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How Does Print Media Describe Gang Members?

Analysis of Newspaper Reports and Policy Implications

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Abstract

Gang-related research is one of the hottest topics in criminology and criminal justice. However, neither official institutions nor mass media pay much attention to information gathered from academic research. The current study uses qualitative methods to examine how print media describes gang members through analyzing 180 newspaper reports. The findings show that although newspaper reports do criticize overidentification of gang members by law enforcement, how newspaper reports describe gang members seems to be different from findings in academic research. Specifically, the newspaper reports analyzed in the current study provide very few legal definitions, often emphasize individual gang histories, and commonly provide ambiguous gang member characteristics. Based on the findings, proposed policies are made, including providing a statement at the beginning of each report, standardizing and clarifying legal definitions of gang members, improving police use of gang databases, and most importantly, identifying and citing academic studies.

Keywords: gang members, newspaper reports, overidentification, content analysis

Introduction

Research on gangs has become one of the hottest topics in today's criminal justice literature. A book chapter published by Pyrooz and Mitchell (2015) suggests that there were 4,992 publications related to gangs before the end of 2013. However, neither official institutions nor the public has utilized these findings (see Barrows & Huff, 2009; Decker, 2002; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Howell, 2007). On the contrary, the mass media continues to contribute to the creation of myths about gangs (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Howell, 2007; Hu & Dittmann, 2016). Some scholars argue that emergence of this phenomenon is caused by the fact that the mass media heavily relies on official sources (e.g., police departments) rather than academic sources (Buckler et al., 2008). Furthermore, official databases of gang members suffer from the issue of overidentification (Curry et al., 2014; Huff, 1996).

Compared to other types of news, the mass media tends to report crime news (Pritchard & Hughes, 1997; Thompson et al., 2000). With the close relationship of news media to police agencies, there will never be a lack of crime news. Studying gang-related media reports is important as studies have shown that indirect victimization, such as stories told by the mass media, are significantly related to the fear of gangs (Katz et al., 2003; Lane, 2002), which also influences public perception toward gangs. In turn, public perception has an impact on punitiveness (Brace & Boyea, 2008). Since gang identity increases public fear of crime, gang members usually receive more severe punishments than similarly-situated non-gang members who commit the same crimes.

Although mass media typically claim that the delivered information is reliable, academic researchers often question this conclusion. For example, Howell's (2007) work shows that there are plenty of differences between youth gangs in reality and youth gangs in the newspaper media reports. An analysis of crime reports on cable news also shows that criminologists seldom appeared on cable news (Frost & Phillips, 2011). Some researchers argue that information provided by the mass media, to some extent, can be incorporated in academe to study public perceptions of crime. For example, Chaudhuri (2012) concludes that the media-academic partnership could be useful to further understand male victims in intimate relationships.

In general, previous research has confirmed that although newspaper reports tend to report the truth, they are still creating myths about gangs at the same time (see Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Howell, 2007). It may be difficult for the public to identify these myths because they do not typically read academic literature that may provide more accurate information. The current study tries to explore how newspaper reports describe gang members by applying the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to analyze 180 newspaper reports drawn from the LexisNexis database. Doing so allows the researchers to indirectly explore the public's perception of gang members after they read gang-related newspaper reports.

Literature Review

The following literature review contains three sections. The first two sections use several key gang-related studies to present information on gang definitions and gang member characteristics discussed in academic research. Doing so helps us compare findings from newspaper reports to those from academic research to examine whether print media misrepresent the characteristics of gang members (Howell, 2007). The third section provides three common ways used by researchers, the police, and the public to identify gang members and discusses each of them, illustrating that overidentification of gang members — who are not gang members but identified as gang members — does not only occur in academic research and police practice, but also occurs in the public.

Gang Definition: Academic and Legal Definitions

A universal point of view toward gang definition in the academic fields points out that there is no considerable agreement among law enforcement, courts, or academics (Curry et al., 2014; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Fudge, 2014; Gilbertson & Malinski, 2005; Howell, 2012; Wood & Alleyne, 2010). In research communities, there are two general types of gang definitions. The European definition describes a street gang as “any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity” (Klein et al., 2006, p. 418; also see Klein et al., 2001). A simplified American definition does not exist; but definitions in gang research share similar criteria—a group which has symbols as their verbal and nonverbal communications, exists for a period of time, has gang-identified territory, and is involved in criminal behavior (Curry et al., 2014; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007). Defining gang members is relatively straightforward—in research that applies self-report, researchers directly ask a person if he or she is a gang member (Decker et al., 2014). Doing so brings the benefit that researchers can use scientifically valid methods to distinguish current, former, and non-gang membership status (Decker et al., 2014) while avoiding definitional debates (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993).

It is obviously difficult, however, for law enforcement to apply self-report to identify gang members. Hence, criminal justice systems (e.g., law enforcement, courts, and corrections) rely on legal definitions of gangs and gang members. Similar to other legal definitions of crime, the definition of gangs in state statutes varies. Barrows and Huff (2009) analyzed state gang statutes—at that time, 41 states and Washington D.C. had statutes that defined what a gang is, but only 15 states had statutes that defined gang membership. It is also known that these statutes are diverse. For example, five states do not require a particular number of members for a group to be considered a gang; 33 states require at least three members while three states require at least five members (Barrows & Huff, 2009). Scholars have raised concerns about how law enforcement will apply these anti-gang statutes in practice, and have found that the overidentification of gangs and gang members causes significant negative results (Curry et al., 2014) such as discrimination in police action (Duran, 2008; Fudge, 2014). Also, overidentification raises questions about the accuracy and validity of police gang databases (Barrows & Huff, 2009), which are directly related to newspaper reports because reporters rely primarily on these databases as official sources of data (Buckler et al., 2008).

Gang Member Characteristics: Age, Gender, Race, and Socioeconomic Status

Age, gender, and race are variables that are commonly examined in gang research. One reason is that these characteristics are part of the demographic information often used by the broadcast media to help the public gain a general sense of gang member characteristics (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007). Age has become a core component of defining gangs, especially in the European definition that defines a gang as a youth group (Klein et al., 2001). Pyrooz (2014) analyzed longitudinal data and reported that the average age of individuals involved in a gang is 15. Almost half of these individuals would end their gang membership after one year, and roughly 80% of them were no longer a gang member after two years (e.g., Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Melde & Esbensen, 2012; Thornberry et al., 2003).

In regards to race and gender, broadcast media suggests that gang members are typically Black and Hispanic males (Curry et al., 2014; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Howell, 2007). Based on national figures and prior research, two-thirds of gang members are male (Curry et al., 2014; Pyrooz, 2014). However, the proportion of female members in a gang varies from 25% to nearly 50% in different locations (Esbensen & Lynskey, 2001; Howell, 2007). Esbensen and Lynskey (2001) also found that in terms of race, the proportions of Black and Hispanic gang members were 31% and 25%, accounting for a total of 56% of gang membership being held by minorities. Pyrooz (2014) reported that Black and Hispanic gang members accounted for 44% of

the total. These figures came from self-report surveys report and are shown to be quite different than police data—48% of gang members were Black and 43% of them were Hispanic (Curry et al., 2014, p. 21). Since self-report surveys have shown to be reliable (Decker et al., 2014), it is reasonable to suggest that the percentage of White gang members, in reality, is larger than what is reported in police databases.¹

In terms of socioeconomic status, Curry and his colleagues (2014) found that gang members almost always came from lower socioeconomic status communities, which has been related to unemployment, few meaningful jobs, and social disorganization (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007). However, an increasing number of studies have discovered that gangs also emerge in suburban and rural areas (e.g., Esbensen & Lynskey, 2001; Winfree et al., 1994), suggesting that low socioeconomic status does not determine gang membership alone (also see Curry et al., 2014; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007).

Approaches of Identifying Gang Members Where Overidentification May Occur

Researchers have used a simple approach to identifying gang members in previous research—self-report. The self-report method simply asks a person if he or she belongs/belonged to a gang (Curry et al., 2014). It has been proven as a solid indicator of gang membership (Decker et al., 2014). However, simply relying on one question to determine if a person is/was a gang member may cause either overidentification or underidentification because a respondent may not be clear about the definition of gang membership (Webb et al., 2006). The definition of gang membership therefore seems much more important. A study reported by Esbensen and his colleagues (2001) found that compared to strict definitions of gang membership, broad definitions of gang membership can lead to an overidentification of the number of gang members by 43%.

Another approach used by both academic researchers and the police to identify gang members is to use official records, particularly police records. Police records are an important source of identifying gang members, but they generate issues of overidentification (Barrows & Huff, 2009). Researchers have argued that police records are often dated and they fail to reflect changes in individual gang affiliation (Curry et al., 2014). The majority of gang members leave gangs shortly after they join (Melde & Esbensen, 2012; Thornberry et al., 2003); while the police do not frequently update their gang databases. Therefore, someone may leave the gang but may still remain in the police gang database. Such overidentification of gang members may have significant negative consequences (Huff, 1996). For example, rival gang members may attack this person because they think he or she still belongs to the gang (Curry et al., 2014).

However, for the public, neither of these two approaches are applicable. The public neither directly asks a person if he/she is a gang member, nor do they go to police departments to check police records. Instead, lay people usually depend on signs (e.g., the appearance of a person) to judge whether a person is a gang member. Based on this assumption, signaling theory may be a useful tool to explain how the public judges whether or not a person is a gang member. Signaling theory is used to examine communication between two parties—sender and receiver (Connelly et al., 2011). The sender delivers information (signals) to the receiver; and the receiver interprets information (Connelly et al., 2011). Signaling theory has been applied in gang recruitment research (Densley, 2012). Gang members use observable signs such as violence to decide whether a person can potentially be a gang member (Densley, 2012). A quote in Densley's (2012) work indicates how prospective gang members are targeted: "It's just like the way people act shows you who wants to be in a gang and who doesn't. You see them and can pick them out, very, very easy..." (p. 308). However, as a receiver, interpreting signals requires experience. Unlike gang members, who gain direct experience of a gang, lay people largely rely on indirect experience, which is mainly produced by the mass media. Therefore, when the mass media tend to

¹ However, it may happen among gang members who are young. Pyrooz (2014) found that as individuals get older, there is less of a discrepancy between self-report survey and police data.

create myths about gangs and gang members (e.g., Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Howell, 2007; Hu & Dittmann, 2016), the public is going to overidentify a person as a gang member based on these myths. For instance, many gang members have tattoos (Curry et al., 2014), but having a tattoo does not mean the person is a gang member. Also, many former gang members have left gangs, but still keep their tattoos (e.g., Hu & Dittmann, 2016). The public, however, will still identify them as active gang members if they see the tattoos.

The Current Study

Previous studies have placed emphasis on the overidentification of gang members by law enforcement (e.g., Curry et al., 2014; Barrows & Huff, 2009; Duran, 2008; Huff, 1996; Fudge, 2014). However, overidentification made by the public is barely mentioned or examined, but actually occurs. The current paper addresses this topic by analyzing newspaper reports to examine whether newspaper reports deliver adequate information to help lay people, who do not have access to academic research or police official databases, interpret signals of gang members. We emphasize here that the current study is not a study that directly examines if the public will overidentify gang members after they read these newspaper reports. Instead, we take a step back to explore three questions: 1) How do newspaper reports describe gang members? 2) Are these descriptions similar to previous academic findings? And 3) if newspaper reports continuously produce myths about gang members, what policy implications can be suggested to help promote more realistic public perceptions of gang members?

Methods

Data

LexisNexis Academic was used to develop the sample for this study. To locate relevant newspaper articles, “gang” was used as the keyword and was searched directly in the LexisNexis Academic newspaper search engine, resulting in a total of 953 newspaper reports as of the end of August 2014. Newspapers were selected based on the following criteria: (1) American newspapers; (2) articles published from 2001 to 2014; and (3) newspapers ranking in the top ten in terms of the total number of gang-related articles. The first two criteria capture the country in which the print media was originated, and provide a wide range of years of publication. The third criterion was used to ensure that there would be a sufficient number of articles to be analyzed (see Appendix A). Based on these criteria, four newspapers were chosen: *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Tampa Bay Times*, and *Daily News* (also see Hu & Dittmann, 2016). Between 2001 and 2014, these four newspapers produced a sample of 180 newspaper reports. According to their circulations, these four newspapers are within U.S. daily newspapers top 25 in 2014 (Friedman, 2014). Hence, we suggest that these 180 newspaper reports had a wide readership on the East Coast of the United States.

Analyses

Like previous studies (Decary-Hetu & Morselli, 2011; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Thompson et al., 2000), this study used content analysis (see Berg & Lune, 2011) to identify patterns among the 180 newspaper reports. Specifically, we applied the grounded theory approach to “develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 24). This process included three stages. At the open coding stage, the authors read newspaper reports and wrote memos individually. At the stage of axial coding, themes were identified in those memos. Two authors compared their themes discovered individually and reached an agreement on the common themes (i.e., sub-themes). At the stage of selective coding, two major

themes (i.e., gang definition and gang member characteristics) at a more abstract level were selected and subthemes were connected to the major themes. To balance bias and theoretical sensitivity (see Strauss & Corbin, 1990), and to ensure the findings were objective, we intentionally have one author who received academic training on gangs (e.g., taking gang courses and participating in gang-related research projects) and another author who did not receive any formal academic training on gang-related topics. These findings (i.e., major themes and sub-themes) were later compared to the content of previous gang literature to seek similarities and differences between academic works and newspaper reports.

Findings

Table 1 provides information on the general content of each newspaper report. Unsurprisingly, we find similar results as Esbensen and Tusinski’s (2007) study on the reporting of gang definitions. Few newspaper reports (9%) provided information on the definition of a gang, either legally or academically. A total of 77 out of 180 newspaper reports (43%) mentioned some information about gang member characteristics. Detailed findings are presented as follows.

Table 1

Descriptions of Newspaper Reports

Name	Number of Reports (%)		
	Gang Definition	Gang Member Characteristics	Total
New York Times	5 (24%)	8 (38%)	21 (12%)
Tampa Bay Times	7 (27%)	5 (19%)	26 (14%)
Daily News	0 (0%)	11 (55%)	20 (11%)
The Washington Post	4 (4%)	53 (47%)	113 (63%)
Total	16 (9%)	77 (43%)	180 (100%)

Gang Definition

Overall, only 16 out of 180 newspaper reports presented gang definitions (a report rate of 9 percent). Among those articles that included a gang definition, most of them would cite state statutes regarding gangs and gang membership:

To be considered as gang member under state law, a law enforcement official trained in gangs must “validate” membership by determining that a person falls under at least two criteria from a list that includes self-admission of gang affiliation, frequenting a gang area, gang dress and tattoos, and using hand signs associated with gangs. (*The New York Times*, 05/16/2010)

Florida law permits authorities to compile lists of gang members and associates, and gives 11 criteria for gang membership. If someone meets one criterion, state law labels them a gang

associate. Meet two, he's a gang member... the law does not require someone to have a criminal record to be listed as a gang member. (*Tampa Bay Times*, 06/10/2013)

The definition of what constitutes a gang member listed above did not mention committing crime, which is in contrast to the definitions common in the academic field. Another report said that "state lawmakers here in North Carolina are working on legislation that would define a gang as any group of three or more people who band together for the 'primary purpose' of committing a crime" (*The New York Times*, 09/13/2007). Based on academic perspectives, this definition still did not cover the full scope of the "typical" gang definition; however, it did capture that gangs are treated as a criminal group. *Tampa Bay Times* presented a different "media definition" of a gang:

According to state law, a gang is a group of more than three individuals whose primary activity is criminal and/or delinquent. They usually have signs, symbols, colors and names that represent them. (*Tampa Bay Times*, 04/09/2010)

This definition is closer to the American definition of a gang, although it did not capture gang-identified territory (see Curry et al., 2014; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007). We conclude that most of the newspaper reports did not provide a clear definition of a gang or what constitutes someone as being a gang member. Part of the reason is that they do not necessarily need a definition. As Esbensen and Tusinski (2007) pointed out, "One objective of reporters and their employers is to inform their readership...this objective does not necessarily include education" (p. 27). Although a complete definition of a gang and gang members was usually missing in reports, some would argue that the current criteria of a gang and gang members, both in state legislatures and law enforcement agencies, might be too broad, which can cause issues related to overidentification:

[Wiley] has no criminal record, no gang tattoos and no history of violence...he was seen with gang members several times and that he was listed as a gang associate...upgraded to a gang member in October because he fit two conditions in the law: associating with gang members and being observed with gang members at least four times. (*Tampa Bay Times*, 09/18/2012)

Nine months later, due to Wiley's case, law enforcement officers were required to "adjust their approach to a state law that can wrongly brand people as gang members" (*Tampa Bay Times*, 06/12/2013). The report also mentioned significant negative results caused by overidentification, which is consistent with academic publications (Curry, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2014; Fudge, 2014):

A young man's future should not be threatened by a broad state law that makes it too easy to permanently mislabel someone as a gang member or associate. (*Tampa Bay Times*, 06/12/2013)

The issue of overidentification also drew the media's attention to gang databases. "Law doesn't address removing names from gang lists...once a gang member, always a gang member" (*Tampa Bay Times*, 09/16/2012). One news report suggested that "Local law enforcement agencies need to change how they collect and use gang intelligence" (*Tampa Bay Times*, 10/11/2012). This point of view is in accord with suggestions from academics as well (e.g., Barrow & Huff, 2009).

Another report also mentioned that there is no agreement on the definition, and it is problematic that the nation does not share the same definition of gangs and gang members:

Different jurisdictions use different criteria for identifying gang members...everybody has a different definition of a gang member. (*The Washington Post*, 08/14/2005)

We also found that even within states with the same statutes, local police policies might vary in terms of identifying gangs and gang members; however, we did not find any article that suggested that local police policies and state statutes should pay attention to academic research.

Overall, the analyses of newspaper reports on definitions of gangs and gang members reveal three points. First, few newspaper reports contained a section discussing definitions of gangs. We argue that this is because they did not necessarily need it (also see Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007). Second, among reports that discussed the definition, they relied largely on state statutes and police department policies. Third, some reports paid attention to overidentification and the negative results it may bring, which is consistent with academic publications (Barrow & Huff, 2009; Curry et al., 2014; Fudge, 2014). In addition, none of the newspaper reports suggested that local police agencies and state statutes should rely on academic research to modify their definitions of a gang and a gang member.

Gang Member Characteristics

Age. After reviewing 180 newspaper reports, we find that there was a wide range of gang members' ages from 12 to late 30s. Many articles reported gang members' ages together with incidences. For example, in an article which reported felony charges on four gang members, it described gang members as "two 17-year-old boys, one 16-year-old boy and one 16-year-old girl" (*The Washington Post*, 03/28/2007). Another article reported arrests of four youth gang members aged from 14 to 17 (*The Washington Post*, 05/31/2007). These descriptions of gang members' ages do not provide a fair representation because they were based on a single incident. Another example of this is found in the following excerpt:

Marceline Garcia, 21, a Bulldogs gang member who joined the ranks at age 12 and was tutored in the gang's ways by older men who were at San Quentin in 1984 during what many Bulldogs now call the Separation. (*The New York Times*, 11/08/2013)

Since newspaper reports mainly rely on official data (Buckler et al., 2008), it is common to see reporters interviewing law enforcement officers and administrators. Despite these efforts, these statements are sometimes contrary to what has been found in academic fields:

NYPD Inspector [name omitted]...commanding officer of the NYPD gang division, also insisted the average age among gang members remains about 21 to 25. "I don't see younger kids involved," he said. (*Daily News*, 02/27/2005)

Newspaper reports also presented experts' judgments. For example, following the quote above, the reporter wrote:

[name omitted], a youth-gang expert at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in Manhattan, said New York is one of the only major cities in the nation that does not release gang-crime statistics to the public. "I'm always very skeptical," said [name omitted]. "They don't want to be seen as a gang city." (*Daily News*, 02/27/2005)

Although rare, some newspaper articles did cite academic studies. Unsurprisingly, information provided by these reports, in general, is more similar to what is found in academic fields.

In interviews with 50 current and former gang members and their associates, researchers found that 75 percent of gang members joined by age 14 and 25 percent joined by age 12, according to the report. (*The Washington Post*, 10/27/2009)

However, since newspaper reports do not require citations, it is difficult to locate these studies and academic reports to compare the report and the article(s) directly. Nevertheless, we argue that through comparing content, we were able to make a comparison indirectly. Our findings suggest that in terms of age, the range presented by newspaper reports is wide, which is somewhat consistent with academic findings (Curry et al., 2014; Klein et al., 2001; Pyrooz, 2014). Also, it appears to be that the public would not make a judgment on whether a person is a gang member just based on his or her age. However, we argue that attention should be paid to data sources (e.g., law enforcement officers and gang experts), as well as data characteristics (e.g., gang databases and individual cases) that are mentioned in newspaper reports. This argument also applies to the following subthemes.

Gender. In terms of gender, we find similar patterns as Esbensen and Tusinski's (2007) study of youth gangs. A few articles directly mentioned the gender of gang members. One report said, "Three teenagers were beaten and stabbed by 30 young men a few blocks from Newtown High School in a suspected gang attack" (*Daily News*, 03/06/2006). Some articles reported gang members' gender as an insignificant role and these articles were more likely to cause the reader to believe that gang members are male because it implied an entire population. For example, "a former member of the gang...said that young men with nothing to lose want to live 'la vida loca' – the 'crazy life'" (*Daily News*, 08/20/2002).

Although few articles mentioned female gang members, those that did usually involved a detailed story. For example, there was an entire article dedicated to discussing a female gang member, which makes it more like a micro-biography of this individual (*The Washington Post*, 09/18/2003). Another article mainly focused on two Central American girls, writing, "male gang members say the girls play an essential role and not just as sexual partners" (*The New York Times*, 04/11/2008). Also, one article described what female gang members did in gangs, which is similar to the role of male gang members:

Five of whom are women, sold drugs to provide financial support to those who were incarcerated, took orders from gang leaders and didn't hesitate to use violence against members of rival gangs as well as Bloods who broke the rules. (*The Washington Post*, 02/26/2008)

There was one article particularly talking about females only, which is a topic that is not commonly studied in academic fields (see Chesney-Lind & Hagedorn, 1999).

The Knockout Honies and the Most Wanted Honeyz are girl gangs, the District's largest, with about 200 members between them...She [informant] said there are now at least 35 such gangs in the District...The Knockouts, Most Wanted and other D.C. girl gangs are not affiliated with male gangs...They are not typically involved in drug dealing, street robberies or other criminal acts...The gangs tend to pick only on their rivals. (*The Washington Post*, 12/28/2004)

The article also mentioned that law enforcement usually does not pay attention to females; but in reality, these female gangs do account for a certain number of crimes—in four months, there were five incidents related

to these female gangs (*The Washington Post*, 12/28/2004). Overall, the overrepresentation of male gangs in the newspaper reports is contrary to what has been found in the academia (e.g., Esbensen & Lysnskey, 2001; Howell, 2007). We propose that after reading these newspaper reports, a person is more likely to believe that the majority of gang members are male.

Race. The general pattern of race presented by newspaper reports in the current study is similar to that found by Esbensen and Tusinski's (2007) study—most of these reports described gang members of minority race and/or ethnicity—overwhelmingly Hispanic and African American. Immigrants were frequently mentioned when newspaper reports were trying to explain from where these minorities came. For example, a report said, “Many [gang members] are immigrants looking for muscle and status” (*Daily News*, 04/08/2001). Some reports also provided racial/ethnographic statistics based on police department records:

Police special investigations division has counted 35 active gangs, with a total of 1,057 members, about 36 percent Hispanic and 33 percent African American. (*The Washington Post*, 08/29/2008)

[Detective] said black gang members account for roughly 40 percent of the region's gang population, which includes more than 8,000 people. Hispanics make up about the same percentage... In past years, Hispanics made up the largest segment of the gang population. (*The Washington Post*, 12/05/2007)

These numbers are similar to what have been found by the National Gang Center, which examined police data and discovered African Americans accounted for 35 percent of gang members and Hispanics accounted for 46 percent (National Gang Center, 2011). This phenomenon can be perfectly explained by the fact that the mass media largely relies on police data (Buckler et al., 2008). However, Curry, Decker, and Pyrooz (2014) argued that the proportion would be largely different if researchers analyzed self-report data—Hispanics and African Americans only comprised 44 percent of gang members. We did not discover any newspaper reports in our sample that applied self-report data.

Newspaper reports in our sample tended to report on nationwide influential gangs such as the Bloods and Crips (African American gangs), as well as Mara Salvatrucha or MS-13 (a Latino gang). These reports would typically describe gang characteristics including their history, which focused on refugees and immigrants (e.g., *The New York Times*, 08/19/2007). Doing so allows the public to easily draw a connection between minorities and gangs.

We also found two articles (*The New York Times*, 11/13/2004; *Tampa Bay Times*, 07/16/2007) that mainly discussed Asian gangs; one particularly pointed to Chinese gangs. One article reported, “Asian gangs modeled themselves after established traditional gangs like the Bloods... few gang investigators... concentrate on Asian gangs” (*Tampa Bay Times*, 07/16/2007). Another article mentioned, “gangs with African American leaders tend to be more open to whites, Hispanics, and Asians” (*The Washington Post*, 07/16/2009). This statement is not common to see in the academic fields because traditionally researchers think gang members within a gang share the same race and/or ethnicity (e.g., Curry et al., 2014).

Therefore, the information on races of gang members reported by these newspapers seems to overwhelmingly emphasize racial and ethnic minorities. However, both academic findings and police official data suggest that Whites also make up a great proportion of gang member population (e.g., Esbensen & Lysnskey, 2001; Pyrooz, 2014). We propose that a person who reads these newspaper reports tends to believe that a gang member is Black or Hispanic rather than White.

Socioeconomic Status, Region, and Symbols. Many gang-related journal articles have shown that gangs are more likely to exist in poor, urban areas (e.g., Pyrooz et al., 2010). Undoubtedly, the print media also notice this phenomenon but in an indirect way—they would discuss local area characteristics when they describe gangs and gang members. Some newspaper articles also mentioned that gangs did not only exist in poor, urban neighborhoods, which is consistent with research findings that suggest that socioeconomic status alone does not determine gang involvement (see Curry et al., 2014; Esbensen & Lynskey, 2001). For example, one article reported:

The authorities say that they have also begun to notice the spread of gangs from their traditional bases in urban centers around the region...to more suburban, and often more affluent, communities. (*The New York Times*, 10/15/2006)

Another article pointed out that gangs are no longer only an urban problem:

In the past, most gang activity was an urban problem, but gangs today prefer the suburbs or even rural locations, where there is less competition for territory and where authorities might appear less prepared. (*The Washington Post*, 02/26/2005)

Another general pattern related to region was that numerous newspaper reports paid a considerable amount of attention to school areas. The majority of these articles described gang recruitment on/around school campuses, along with a description of gang prevention programs. Not many journal articles have focused on this topic. In macro-level analysis, journal articles usually explore larger regions rather than school areas.

Some newspaper reports included information about gang symbols (e.g., clothes, gestures, tattoos, and graffiti) to teach their readers how to recognize gangs, gang members, and gang activities.² For example, one article reported that “handkerchiefs in primary colors, hats, jerseys, [and] necklaces with distinctive marks” were related to gang membership (*The New York Times*, 03/15/2009). Another article cited gang experts, saying, “the higher an MS tattoo is placed on the body, the more violent the crimes the person has committed” (*The Washington Post*, 05/21/2004). More detailed information was presented by another article:

Gang graffiti, symbols gang members spray-paint on walls and fences to “tag” their territory... gang members often tattoo their bodies with gang-related symbols and communicate through hand signals similar to standard sign language. (*Tampa Bay Times*, 04/05/2002)

However, articles obtained through LexisNexis did not provide pictures related to their content.³ Therefore, we make the assumption that not all articles provide pictures of these symbols. We also argue that the public may understand there may be gang activity, but they do not know whether their perception is correct. The consequence of this, which has also been described in academic gang research (e.g., Curry et al., 2014; Duran, 2008; Fudge, 2014), is overidentification. The subject that applies overidentification here, however, is the person who reads newspapers rather than law enforcement officers. Another finding is that some articles mentioned the prevalence of gangs on social networking sites. For example, one article said, “Gang members' Web pages show photos of them flashing signs and messages written in the coded language of the gang” (*Tampa Bay Times*, 09/19/2011).

² We found a detailed description of signs of possible gang activity (see *The Washington Post*, 05/05/2005).

³ Articles from LexisNexis Academic did not provide pictures. We did not ensure that there would be pictures in the original copies.

Summary of Findings

In sum, based on newspaper articles, age is shaped largely by incidents, as well as official data. These articles may create a myth that gang members are often older in newspaper reports than what is suggested in academic studies (e.g., Klein et al., 2001; Pyrooz, 2014). Most newspaper reports described gangs as a group of males, both directly and indirectly. It is argued that indirect statements on gang members' gender may cause more bias since it targets a specific population (e.g., *Daily News*, 08/20/2002). Also, female gang members and female only gangs were mentioned in newspaper reports, and while researchers have paid attention to female gang members (Esbensen & Lynskey, 2001; Howell, 2007), very little attention has been given to female only gangs (Chesney-Lind & Hagedorn, 1999). In terms of race and ethnicity, previously discovered patterns (see Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Howell, 2007) were confirmed in the current research—newspaper reports were more likely to describe gangs as a product of minority populations. Several articles reported Bloods and Crips, as well as MS-13, which makes readers easily link gangs to minorities, particularly African Americans and Latinos. Also, these reports often blamed immigrants (especially illegal immigrants) for gang problems. Consistent with academic findings, newspaper reports also suggested that gangs were flowing from urban to suburban and rural areas, (Curry et al., 2014; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Esbensen & Lynskey, 2001; Winfree et al., 1994), as well as from websites to social networking sites (see Decary-Hetu & Morselli, 2011).

Discussion and Conclusion

Scholars are often skeptical of the accuracy of mass media (e.g., Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Howell, 2007). There is also no doubt that mass media provides entertainment with exaggerations of crimes (see Surette, 2015). Print media (e.g., newspapers), which emphasizes objectiveness, may deliver more accurate information compared to movies or TV shows. Previous studies confirm print media's role in creating myths of gangs (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Howell, 2007; Hu & Dittmann, 2016); but they have not explored why such myths would be created after reading newspaper reports. The current study tries to explain this phenomenon by investigating three major questions: 1) How do newspaper reports describe gang members? 2) How are descriptions of gang members in the print media different from that in academic findings? And 3) What policy implications can be suggested to help promote more realistic public perceptions of gang members?

Two key findings are found. First, the current study shows that newspaper reports discuss and criticize the overidentification of gangs and gang members (e.g., *Tampa Bay Times*, 09/18/2012; *Tampa Bay Times*, 06/12/2013). They criticize law enforcement agencies on applying flawed approaches to identify gang members, emphasizing serious negative results to those "gang members." They criticize official gang databases and how they collect and use gang intelligence data. All the disadvantages that newspaper reports try to point out reach a conclusion that law enforcement agencies should be more consistent, systematic, and accurate when identifying gangs and gang members in order to reduce overidentification.

On the other hand, however, how newspaper reports describe gang members seems to be different from findings from academic research, resulting in a potential false perception of gang members perceived by the public. Our findings once again confirm the arguments made by previous studies that print media continues to contribute to myths/misrepresentations about gang members (Barrows & Huff, 2009; Decker, 2002; Howell, 2007; Hu & Dittmann, 2016). The newspaper reports analyzed in the current study provide very few legal definitions, often emphasize individual gang histories, and always present ambiguous gang member characteristics. While academic research is cautious about categorizing a person as a gang member by continuously revising definitions of gangs and gang members, these definitions are rarely the focus of newspaper reports. Therefore, the public knows the term "gang members" but they do not exactly know its meaning.

Newspaper reports also frequently mention individual gang history, indicating that gangs are mostly the product of refugees and illegal immigrants. Additionally, newspaper reports overemphasize young, male minorities. Together with gang symbols identified by newspapers (e.g., tattoos and graffiti), information delivered by newspapers indicates to the public that a gang member is typically a young Black/Hispanic male, who has tattoos, comes to the United States illegally, and frequently hangs out with others like him. This description of gang members seems quite different from empirical research. Therefore, it appears to be that newspapers have not recognized the important role of academic research on this topic.

Policy Implications

These are several policy implications generated by the findings of the current study. First, Although the purpose of the media is not necessarily to educate the public (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007), we suggest that media move to be more descriptive and accurate when reporting on gangs and gang members in order to reduce the false perception of gang members held by the public and the possibility of increasing the public's fear of crime. For instance, adding a brief statement at the beginning of reports such as "these descriptions are only based on one gang and may not apply to other gangs in other locations" may help alleviate potentially unwarranted overidentification and fear of crime. Heath and Gilbert (1996) suggest that "because the media often distort crime by over-representing more severe, intentional, and gruesome incidents, the public overestimate its frequency and often misperceive reality" (p. 371). Given that the First Amendment prohibits infringing on the freedom of the press, the decision to include such statements is left up to the media.

Second, when newspaper reports describe gangs, gang members, and gang-related activities, their information mainly comes from legal definitions and official agencies. Therefore, as a source, legal definitions of gangs and gang members and official management of gang members should be improved before blaming mass media for creating myths about gangs. In regards to inconsistencies in legal gang definitions, we argue that legislators must agree on what constitutes a gang and a gang member. When there are inconsistencies in classifying individuals as gang members, both type I (i.e., false positive) and type II (i.e., false negative) errors can occur. False positive error occurs when a person is not a gang member but identified as a gang member. It may result in an individual being unnecessarily targeted by police (Huff, 1996), and if charged with a crime, that person could possibly receive a sentencing enhancement given their incorrect classification as a gang member. Wright (2005) mentions that inclusion in these gang databases is associated with an increase in the likelihood of conviction and sentence enhancements, which raises 4th and 5th Amendment constitutional concerns. A false negative error occurs when a person is a gang member but is identified as not. This person may fly under the law enforcement radar which can enhance their ability to commit crimes and victimize citizens as a result.

Previous research indicates that gang members are far more likely to be violent and to engage in criminal behaviors when compared to non-gang members, suggesting that failing to properly identify gang members may pose serious issues (Huff, 1998; Huff, 2004; Thornberry et al., 1998; Thornberry et al., 2003). Standardizing the legal definitions of what constitutes a gang and a gang member may help law enforcement more accurately and reliably identify gangs and gang members and overcome overidentification and underidentification. Meanwhile, because newspaper reports heavily rely on official sources (Buckler et al., 2008), doing so may also help newspaper reports be more descriptive and accurate when reporting on gang members.

Along with the second policy implication, the third implication relates to how the police use gang databases. Pyrooz (2014) discovers that most gang careers last roughly two years or less, and Wright (2005) finds that inclusion in these gang databases is associated with an increase in the likelihood of conviction and sentence enhancements. When gang databases continue to include individuals in these databases for longer than

they are actually affiliated with or engaging in gang-related crime, this also raises constitutional concerns and may lead to issues with sentencing disparity. To address this problem, we propose two suggestions. First, policies should be created that require gang databases to be updated after an established period of time, allowing for those who are no longer perceived to be members of a gang or involved in gang activity to be reclassified accordingly. Second, we suggest that policies be put in place that allow for ex-gang members and those who have desisted from their gang to contact law enforcement agencies to determine their database status and to correct their status if they can prove that they are no longer active gang members.

At last, our findings suggest that at least based on our sample, newspaper reports seldom use academic resources, which is consistent with previous findings (e.g., Barrows & Huff, 2009; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Hu & Dittmann, 2016). In terms of the media's role in providing information about gang members, identifying and citing academic studies will allow them to more accurately describe gangs, gang members, and gang-related activities due to the fact that they now have a definition and criteria to go by, which in turn may provide the public with a more accurate perception of gangs and gang members, thus reducing the possibility of public misperceptions and the overidentification of individuals suspected to be gang members. We also suggest that gang researchers and scholars should actively participate in media activities (e.g., *The Washington Post*, 07/26/2014) to help print media improve its content on gangs and gang members.

There are, of course, limitations in the current study. First, without extensive survey/interview data with the reading public, it would be difficult to draw any firm conclusions about whether gang members are overidentified based on the reading public's interpretation of what they read. Based on signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011), the current study has confirmed that as a sender, newspaper reports do send out signals that may cause overidentification of gang members by the public; however, whether the public, as a receiver, received and interpreted these signals is not tested in the current study. Future research may apply experimental and quasi-experimental design to explore this topic. Second, our sample selection criteria led to the fact that we focused on the newspaper reports produced by the East Coast of the United States. Therefore, the generalizability of the findings can be questioned. Future research should include more newspapers that have wider audience coverage. Third, with the development of technology, a great proportion of the public, especially young people, tend to use Internet-based approaches to receive news information (e.g., phone applications, emails, and social media websites). Future research should pay attention to this new media age (Surette, 2015).

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Appendix A

Enrollment Decision on Portrayals based on Country and Year

	Newspapers	Country	Total	Before 2001	2001-2014	Enrollment Decision
1	The Washington Post	USA	178	33	145	Yes
2	The New York Times	USA	83	59	24	Yes
3	Tampa Bay Times	USA	68	41	27	Yes
4	The Press	New Zealand	42	-	-	No
5	The Gazette	Canada	38	-	-	No
6	Daily News (NY)	USA	30	9	21	Yes
7	The Evening Standard	UK	30	-	-	No
8	Standard. Co. UK	UK	27	-	-	No
9	The Toronto Star	Canada	27	-	-	No
10	The Globe and Mail	Canada	26	-	-	No