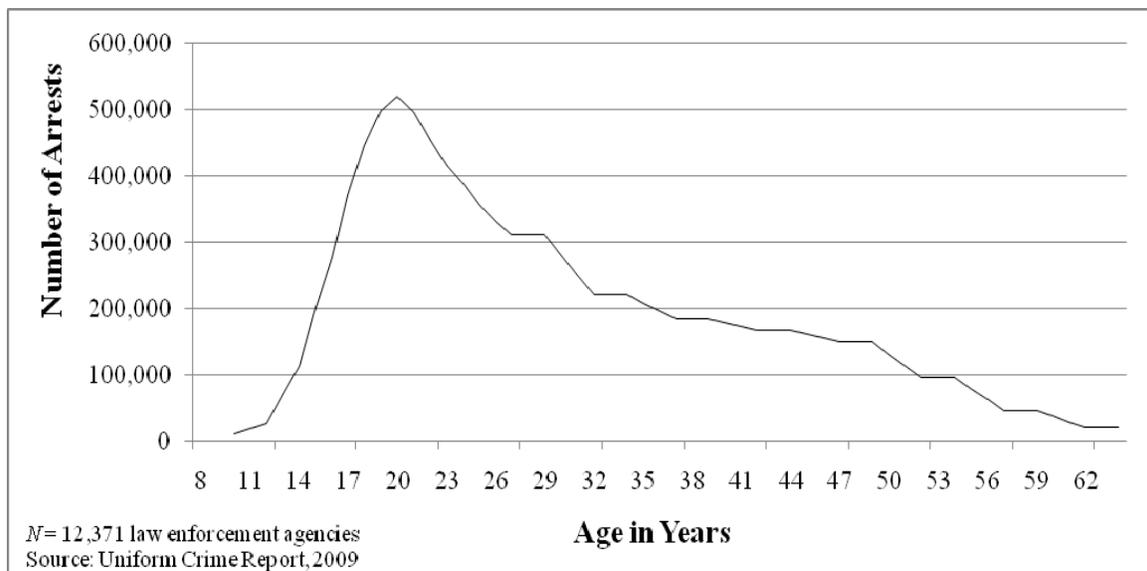
Research into gangs has been slower to examine desistance, as there are but a handful of studies of desistance from gangs. While there are dozens of studies that focus on the factors and processes that lead individuals to join a gang, some work is emerging. We present below in Figure 2 the age-gang curve. The pattern is generally the same, with a steady increase in gang membership beginning in the early teens that peaks by age sixteen and begins a gradual decline. This curve is built from data that is nationally representative over multiple waves that extends into the late twenties. The growth is not

nearly as peaked as that for the age-crime curve, but the decline is sharper, reaching half-peak by age twenty-one.

These two figures suggest several important findings for the context of our study. First, age is an important variable in understanding involvement in crime and gangs as well as desistance from both processes. Second, the process of desistance is visible and very strong for both involvement in crime and gangs. Third, understanding the natural processes by which gang desistance occurs is a major item on the inventory of criminological research. It is clear that the overwhelming majority of gang members leave their gang, and that this occurs not through a program or a policy but rather through natural social processes.

**Figure 2. Probability of Gang Membership by Age in the United States**



*N* = 837 persons "ever" reporting gang membership
Source: National Longitudinal Study of Youth, 1997
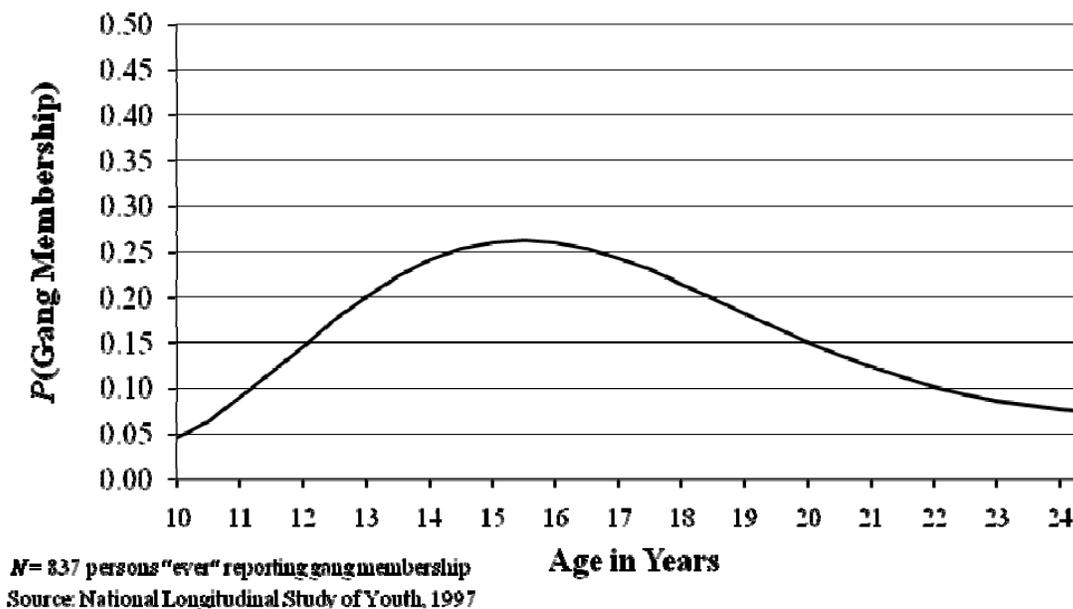
We examine the results from 177 in-person interviews conducted in Fresno, California; Los Angeles, California; and St. Louis, Missouri. These interviews focus on embeddedness in the gang, use of the Internet, and involvement in offending and victimization. The interviews document why and how individuals leave their gang, and also examine the consequences of leaving the gang. We hope through this research to shed additional light on these important issues.

*METHODS AND DATA*

Interviews were conducted in summer 2011 with young adults, aged 18 to 40, in three cities across several populations.[1] We did not draw random samples; rather our subjects were purposely selected to reflect the characteristics of groups that are likely to have a large number of current and former gang members. In Fresno, interviews were conducted with a jail population. This represents a deep-end sample of individuals who have been arrested and processed by the criminal justice system. In St. Louis, interviews were conducted with individuals "on paper"—on probation or parole. This population represents a group that is under supervision by the criminal justice system following adjudica-

tion but is in the community. In Los Angeles, populations of individuals at high risk in the community were interviewed. These interviews were conducted with participants at a social service agency known in the community for its work in finding jobs for gang members. The goal of this agency is specifically to work with gang members ready to change their lives. Most of their clients had long histories of involvement in gangs and with the criminal justice system.

Interviewing in this way allowed us to examine the issues of technology, gang behavior, and desistance across several levels of involvement in gangs and in the criminal justice system. We used purposive sampling to be able to speak about gang members in jail, those on community supervision, and those involved with community agencies. Purposive sampling identifies different groups about which more information is desired and then pursues that information in a targeted manner with each group. We have attempted to maximize the variation in level of penetration in the criminal justice system as well as regional variation in the gang members interviewed. In addition, as is evident from Table 1, there are differences in the nature of each city as well as each city's crime rates.

## NATURE OF THE SAMPLE

There were differences in the characteristics of the four cities in which we did interviews. In particular, the nature of the gang problem differed in each city. Table 1 displays the annual averages of gang activity in each of the study sites between 2002 and 2006. The data were drawn from law enforcement intelligence on gang activity, based on surveys carried out by the National Gang Center. Fresno and Los Angeles represent "chronic" gang cities, locations where there has been a gang problem prior to 1980. These cities are also characterized by well-developed gangs: those that tend to display resilience, that have more formal organizational structures, and that are intergenerational. St. Louis, on the other hand, represents "emerging" gang cities: cities where the gang problem emerged after 1980 and that as a consequence have gangs that are less entrenched and less likely to be intergenerational. National gang research has documented differences between these types of gangs. We added an additional element of differentiation: the degree of criminal justice system penetration.

**Table 1. Annual Averages of Gang Activity across the Study Sites (2002–2006)**

|  | FRE | LA | STL | 100 largest U.S. cities |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Gangs and gang members* |  |  |  |  |
| Number of gangs | 55 | 408 | 81 | 64 |
| Number of gang members | 4,310 | 42,318 | 4,600 | 2,982 |
| Gang members per 10,000 persons | 95 | 110 | 134 | 52 |
| *Homicide* |  |  |  |  |
| Number of homicides | 47 | 531 | 111 | 68 |
| Number of gang homicides | 9 | 260 | 26 | 14 |
| Gang homicide prevalence | 19% | 49% | 23% | 20% |
| Gang homicides per 100,000 persons | 1.98 | 6.74 | 7.46 | 1.97 |

*Abbreviations*: FRE = Fresno, CA; LA = Los Angeles, CA; and, STL = St. Louis, MO

*Note*: Values were compiled using data from the Uniform Crime Report and the National Gang Center

Table 2 below documents the demographic characteristics of our sample. We display four columns of data, those for current gang members, former gang members, non-gang members, and the full sample of individuals we interviewed for this project. These descriptive data are important for several reasons. First, they tell a lot about the nature of the individuals we interviewed. Second, the data allow for a comparison across the categories (current, former, and non-gang members) that establish initial points about the differences between the groups. Finally, these comparisons lay the groundwork for the analyses to come.

It is notable that the former members we interviewed were older by slightly more than four years than current and non-gang members. This reflects the length of time that the former members spent in the gang and also speaks to the social process of maturational reform. Maturational reform is a common process observed in criminology; as individuals age, they move out of crime and into conventional activities such as jobs, marriage, and families. These processes have a well-established effect on reducing criminal involvement. Males dominate each of the three groups of research subjects. An interesting pattern in race/ethnicity is observed in Table 2. Current gang members are more likely to be Hispanic than any other race/ethnic category, reflecting the longer-term cultural pull of Hispanic gangs. The differences across race/ethnicity among our gang, ex-gang and non-gang members is consistent with U.S. data regarding the prevalence of gang membership that shows higher membership among Hispanics, followed by African-Americans, with whites having the lowest rate of gang participation.

**Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample by Gang Membership Status**

|  | Current Gang Members | Former Gang Members | Non-Gang Members | Full Sample |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Mean (sd) | Mean (sd) | Mean (sd) | Mean (sd) |
| *Subsample Prevalence* | 29 | 25 | 45 | 100 |
| Age | 23.75 (6.08) | 28.55 (9.27) | 24.48 (7.64) | 25.29 (7.87) |
| Male | 94 | 84 | 96 | 93 |
| White | 2 | 9 | 18 | 11 |
| Black | 25 | 41 | 20 | 27 |
| Hispanic | 64 | 43 | 50 | 53 |
| Other | 9 | 7 | 13 | 10 |
| Foreign born | 9 | 7 | 19 | 13 |
| Number of children | 1.37 (2.04) | 1.43 (1.45) | 0.97 (1.21) | 1.21 (1.56) |
| Parental education in years | 11.35 (2.57) | 10.60 (2.90) | 9.57 (3.75) | 10.28 (3.32) |
| Monthly legal income /1,000 | 0.89 (1.25) | 0.91 (.68) | 1.56 (3.71) | 1.20 (2.62) |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Monthly illegal income /1,000 | 0.76 (1.98) | 0.20 (.45) | 0.58 (1.82) | 0.54 (1.65) |
| Hours spent at work or school per week | 25.65 (19.50) | 31.01 (17.58) | 20.01 (16.96) | 24.32 (18.36) |
| N | 53 | 44 | 80 | 177 |

*Note*: Values may not equal 100 percent due to rounding and (sd) refers to a standard deviation.

The percent of foreign born individuals is higher for non-gang members than for gang or ex-gang members. These data are consistent with an emerging literature that shows lower rates of participation in gangs specifically and crime in general by foreign born individuals.[2] Ex-gang members have slightly more children, though the difference is small. Similarly, small differences in parental education are observed across the three groups. The monthly income of non-gang members ($1,558) is higher than that of former gang members ($911) and current gang members ($889). The finding that income is higher among ex-gang members than current gang members is important for intervention messages that encourage individuals to leave their gang. However, as would be expected, current gang members have much higher levels of illegal monthly income ($758) than former gang members ($198) or non-gang members ($584). The low levels of illegal monthly income among former gang members may reflect their reluctance to report such activities or the result of leaving the gang life and the opportunities for illegal income that it provides. Finally, former gang members spend more hours at work or school each week (thirty-one) than do current gang members (twenty-six) or non-gang members (twenty). This points to the positive effects of gang leaving for involvement in pro-social activities.

## RESULTS

### Key Parameters of Gang Membership

In Table 3 below, we compare several important characteristics of current and former gang members. Both joined their gang at a relatively young age, 13 and 14 years old on average, respectively. The age at which former gang members left their gang (22.67 years) occurs later than what is found in the adolescent surveys conducted in school or community settings. This is likely due to the cross-sectional nature of our sample, as well as the fact that we have "deep-end" samples; that is, samples collected from serious offenders rather than general school-aged youth. This late age of departure from the gang also occurs after most of the effects of "maturational reform" have occurred.

### Table 3. Life Course Parameters of Gang Membership

| | Current Gang Members | | Former Gang Members | | Average (Current and Former) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean (SD) | Range | Mean (SD) | Range | Mean (SD) | Range |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age of gang joining | 13.01 (2.80) | 8–20 | 13.94 (2.53) | 9–20 | 13.45 (2.71) | 8–20 |
| Year of gang joining | 2000.10 (6.79) | 1973– 2010 | 1996.36 (9.34) | 1968– 2010 | 1998.31 (8.27) | 1968– 2010 |
| Age of gang leaving | — | — | 22.67 (5.71) | 12–37 | | |
| Year of gang leaving | — | — | 2004.48 (7.77) | 1979– 2011 | | |
| Duration of gang membership | 11.36 (6.79) | 0.71– 37.87 | 8.45 (5.54) | 0.92– 24.42 | 9.97 (6.35) | 0.71– 37.87 |
| N | 48 | | 43 | | 91 | |

This is an interesting finding, suggesting that perhaps gang membership is powerful enough to negate the social forces of reform that most youth experience in their late teens. Finally, membership in the gang averages 11.36 years for current gang members and 8.45 years for former gang members. This too is longer than what is observed in school- or community-based surveys of adolescents. We attribute this difference again to the heavy involvement in offending on the part of our sample. The power of the gang for this group is particularly important, as gang membership means elevated involvement in offending and victimization.

**Gang Embeddedness Among Current and Former Gang Members**

An important measure of involvement in the gang is the extent to which individuals are embedded in the gang. Embeddedness refers to individual immersion within an enduring deviant network, restricting involvement in pro-social networks.[3] These ties can be based on activities (behavior) or symbols. We measure embeddedness by pooling six measures, including involvement (wearing gang clothes/colors, participating in gang fights, having contact with gang members, friends in a gang), status (position in the gang), and identity (importance of the gang to you) items. We then examine how this embeddedness scale changes from the period of peak involvement in the gang to the time of the interview for both current gang members and former gang members. This allows us to measure the change in gang embeddedness in each sample over time. Our hypothesis for this table is that gang embeddedness will decline for former gang members and that the decline will be substantially greater than any change observed for current gang members. After all, leaving the gang should mean reduced ties to active gang members and gang activities.

Table 4 displays the results of this analysis. There are not many differences in embeddedness between current and former gang members at the time of their peak involvement. In fact, former gang members reported being more embedded in their gang at the time of peak involvement than were current gang members. This suggests an important conclusion for interventions designed to address gang membership: even the most deeply embedded gang members can sever their ties to the gang and move away from gang membership. Interestingly, current gang members reported a decline in their levels of embeddedness from 0.48 to -0.19.[4] This decline, a raw change of 0.67, is impressive,

demonstrating that even among gang members there is a dynamic level of commitment to the gang and declines in embeddedness occur.

**Table 4. Gang Embeddedness Among Current and Former Gang Members**

|  | Peak Involvement | Immediate | Raw Change | Correlation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Mean (sd) | Mean (sd) |  | *b* |
| Current Gang Member | 0.48 (0.81) | -0.19 (0.71) | 0.67 | 0.59 |
| Former Gang Member | 0.65 (0.66) | -1.24 (0.77) | 1.89 | -0.06 |
| Average (current and former) | 0.55 (0.75) | -0.60 (0.89) | 1.15 | 0.23 |

Gang embeddedness items were pooled and entered into a principal components factor analysis using varimax rotation to create z-scores. Items loaded onto one factor (eigenvalue = 3.76, variance = 63 percent).

However, this change is dwarfed by the declines in embeddedness among former gang members. Former gang members reported a decline from 0.65 to -1.24. This decline is nearly three times greater than that reported by current gang members. The magnitude and direction of the decline (large and negative) in gang embeddedness suggests that the measures of embeddedness have high validity, and that a major component of leaving the gang is reduced involvement in activities with and commitment to the gang. The former gang members in our sample had undergone such changes.

But even though they had left their gang, the former gang members carried some of their old roles forward with them. For example, two former gang members in Los Angeles pointed out that:

> [I am] not active, but will always be known as "that person" [a gang member].

> I will always be a gang member; that was my life. It will always be a part of me, that mentality. I have changed a lot—I don't see a gang member in the mirror.

The movement from current to former is not as abrupt as one might expect; it involves separation in terms of time, new social roles, and cognitive shifts. These quotes, nevertheless, illustrate the staying power of gang membership.

**Gangs, Social Networking, and Online Activities**

The majority of our sample (82 percent) reported the capability to access the Web or send email, and 81 percent reported that they use Google to search the Web. They were also active on social networking sites. We begin in Figure 3 with the entire sample. Importantly, 71 percent of our sample reported using a social networking site, with the majority using Facebook (55 percent) or MySpace (45 precent). These figures are somewhat lower than the prevalence for the use of social networking

reported among general population samples comparable to this age range. A previous study reported prevalence rates of social networking sites of 87 percent; perhaps the differences between those findings and our sample reflect some elements of the "digital divide" between college students and our sample.[5]

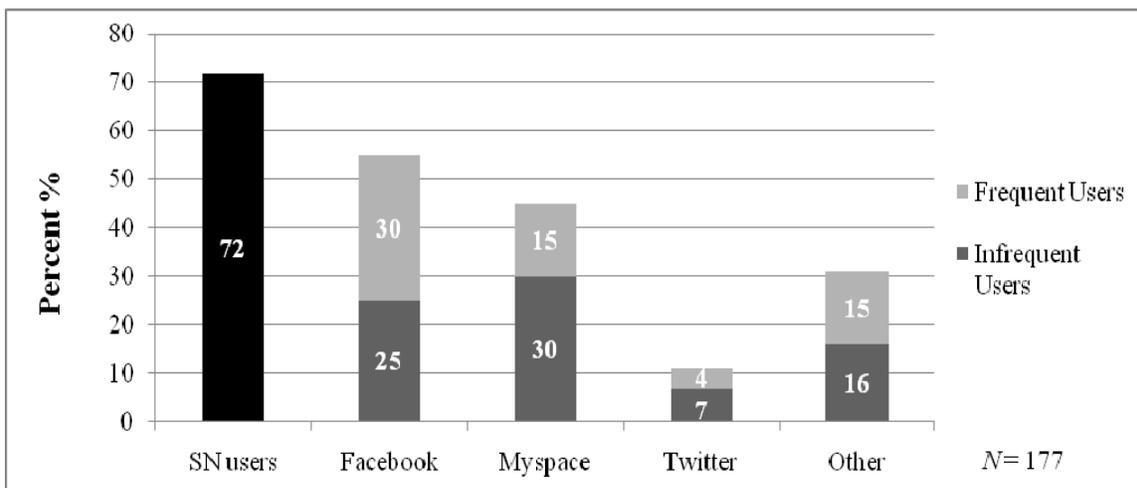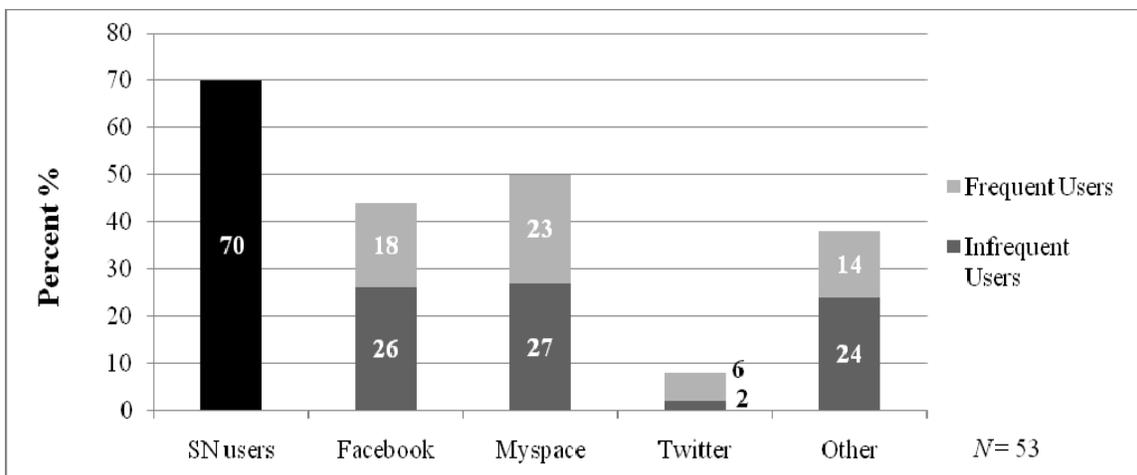**Figure 3. Use of Social Networking Sites (Full Sample)**



**Figure 4. Use of Social Networking Sites (Current Gang Members)**



A somewhat different picture of social networking use among current gang members emerges in Figure 4. While a similar percentage of gang members uses a social networking site (70 percent) as compared to the overall sample, there is a clear preference for MySpace (50 percent) over Facebook (44 percent). The ability to customize the home page on MySpace may account for this preference.

The use of social networking sites by former gang members is displayed in Figure 5. The majority of former gang members (68 percent) uses a social networking site, but the strong preference is for Facebook over MySpace, 61 percent versus 33 percent. While no definitive conclusions can be drawn from the preference for one social networking site over another, it is important to observe that current and former gang members use social networking sites at a high rate.

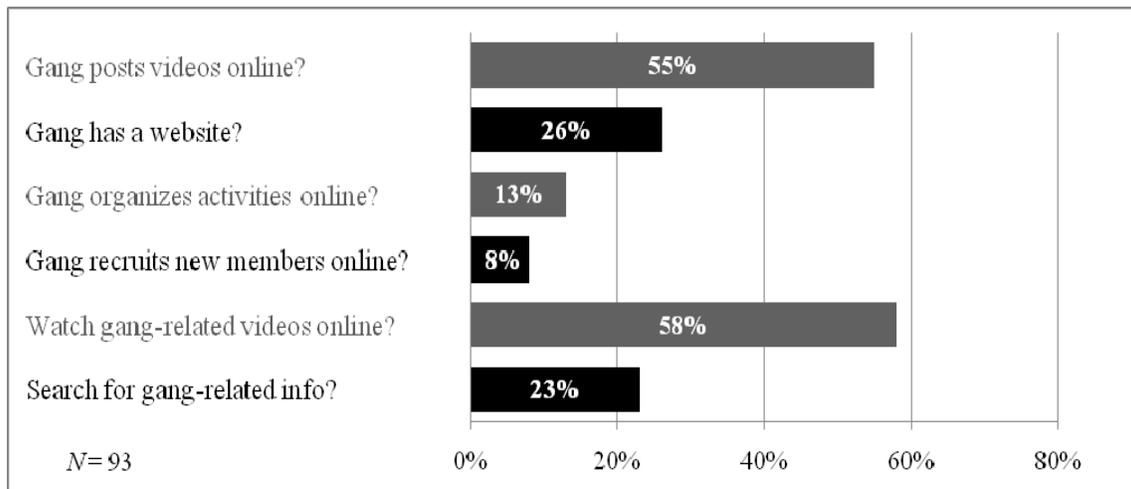**Figure 5. Use of Social Networking Sites (Former Gang Members)**
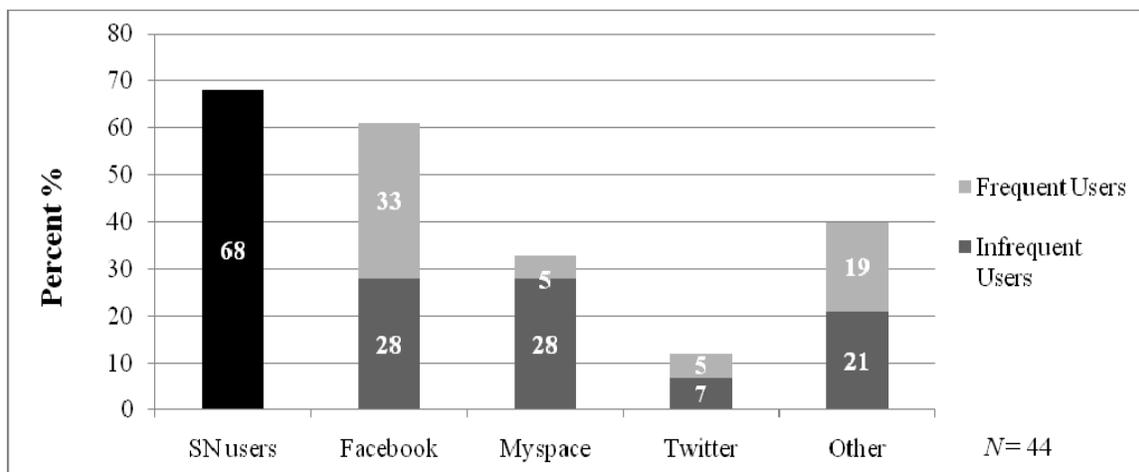


Surprisingly, this rate is not much lower than among college students and could be reflecting a narrowing digital divide between users and non-users—especially those at the lower end of the social and economic spectrum.[6] This suggests that it is quite possible to reach these populations through the use of social networking websites.

The heavy use of social networking sites in particular, and the Internet in general, raises the important question of what gang members do online. The two most prevalent activities are posting videos (55 percent) and watching gang-related videos (58 percent). Both gang and former gang members report that YouTube was the site they used to do this. The next most prevalent were having a gang website (26 percent) and searching for gang-related information online (22 percent). The least common activities involved organizing gang-related activities and function and recruiting new members online. The graphic nature of gang activity, particularly gang violence, can be seen in the posting and watching of gang videos.

When asked about using the Internet to engage in crime like setting up drug deals, most gang members reported that gangs frowned upon this sort of endeavor. One Los Angeles gang member responded, "Who does that?" Another echoed that sentiment:

> That's a no-no. Only idiots do that. Why would you do that [organize drug deals or other crime online]? That's not the attention you would want.

**Figure 6. Gang Activities Online**



Gang posts videos online? 55%
Gang has a website? 26%
Gang organizes activities online? 13%
Gang recruits new members online? 8%
Watch gang-related videos online? 58%
Search for gang-related info? 23%

*N* = 93   0%   20%   40%   60%   80%

But others indicated that social networking sites like Facebook or MySpace could be useful for announcing gang activities, like a gang get-together. A gang member in St. Louis said that someone would announce that "Tonight is a red rag [Bloods] party" or "We got a baseball game" as a means to convene people. The symbolic nature of the Internet for gang activity was a frequently mentioned use of YouTube. In the words of several St. Louis gang members:

> YouTube is a big deal . . . rapping on videos . . . fights on videos.

> Someone's always got a phone recording. Anything you record goes on Facebook or YouTube.

Sometimes social networking sites were used to post insults against other gangs or gang members—disrespect—that could lead to trouble in the street. A gang member in St. Louis said that "Words on Facebook, the whole hood is beefin' [ready to fight] . . . it can lead to a lot of stuff." In many ways, the online environment is a much more public extension of the street. Given youths and young adults' reliance on the Internet, and immediate access to it on cell phones, the information and comments posted on social networking can spread quicker than more traditional forms of "word of mouth." For this reason, we now turn to reports of online offending and victimization.

**Offending and Victimization Online**

In Table 5 below, we identify the patterns of offending and victimization for members of our sample that involved the Internet. The individuals we interviewed are involved in high levels of crime and victimization; indeed, as these are defining characteristics of gang life, it is no surprise that they migrate to the online world. There is a high level of self-reported illegal downloading of software and music by members of our sample. Generally, the most active group in each category of online offending is current gang members, followed by former gang members. Non-gang members report the lowest levels of participation in online offending. This is consistent with the research literature that shows higher levels of involvement in crime by gang members compared to individuals not in a gang.

These differences are particularly pronounced for street assaults motivated by things that happened online. Victimization that stems from online activities generally follows a similar pattern, with higher levels of harassment and attacks that stemmed from online activities among current gang members than former or non-gang members. One notable exception to this pattern, however, is the harassment or threats toward former gang members that is gang-related. Fully 23 percent of former gang members reported online threats or harassment online that was gang-related. These activities targeted against former gang members may stem from their decision to leave the gang.

**Table 5. Online Offending and Victimization by Gang Membership Status**

| | Current Gang Members | Former Gang Members | Non-Gang Members | Full Sample |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | % | % | % | % |
| *Offending* | | | | |
| Illegally downloaded music . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . | 46 | 44 | 44 | 45 |
| Gang-related? | — | — | — | — |
| Harassed or threatened someone online . . . . . . . . . | 14 | 21 | 10 | 14 |
| Gang-related? | 10 | 9 | 0 | 5 |
| Posted videos of violence or threats online . . . . . . . . | 20 | 9 | 8 | 11 |
| Gang-related? | 16 | 7 | 1 | 7 |
| Attacked someone on the street because of things that happened online . . . . . . . . | 24 | 19 | 9 | 16 |
| Gang-related? | 18 | 12 | 0 | 9 |
| *Victimization* | | | | |
| Been harassed or threatened online . . . . . . . . | 24 | 33 | 18 | 23 |
| Gang-related? | 16 | 23 | 1 | 11 |
| Been attacked on the street because of things that happened online . . . . . . . . | 20 | 12 | 5 | 11 |
| Gang-related? | 18 | 9 | 4 | 9 |
| *N* | 52 | 43 | 80 | 175 |

*Note*: The values presented in the cells are prevalence rates of "ever" perpetrating or experiencing a specific act. For example, 24 percent of current gang members reported being harassed or threatened online and 67 percent (16 percent gang-related/24 percent ever) reported that this was gang-related at one time or another.

**Methods and Motives for Leaving the Gang**

Three major issues in our analysis remain: an examination of both the motives and methods for leaving the gang, and an assessment of the consequences of leaving the gang. We examine the motives for leaving in Figure 7 below. The gang literature identifies "push" and "pull" factors involved in leaving the gang.[7] Push factors are largely internal to gang life; they are conceived as conditions that facilitate or hasten desistance processes. Because these factors make persistence in that social environment unappealing, they are viewed as "pushing" the individual away from the gang. Pull factors, alternatively, are largely external to the gang; they are conceived as circumstances or situations that attract individuals to alternative routes. Because these factors typically operate outside of the gang's control, they are viewed as "pulling" individuals away from the gang and directing them toward new activities and pathways.

Figure 7 displays the self-reported push and pull motives for leaving the gang. The modal category of pull factors are familial responsibilities, such as having a child. Half of the former gang members we interviewed told us that this was an important consideration for them in leaving their gang. This is consistent with other literature about leaving gangs and much of the literature on leaving deviant or fringe groups.[8]

**Figure 7. Motives for Leaving the Gang**
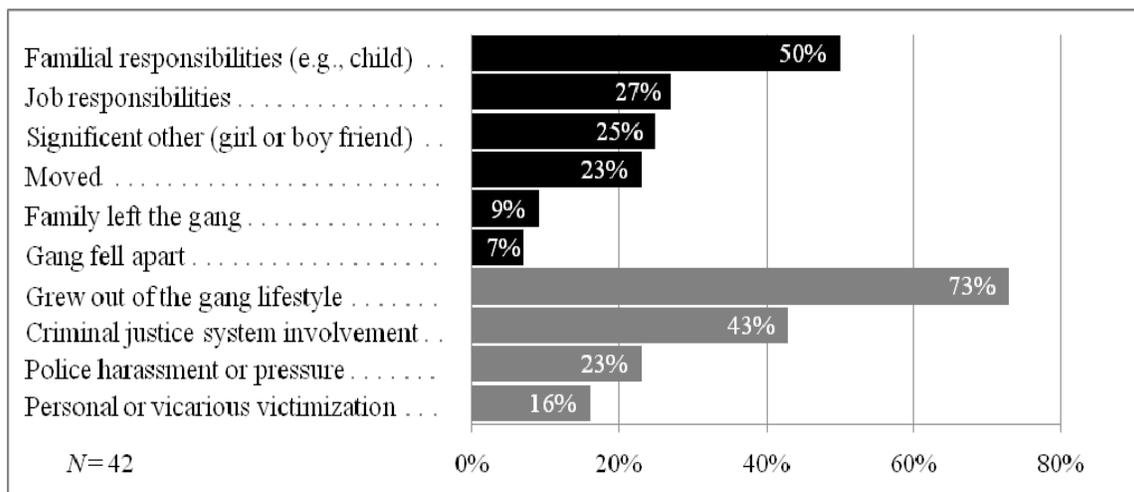


Job responsibilities (27 percent), the presence of a girlfriend or boyfriend (25 percent), and moving (23 percent) were the next three most frequently mentioned categories. As a former Los Angeles gang member put it:

> It was my chance at having a child; either I could or could not be involved [in the child's life]. I did not want to be gang involved when I had a child.

Among push factors, "growing out of the gang lifestyle," reported by 73 percent of former gang members, was the dominant reason for leaving the gang. It is significant that 43 percent of former gang members cited their involvement with the criminal justice system as a reason for leaving. This was followed by harassment from the police (23 percent). These three categories all indicate that over

time, the gang lifestyle "takes its toll" on individuals. Indeed, many of the people interviewed talked about how things eventually built up for them and they had to find a new lifestyle—that the gang lifestyle and its attendant pressures (arrests, being stopped by the police, living under threat of victimization) just got to be too much for them. These pressures, coupled with increasing family and job responsibilities, laid the groundwork for getting out of the gang life. As one former Los Angeles gang member said:

> It was a young thing. I experienced the life and now it is time to experience something else. I have responsibilities [a family, job].

**Figure 8. Methods for Leaving the Gang**
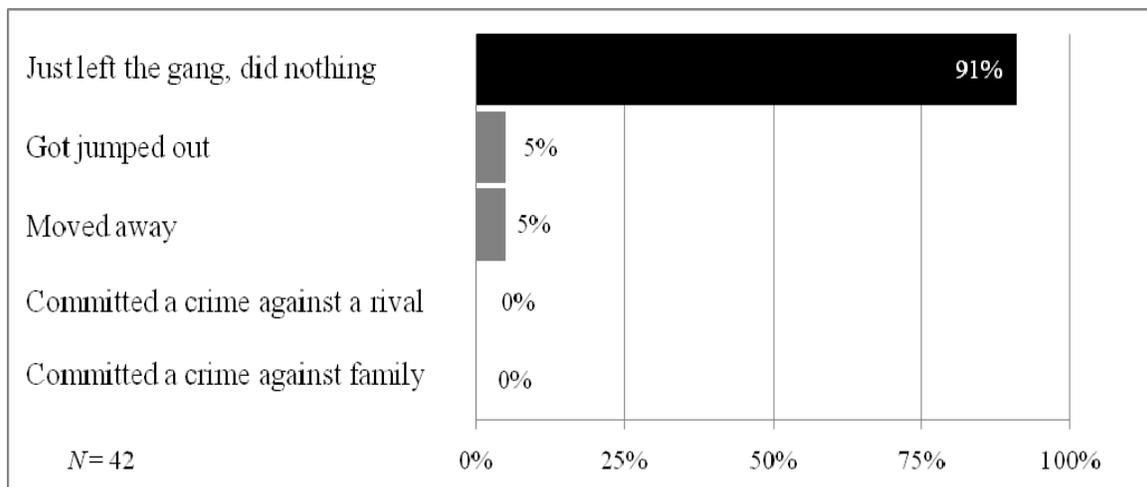


This was the most typical response, as former gang members reported experiencing a combination of pushes and pulls that ultimately directed them away from the gang.

Having reviewed what former gang members told us about *why* they left their gang; we now turn our attention toward *how* they left. There is a lot of mythology about how individuals leave their gang. Two previous studies reported that gang members in Los Angeles and St. Louis report that the only ways to leave the gang are by being "beaten out," shooting a family mother (typically one's mother), or committing a crime against a rival gang.[9] We found virtually no support for these statements in the experiences of the forty-two former gang members that were interviewed about this subject. The overwhelming majority of our sample, 91 percent, reported that they just left their gang and did not have to engage in any exceptional means to quit. Former gang members mentioned that getting jumped out "happens, but just not for me." A number of individuals told us that being "beaten out" or having to commit a crime were myths about gang life, and if they had any basis in reality it was only for the lives of very young gang members who desired to leave their gang after a short period of membership before they had put in enough "work." When asked about how people leave the gang, two current gang members in St. Louis said:

> They [the gang] understand. We ain't gon' press you. Good reason for it (family or school), that's cool. Not cool if you don't wanna be from the hood anymore.

Just leave when you want to leave. But you are X'ed out from the hood; you can't claim, but you can walk through the hood.

In this sense, leaving the gang is more about respect and responsibilities. Other research has found that if individuals left the gang for family or employment they faced no sort of hostile departure; only those that left without "good" reason experienced violent or hostile modes of leaving. It is important once again to place the current findings in the context of our sample. The gang and former gang members we interviewed came from a jobs program in Los Angeles, a probation and parole office in St. Louis, and a jail in Fresno. These individuals represent a "deep-end" sample; that is, individuals heavily involved in gangs, with extensive involvement in the criminal justice system, and in cities with a long gang history and high rates of gang violence. One of the clear and consistent messages from this finding is that it is important to find ways to facilitate gang leaving, a natural process that occurs quite regularly in the lives of gang members.

Our analysis highlights the difficulty of defining what it means to become a former gang member. The definitional issues involved in measuring and assessing the status as a "former" member are complex and consequential. It is one thing for an individual to declare that he has left a lifestyle or quit membership in a group, but quite another for others to accept this decision. In her classic study of group leaving, Ebaugh identifies the challenges faced by individuals who become an "ex" member of that group. Whether the group was an order of nuns, convicts, alcoholics, or transsexuals, many individuals found that members of their former group and the general public defined them and treated them as if they were still members of their "former" group.[10] These definitions and behavioral responses are also of considerable importance in the context of the gang. An individual may announce that they have left leave their gang but find they continue to be treated as a gang member by individuals in their gang, in rival gangs, or by the police. Further, individuals may no longer be in a gang, but residual social and emotional ties to the gang may introduce issues.[11] Because self-perceptions are important for behavior and are shaped by interactions with others, finding a way to establish a new identity as a non-gang member and have it accepted by others is important to the process of becoming a former gang member. We explore these issues in Table 6.

**Table 6. Consequences of Leaving the Gang**

|  | Ever | Today | Right after leaving |
|---|---|---|---|
|  | Yes (%) | Yes (%) | Yes (%) |
| *After leaving …* |  |  |  |
| … were you attacked because you left the gang? | 12 | — | — |
| … were you attacked by rival gangs? | 38 | — | — |
| … were you treated by the police like you were still in a gang? | 74 | — | — |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| . . . were family members attacked because of your gang affiliation? | 7 | — | — |
| *After leaving, were you worried that . . .* | | | |
| . . . your gang would attack you? | — | 12 | 20 |
| . . . rival gangs would still target you? | — | 32 | 33 |
| . . . the police would still treat you as a gang member? | — | 52 | 63 |
| . . . family would be attacked by the gang? | — | 26 | 25 |

$N = 42$

Below we examine the consequences of leaving the gang for former gang members. Typically, former gang members report the least interference by members of the gang that they left. Only 12 percent of former gang members reported that they were attacked by members of their own gang because of their decision to leave the gang. Rival gang members were more likely to retaliate against them; 38 percent of our former gang members reported being attacked by rival gangs. An important part of role exit is having the decision to exit a role or a group validated or recognized by others. For groups that are involved in crime, the recognition by the police that they have left a criminally in-volved group is quite important. If, for example, gang members who attempt to leave their gang con-tinue to be perceived as and treated by the police as active gang members, the commitment to leaving could be reduced substantially. This is a serious concern; 74 percent of former gang members told us that the police continued to treat them as if they were still in the gang. This treatment included being stopped and questioned about gang activity, being arrested, and being retained in a gang database. Several gang members from every city commented on this:

They [the police] are going to harass you regardless.

Cops still harass badly: "Once a gang member, always a gang member."

Harassed by the police all the time because of the gang; [leaving] doesn't make a difference.

We also asked former gang members about how their concerns about being perceived as a gang member by various groups had changed over time, from the day they left to the present. One former Los Angeles gang member said that "at school they [other people] still think he is in the gang."

The magnitude of these concerns declined between the time they left their gang and their inter-view, even with respect to the police harassment. This makes sense because, after all, the former gang was more likely to be aware and eventually accept the new status of an ex-gang member due to share affiliational ties. However, a different pattern was observed in the responses of rival gangs and the police. Indeed, roughly one-third of former gang members interviewed were as concerned about an attack by a rival gang today as they were when they left the gang. At the time of leaving the gang, 63 percent told us that they were concerned about the police continuing to treat them as an active gang member, a percentage that declined to 52 percent today. Both sets of findings from Table 6 confirm that the process of leaving and in turn being recognized as a former member is complex, gradual, and perceived differentially by different groups. Members of one's former gang were most likely to be

aware of and accept the change in status. However, members of rival gangs continued to perceive individuals as a threat well after an individual left their gang. But it was the police who were perceived to be the least likely to observe and respond to the change in status. Indeed, the police were viewed as roughly twice as likely to continue to treat former gang members as active than were members of rival gangs.

## CONCLUSIONS

The process of becoming an ex-gang member is complex and replete with definitional, conceptual, and empirical ambiguities. This study examined this process in three cities— Fresno, Los Angeles, and St. Louis—with high levels of gang activity. We interviewed 177 subjects, 97 of which had a history of gang membership. We focused heavily on these individuals—fifty-three current and forty-four former gang members—in relation to the process of "logging off" from the gang in a networked era. Based on the findings presented above, four issues merit further consideration.

First, there is a natural desistance process from the gang. Almost every youth that joins a gang will leave a gang, and not because of violence, imprisonment, or programming, but because of the natural desistance processes. The relationship between age and crime is among the most robust and replicated findings in criminology, with common threads observed across time and racial/ethnic, social, and cultural contexts. The relationship between age and gang membership presents a similar circumstance, where individuals move into gangs in early adolescence and out of gangs in emerging adulthood. Identifying the variability around the average gang desistance trajectory is an important task for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers who have a stake in addressing youth violence, prisoner reentry, and adolescent to adulthood transitions. That said, it appears that even without formal interference, most individuals will transition out of the gang and into other social arenas. It will be critical to find ways to support and avoid interfering with natural desistance processes, both of which are important goals across the spectrum of deviant social networks.[12]

Second, leaving the gang is an evolving process; it does not happen overnight. The decision to become an "ex" unfolds over time and typically occurs as a result of a combination of factors that push and pull at the ties that bind individuals to gangs. Ultimately, former gang members redefine their relationship to the gang, friends in the gang, and gang activities. Stakeholders should promote gang desistance by endorsing healthy families and related informal factors that assist the natural process involved in leaving the gang. In many ways, the very factors that make gangs unique—violence, intimidation, and group-based processes—are the internal factors that ultimately push or drive individuals away from gangs. When gang members are ready to redefine their relationship with the gang, it is the responsibility of stakeholders to provide the much-needed "hooks for change" that help rather than hinder movement out of the gang.[13] In this sense, police harassment and tattoos are glaring reminders of ties to the previous self: reducing and removing these connections are crucial to promoting a new identity and encouraging desistance.[14] As a former gang member in Los Angeles told us, "I don't see a gang member in the mirror." This declaration occurs only after considerably reducing one's embeddedness in the gang lifestyle.

Third, the Internet plays an increasingly important role in gangs, but not to such an extent that it dominates gang activity. To be sure, gangs are overwhelmingly a street-based phenomenon. In general, gang members use the Internet in ways similar to youth that avoid gangs—they talk to girls (and boys), they listen to music, they watch videos, they post videos of themselves, they look for jobs, and

they carry out research for school. In this sense, there is a lot of age-appropriate behavior by gang members in their use of the Internet. But there is a darker side. The role of the Internet in supporting gang activity is seen most clearly in opportunistic and symbolic activities of the gang. Disrespect, bragging, and making threats are a large part of gang life. Believing and pronouncing that one's gang is the toughest, biggest, or "baddest" is endemic to gang life. Such braggadocio can lead to violent confrontations. Like most situations in the gang context, however real or perceived, disrespect on sites such as Facebook can cascade into larger problems and spill over onto the street. Indeed, many current and former gang members reported perpetrating or experiencing violence on the street as a result of online activities. Similarly, many members of our sample reported posting and viewing gang fights on YouTube. Even some individuals who were comfortable with their identity as former gang members reported that they still took umbrage at disrespect targeted toward their former gang. However, we found very little support for the view that gangs use the full capacity of the Internet to organize gang activities. This probably reflects the generally disorganized nature of gangs. Even as the digital divide narrows across social and economic classes, the fluid processes of gang membership and the informal and diffuse nature of gangs make it unlikely that gangs will maximize the criminal potential of the Internet. This does not mean, however, that the Internet—social networking sites in particular—will not be the source of gang-related conflict in the future. The Internet is a very real extension of the street, with very real consequences to match.

Finally, we caution people not to be taken in by common gang myths. Such myths include statements that you can never leave your gang, that gangs are well organized, and that gangs use the Internet to effectively organize their criminal and noncriminal activities. None of these myths was supported by the findings of our work, nor do they find much support in the gang literature. This study was based on interviews with individuals with various levels of penetration into the criminal justice system—from at-risk individuals to convicted felons in jail to those on probation. These myths can take on a life of their own, disseminated through popular imagery, media, and politics, yet support for them was not found within a sample of serious gang members.

Communities, the criminal justice system, schools, and individuals should support natural desistance processes wherever they occur. It is often difficult to identify the first steps in becoming an "ex," but it is critical to do so. Reinforcing the identity of an individual as a gang member, particularly in the face of efforts to change, will be self-defeating. In an increasingly networked era, where lives are lived online as well as the street, the Internet remains a potent source for reaching individuals attempting to create new identities, and it should be integrated into any response to gangs.

*APPENDIX: SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS
ACROSS THE STUDY SITES*

| | FRE | LA | STL | 100 largest U.S. cities | United States |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| City Population | 494,665 | 3,792,621 | 319,294 | 598,641 | 308,745,538 |
| Female headed households | 11.60 | 7.30 | 10.50 | 8.98 | 7.20 |
| Median age | 29.30 | 35.10 | 33.90 | 33.71 | 37.20 |
| Population under age 18 | 30.10 | 23.10 | 21.20 | 23.97 | 24.00 |
| Unemployed | 13.90 | 11.60 | 14.40 | 10.87 | 9.90 |
| Households receiving public assistance | 16.75 | 6.61 | 24.54 | 12.35 | 10.30 |
| Percent living in poverty | 22.70 | 19.80 | 26.70 | 18.57 | 14.30 |
| Community disadvantage[1] | 0.62 | -0.42 | 1.48 | 0.00 | -0.58 |
| Percent White | 49.60 | 49.80 | 43.90 | 56.90 | 72.40 |
| Percent Black | 8.30 | 9.60 | 49.20 | 21.31 | 12.60 |
| Percent Asian | 12.60 | 11.30 | 2.90 | 7.67 | 4.80 |
| Percent Other | 24.50 | 24.60 | 1.60 | 10.30 | 7.30 |
| Percent Hispanic (all races) | 46.90 | 48.50 | 3.50 | 24.65 | 16.30 |
| Ethnic heterogeneity | 0.66 | 0.67 | 0.56 | 0.54 | 0.45 |
| Violent crime rate[2] | 729.88 | 921.18 | 2201.15 | 876.21 | 466.23 |

*Abbreviations*: FRE = Fresno, CA; LA = Los Angeles, CA; STL = St. Louis, MO.

*Notes*: Values were compiled using data from the Uniform Crime Report (2002–2009), the U.S. Census Bureau (2010 decennial), and the American Community Survey (2009).

1. Principal components factor analysis (items included: percentage of households receiving food stamps, percentage of the population unemployed, population living in poverty, percentage of the population that is black, and percent female-headed households) was used to create a community disadvantage score. The items were loaded onto one component (eigenvalue = 3.62, variance = 72.39 percent).

2. Averaged between 2002 and 2009 to smooth out anomalies in crime trends. Rates are the number of reported offenses per 100,000 persons.

# Endnotes

1. For a demographic comparison of the cities, the average for the one hundred largest U.S. cities, and the average for the United States, see the Appendix.

2. Charles M. Katz, Andrew M. Fox, and Michael D. White, "Assessing the relationship between immigration status and drug use," *Justice Quarterly*, 2011.

3. David C. Pyrooz and Scott H. Decker, "Motives and methods for leaving the gang: Understanding the process of gang desistance," *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 2011.

4. These are $z$ scores, with a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1, and are standardized measures that allow for comparisons across groups.

5. Eszter Hargittai, "Whose space? Differences among users and non-users of social network sites," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 2007.

6. Ibid.

7. Pyrooz and Decker, "Motives and methods for leaving the gang."

8. Scott H. Decker and Janet Lauritsen, "Leaving the gang," in C. Ronald Huff, ed., *Gangs in America*, 3rd edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002); Helen R.F. Ebaugh, *Becoming an Ex: The Process of Role Exit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

9. Scott H. Decker and Barrik Van Winkle, *Life in the Gang: Family, Friends, and Violence* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998); James D. Vigil, *Barrio Gangs: Street Life and Identity in Southern California* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988).

10. Ebaugh, *Becoming an Ex*.

11. David C. Pyrooz, Scott H. Decker, and Vincent J. Webb, "The ties that bind: Desistance from gangs," *Crime and Delinquency*, 2010.

12. Scott H. Decker and David C. Pyrooz, "Gangs, terrorism, and radicalization," *Journal of Strategic Security*, forthcoming 2011.

13. Peggy C. Giordano, Stephen A. Cernkovich, and Jennifer L. Rudolph, "Gender, crime, and desistance: Toward a theory of cognitive transformation," *American Journal of Sociology*, 2002.

14. Ebaugh, *Becoming an Ex*.