A LIFE-COURSE PERSPECTIVE ON GANG MEMBERSHIP IN INDIGENOUS
COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

"Turning points" are life events that can positively or negatively change the trajectory of one's criminal behaviors, attitudes and lifestyle (i.e., persisting, accelerating or desisting from crime). Through research, gang membership is a turning point that not only affects one's trajectory into offending but also has detrimental effects on one's health and well-being. Due to the historical and contemporary placement of Indigenous Peoples in the Americas brought on by settler colonialism, there are health and well-being disparities that negatively affect these populations. However, current research shows how Native Americans can use resiliency and strength as tools in combatting these disparities through cultural connection. The present study seeks to understand the relationship between Native gang members and their cultural ties while also seeking to better understand the impact gang membership may have on Native youth's health and well-being. Using binary logistic regressions, the present study did not find support that gang membership and culture are connected, or that gang membership increases the likelihood of self-harm, suicidal ideation and school dropouts. But the results support previous literature that emphasize culture ties and strength as a buffer for Native health and well-being disparities which encourages further efforts to enculturate Native youth in their Native ways of life. Also, evidence shows that location (i.e., full-time on/off or part-time on tribal lands) may matter for Native youths' engagement in gang activity which encourages further exploration of Native youth's living arrangements in relation to their behaviors and identities. In conclusion, it is important to understand how historical trauma and current oppression have not only impacted Native youth's health and well-being but in addition, have limited the cultural protections available to Native youth, especially those involved in gangs.

This thesis is dedicated to my Cherokee Nation, and my Cherokee grandmother.
As always, *donadagohvi*, until we meet again.

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INTRODUCTION

Turning points, a phenomenon established by Elder (1994) but furthered by Sampson and Laub, are life events that, either positively or negatively, change the trajectory of an individual's behaviors, attitudes, and lifestyle. In criminology, turning points are often associated with persistence, acceleration or desistence from offending (Sampson & Laub, 2005). Entering a gang, individuals continue a path of persistence in criminal behavior (Thornberry, 2003; Pyrooz & Mitchell, 2015). Because gang membership and activity has been shown to negatively affect one's life, life-course criminologists began examining it as a turning point in individual's lives. Studies show that gang membership does change the trajectory of a gang member's life for the worse in aspects such as mental and physical health, victimization, employment and education (Pyrooz et. al., 2024). However, there is realm of research examining individualized characteristics of gang membership to better understand how this turning point may affect different racial populations compared to aggregate data that has not been explored. Research must move in this direction because people of color may be facing the knifing off of opportunities caused by a turning point at a higher rate than those who are White due to historic disparities in positive opportunities. For Native Americans, it is especially important due to the effects of settler-colonialism in the United States, they disproportionally experience negative life aspects mental health (i.e. depression, suicide), physical health (homicide, victimization) and environmental health (i.e. tribal reservations). To prevent and intervene in Native gang membership, there is a need to find cultural-based practices that encourage Native connectiveness and opportunities that may buffer the effects of joining a gang for Native youth and young adults rather than the traditional practices already used to youth gang members. The present study will examine the association between cultural strength and gang membership, and

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the association between gang membership and several negative life aspects: self-harm, substance use, and victimization in a Native-specific population.

SAMPSON AND LAUB: AGE-GRADED THEORY

In 1993, Sampson and Laub highlighted the presence of turning points in their age-graded theory of informal social control (1993). They examined the Glueck data which compared 500 juvenile offenders at various ages with 500 juvenile non-offenders. In this study, they found themselves opposing the claims made by Gottfredson and Hirschi on the age-crime curve. Gottfredson and Hirschi believe that while marriage, employment and leaving school are age-related and have potential associations with crime, that age would cause these effects regardless of the presence of these events (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). On the other hand, Sampson and Laub explain that these events are not only related to crime, but they are "turning points" that can alter the trajectory of an individual's behavior, specifically criminal behaviors (1993). They explain that these turning points happen throughout life rather with the potential of changing the trajectory of someone's criminal behavior, through the onset, acceleration or desistance from crime. Sampson and Laub argue that these transitional periods, or turning points, could happen well into adult life. In their 2005 article, Sampson and Laub laid out several distinct pathways through which turning points can change behavior and possibly lead to long-term consequences on one's participation in criminal behavior (2005). First, crime is more likely to occur if one's bond to society is diminished which relies on evidence rooted in social-control theories (Hirschi, 1969). When individuals have a weakened relationship to their positive social bonds, their likelihood of engaging in antisocial behaviors is higher. Once an individual becomes aligned with antisocial behaviors, it begins to "knife off" their opportunities. Sampson and Laub conceptualize these opportunities as job stability, and marital relationship options which are inherently adult-age transitions (1993). The presence, or lack thereof, of these informal social

controls influences one's deviance. Sampson and Laub also found that the supervision involved in these social bonds due to investment, and the routine of these informal bonds may help one desist from crime. For example, if someone is married or in a healthy relationship with children, they are loosely monitored by their partner because they expect them to meet expectations (e.g. be home for dinner; bathe the children; remain employed). Plus, the change in routine affords less time to associate with antisocial peers or behaviors.

The final mechanism Sampson and Laub address when considering turning points was missing from their 1993 publication for which they were heavily criticized: human agency (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph, 2002; Giordano, Schroeder, and Cernkovich, 2007; Maruna, 2001). One's identity, perception and decision making are not rigid, but instead is pliable in the presence of turning points. Elder (1994), a founding father of life-course theories, stated that is important because it is constructed by one's choices and actions that are allowable in their current constraints and opportunities. If someone is born into a violent area, has an unstable family environment, and is abused, their potential for prosocial decision-making and perceptions may be limited. However, if they are introduced to a stable environment such as the military, they have more opportunities for prosocial relationships and behaviors. Being away from the environment and social life that may have encouraged antisocial attitudes, behaviors, and decision-making and the addition of prosocial social opportunities, the individual's perceptions and behaviors will change.

GANG MEMBERSHIP AS TURNING POINT

When examining gang membership, it is necessary to examine the relationship between gang initiation and delinquency through three different models: selection, social facilitation and enhancement (Thornberry et. al., 1993). First, selection is the process of active gang members recruiting adolescents who are already delinquent or show potential for delinquency. These youth

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are already more likely to engage in delinquent behaviors than their non-gang member counterparts. This model is embedded in the belief that the gang is not creating delinquency but instead just offering a place for these predisposed to offending. Opposing this model is the social facilitation model which is centered in the gang causing delinquency. In this model, the average rate of delinquency for gang and non-gang members is relatively the same before joining a gang. However, after joining an environment that thrives on delinquency (i.e., theft, vandalism, drug trafficking, etc.), gang members become significantly more delinquent than those who never joined. Thornberry (1993) discusses selection as deviant behavior leading to gang membership while facilitation is gang membership leading to deviant behavior. Lastly, a mix of the two models, is the enhancement model of gang membership and delinquency. Enhancement is in support of selection where gangs recruit adolescents who show higher rates of delinquency but incorporates how the gang environment, attitudes and values can encourage increased delinquency once they have joined the gang. This process resembles the acceleration of delinquency seen in adolescents who join a gang, and therefore, a turning point of crime.

Following the lead of Sampson and Laub (2005), Melde and Esbensen (2011) furthered the study of turning points in the life course in the lens of gang membership. Their reasoning for examining gang membership as a turning point relates directly to the mechanisms previously laid out by Sampson and Laub (2005) but the same elements were first examined by Thrasher (1927) and his examination of Chicago gangs. Thrasher observed how adolescent gang members joined gangs because it appealed to them outside of the usual conventional life in a developmental stage that has extensive idle time. Once they have been imbedded in the gang, morals and values tend to shift (1927). For example, youth in gangs did not consider theft in opposition to their morals due to the sheer abundance of robberies and burglaries but in conventional society, this would be against societal norms and values. While Thrasher set the foundation of gang research, the

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addition of Sampson and Laub's age-graded theory mechanisms gave researchers a framework to further examine the relationship between gang members and societal controls.

First [bond to society attenuated], their bond to conventional society is diminished due to their entrenchment into the gang and its values. There is a loss of prosocial beliefs when joining a gang that knife off opportunities. Second [supervision/monitoring], the commitment and loyalty to one's gang shows the investment into the relationship. This investment can come in assimilating to the gang's symbols (i.e. gang signs, language, colors); engaging in dangerous activity for the sake of the gang; and receiving violence (i.e. jump-ins) which all are meant to strengthen their bonds to this unconventional society and social bonds. Third [routine activities], gang members are more likely to spend time away from supervision (e.g. kicked out of school for delinquency) and increase time with peers, especially deviant ones) which leads to more antisocial opportunities for gang activities such as drugs, alcohol, and gang rivalries (Melde & Esbensen, 2011). Lastly, Melde and Esbensen explained that gang membership has been shown to impact one's attitudes, decisions and perceptions [human agency] (2011) A common attitude perceived in gang members is "anger identity," which is their personal belief that they are easily agitated and quick to resort to violence. While found in those outside of gangs, this pre-existing attitude can be a deciding factor in an individual joining a gang. The effect of moving this attitude into a group setting allows for the intensifying of these already deviant attitudes/concepts and the diminishing of prosocial attitudes through social reinforcement which resembles the enhancement effect described by Thornberry (1993).

They found evidence that gang membership is a turning point because it exerts an independent effect on delinquency when other differences are controlled for. First, it is associated with increased delinquency after joining. Second, those who joined had significantly lower levels

of education which shows "knifing off" effects associated with a turning point that leads to a negative life trajectory (i.e. loss of educational opportunities). Lastly, in the turning point framework, they found that membership does partially mediate the effects of delinquency. So, while most youth may be prone to delinquency, those youth who enter gangs are more likely to already be engaging in delinquency. When joining a gang, this engagement in delinquency is then amplified further, an enhancement effect. In all, Melde and Esbensen were able to uncover how gang membership can negatively impact one's life simply by joining.

Consequences of Gang Membership

Melde and Esbensen's focus on gang membership was an expansion of the long-term consequences associated with the trajectory of being in a gang. Besides them, other researchers have found key negative life outcomes associated with being a gang member. First, there is a decrease in educational attainment if one enters a gang (Thornberry, 2003; Levitt & Vankatesh, 2001; Hagedorn, 1998; and Gilman et. al, 2014; Pyrooz, 2014). Of those who join gangs, they are more likely to drop-out of school and less likely to receive a high school diploma with one Milwaukee study showing that two-thirds of gang members did not graduate (Gilma et. al., 2014). In another study examining from 1998 to 2009, Pyrooz found that youth gang members were 30% less likely to obtain a high school diploma (2014). Second, there is a decrease in job stability associated with gang membership (Thornberry, 2003; Levitt & Vankatesh, 2001; Hagedorn, 1998; and Gilman et. al., 2014). They are more likely to not be able to keep employment and are more likely to rely on illegal income than non-gang members which further entrench them into the "gang bubble" and away from conventional society. Third, there is an increase in offending for those who join gangs versus those who do not (Thornberry, 2003; Hagedorn, 1998; and Gilman et. al., 2014). Studies found that gang members are more likely to report committing a crime in the past year, be arrested in the past year, and incarcerated as an

adult than non-gang members. This directly positions gang membership as a turning point in the development of life-course criminology in that it changes the level of offending of those who identify as a gang member (Pyrooz & Mitchell, 2015).

Lastly, gang membership has been shown to have negative consequences on an individual's mental and physical health which can manifest in several ways. First, the rate of depression, substance use, suicide and suicide attempts are higher, sometimes two or three times higher, for gang members than non-gang members (Boyle & Hassett-Walker, 2008; Watkins & Melde, 2016; and Coid et. al., 2013). Not only were these rates higher when compared to the general population but when compared to other violent offenders, gang members still had higher rates of depression, suicide and other mental health illnesses (Coid et. al., 2013). Coid et. al., study showed how gang membership changes the trajectory of one's pattern of criminal behavior. While violent men may endure some of these characteristics, they are not as affected as those who have had gang membership in their pathway. Second, gang members are more likely to be violently victimized, and therefore experience PTSD symptoms due to their victimization (Kulkami et. al., 2011; Li et. al., 2002; Kerig et. al., 2016; Boyle & Hassett-Walker, 2008). Gang members are often exposed to more direct and indirect violence than non-gang members. When examining youth with extreme exposure to violence, it is found that this exposure leads to a desensitized attitude towards violence and can increase one's likelihood of being violent. For example, Beresford and Wood (2016) compared this desensitization to adolescents from child armies who while victims, often victimize others once they gain a "place" in the hierarchy of the militia (Betancourt et. al., 2010; Boothby & Thomson, 2013; Annan et. al., 2006). This is much like gang members who experience violence from their gang (i.e. jumped in) and in turn, inflict that violence onto others once they rise in the gang hierarchy. One form of violent victimization for gang members is sexual victimization, especially for female gang members. Studies have

found that women in gangs are abused by their non-gang members, rival gangs and their own gang with approximately 40-50% being victims (Fleisher & Krienert, 2004; Miller & Decker, 2001; Fox, 2017). Sexual victimization is built into female gang membership beginning with entrance into the gang (i.e., "sexing in", a gang initiation ritual) that is built on gang rape (Miller, 2001).

While studies on the effects of gang membership on negative long-term aspects have provided examples of consequences for the general population of gang members, the future direction of gang membership as turning point must seek to understand if gang membership has a greater impact on some rather than others due to their culture and background. This study hopes to build on this gap in research by examining Native Americans and their culture, and how the loss of a cultural connection may turn individuals away from crime, including gang membership and activity.

A NATIVE AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

Native Americans have and continue to experience the negative consequences of colonization due to centuries of genocide, assimilation, exile and forced government dependency. First established by Brave Heart and DeBruyn (1998), the theory of historical trauma accounts for how these atrocities have spilt over into a collective loss that expands across generations. During the European colonization of the Americas, people native to the Americas experienced extreme culture loss through practices such as forced dependency, assimilation and exilement.

Colonization

When European colonizers first invaded the Americas, Native American tribes were self-governed and prosperous. However, this diminished with the development of the United States, Canada and Mexico. With the help of the Discovery Doctrine and Johnson vs Macintosh,

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Indigenous Peoples to the Americas became involuntarily dependent on the U.S. government (Utter, 2001). First, the Discovery Doctrine is centered in the belief that European discovery of the Americas gives exclusive rights to extinguish the Indian title of occupant, either by purchase or conquest (Pope Alexander VI., 1493). Native peoples were effectively no longer in control of their own governing bodies and instead, had their lands and tribes at the mercy of the dominant governing body. European colonizers gave themselves this right due to their belief in being the rational society compared to Native Americans (Ross & Gould, 2015). The *Johnson v. MacIntosh* case upholds this ideal (1823). It states that the U.S. has "unequivocal rule over its civilized inhabitants that were already there." There was simply no way around it: Natives were under the oppression of this foreign governing body that wholeheartedly expected to diminish their autonomy.

Assimilation

The most direct explanation for the loss of Native American traditions and culture is forced assimilation. Assimilation is defined here as the process by which individuals or groups of differing ethnic heritage from the dominant culture are absorbed into this culture while their own is diminished. In the lens of the Native American population, assimilation is when their heritage, languages and other cultural characteristics were forcibly replaced by the Euro-centric dominant cultures. While there were countless efforts to assimilate the Natives into Euro-centric society, the use of boarding schools for Native youth was highly detrimental to Native history and traditions (Ross & Gould, 2015). Often compared to the ripping of enslaved African American children from their parents and families, Native youth were forcibly removed from their culture and known environment to be placed into boarding schools. At these schools, Native youth were mentally, physically and emotionally abused with a current recorded estimate of 500 children dying over the span of 150 years of their existence (Newland, 2022). However, beginning in

2022, the U.S. is investigating the true lethal impact of boarding schools on Indigenous youth with the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative (U.S. Department of Interior, 2021). These abuses came down upon them when they could not properly assimilate into all areas of their colonizers' culture such as language, religion, appearance, and more. The abuse allowed for the erasure of hundreds of Native languages into one, English; the erasure of dozens of Native religions and rituals into one, Christianity; and the erasure of hundreds of tribes into one collective, Native Americans. It was not until the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (1978) that the Natives were encompassed into the First Amendment and the freedom of religion. However, the U.S.'s goal of assimilation of the Indigenous Peoples led to irreparable damage to many aspects of native heritage and culture.

Exile

Again, using their believed right of discovery, the U.S. government was able to intimidate Native tribes into exile by pushing Natives off their tribal lands, and onto government-led reservations. The 1830 Indian Removal Act allowed for the U.S. government to force treaties, or use the U.S. army, to forcibly remove Native Americans, from their location. To the Cherokees, the most notable forced exodus was *nunna dual tsuny*, to the country it became known as the Trail of Tears. It saw the relocation of 100,000 Native individuals into the Oklahoma-area. Members of the "Five Civilized Tribes" (Cherokees, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek and Seminole) were led out of their ancestral lands into the unknown. On the journey, Native people suffered many afflictions that led to fatal results such as colds, influenza, whooping cough, dysentery, freezing temperatures, starvation and more (Minges, 2001). However, their journey to exile was only one battle. Once there, these tribes continued their fight against epidemic diseases and starvation with depleted, or no, resources. While this was only one example of Native American exile, it was detrimental to the "Five Civilized Tribes," and created

a fear of relocation in other tribal communities due to the severe loss of Indigenous People's lives: the death toll estimated at 4,000-8,000 Cherokees; 6,000 Choctaws; 3,500 Creeks; 3,000 Chickasaws and 3,000 Seminoles (Thornton, 1984).

The emotional and psychological wounding of losing one's traditions, culture, ancestral homes, and identity (i.e. historical loss) has resulted in massive group trauma experienced by Native Americans that is unresolved. By developing the Historical Loss Scale and Historical Loss and Associated Symptoms Scale, Whitbeck et al. (2004) were able to compare a Native's perception of historical loss (HLS) and the feelings associated with said loss (HLAS). They found that the higher a Native person scored on HLS, the likeliness to report depression is higher. Another study, specifically examining reservation-based Native adolescents and youth adults, added HLAS to their testing of adverse childhood experiences (ACE) (Brockie, 2015). They found that those who reported higher levels of depression, poly-drug use, and PTSD also reported higher raters of HLAS so there is evidence that historical trauma and loss impact Native people's mental and physical health.

Physical and Mental Health Disparities

When compared to the general population, Native Americans are more at-risk for negative life aspects than their non-Native counterparts, whether it be physical, emotional or mental. Native Americans have a 70% higher rate of suicide, which is higher than any other ethnic group and the second leading cause of death for Native Americans (Dorgan, 2010). Unfortunately, Native Americans are also more likely to be victimized than others in the general population at a rate of 42.2 out of 100, ranging from 2-6.5x more than other races whether sexual, violent, or intimate partner violence (IPV) (Brockie, 2012). According to the National Institute of Justice, 56.1% of Native women and 27.5% of Native men have been sexually victimized (Rosay, 2016). The NIJ released evidence that Natives are also exposed to more IPV,

with 55.5% of women and 43.2% of men experiencing, which is about 1.5x higher than their White counterparts. Native Americans are also 2.1x more likely to die by homicide than the general population. While the National Crime Victimization Survey may have more current statistics, it, like many measures, fails to put Indigenous Peoples in their own ethnic category. Again, this grouping of Natives can muddy the true rates of victimization. In the realm of addressing health disparities among Native Americans, it's imperative to acknowledge the multifaceted challenges they face. Research by Richer & Roddy (2023) underscores the scarcity of interventions tailored specifically for Indigenous populations, particularly in combating opioid use disorders, highlighting a crucial gap in culturally integrative treatment options. This dearth is exacerbated by historical trauma, as elucidated by Richer & Roddy (2022), necessitating comprehensive strategies that not only acknowledge tribal sovereignty but also effectively allocate resources to uplift Indigenous communities and mitigate the adverse impacts of settler-colonialism. In order to establish a culturally competent study on gang membership which is known to put one on the trajectory of poor health outcomes (i.e. depression, suicide, homicide, substance use), researchers must recognize the already disadvantaged Native Americans are in health wise due to settler-colonialism.

Resiliency and Cultural Connection

Despite, and partly because of, the atrocities placed unto them through settler colonialism, the Indigenous People of the United States are resilient by use of their culture. Native American research is centered in strength-based approaches that use cultural practices, identity and connectiveness as protective factors, or buffers, to combat the disparities they may be facing health wise (Walters & Simons, 2002; Brockie et.al., 2018; Curie et. al., 2013). These buffers have been seen across Native literature and topics but especially in health and well-being. The Indigenist stress-coping model is a prime example of this framing of culture as a buffer (Walters

& Simons, 2002). Coined by Walters and Simoni, the model addresses how historical trauma and discrimination has led to an increase in Native health disparities. For example, Native women's high rates of forced sterilization can be traced back to the direct loss of the matriarchal guidelines of culture due to assimilation. When settlers came, they diminished the role of women in the tribe and therefore, led to women having significantly less bodily autonomy. Over time, that loss of autonomy and therefore culture, transitioned into higher numbers of forced sterilization, which continues today. The authors discuss how if instead of erasing culture practices, we should be putting forth efforts to include traditional practices, language and rituals to mediate, or cope with, the effects of historical trauma. Brockie (2018) expands on this concept of mediating stressors by examining Native youth with type 2 diabetes through an Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) survey. When including cultural factors such as spiritual activities and connectedness, they found these factors were linked to better physical and mental health. The use of connectiveness and spiritual activities are key components of Indigenous way of life because they offer social support that is otherwise unseen by their colonizers. Lastly, one study showed that increase in native enculturation led to a decrease in prescription drug abuse unlike increased mainstream acculturation which increased prescription drug abuse (Currie et. al, 2013). The absence of Indigenous values such as cultural events, spiritual ceremonies and sense of community, and the presence of Canadian values such as observing Canadian holidays, general recreation and hockey increased one's willingness to participate in illicit drug use. Through these examples, it is clear that the erasure of culture through settler colonialism was a direct threat to Native health and well-being because it took away an important protective factor from Indigenous People. However, through resiliency and strength-based approaches, there is the ability to reinstate and build upon these protective factors.

Tribal Reservations

For those Native to the Americas, reservations are a direct symbol of the displacement and assimilation forced unto the Native peoples. While currently the center of tribal relations, reservations used to be government-enforced living for Native Americans meant to open up their lands for western expansion. When Bachman (1992) observed many reservations, they found that 35-50% of Native Americans occupied these lands. While in 2020 the number has decreased to only 13% of Native Americans on tribal lands, the conditions and negative life aspects associated with reservation living must be examined (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Tribal reservations experience a spectrum of conditions, but some are exceptionally worse than others (i.e., no running water, no heating or air conditioning, and no electricity (Bachman, 1992). Hailer (1998) found that unemployment rates on reservations are far greater than those of the general population, or even Natives as a whole. They found that reservations had an average 50% unemployment rate but that some reservations had closer to 80-90%. While Hailer's estimates may need to be revisited, there is still disparities in the national averages of unemployment (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). The general U.S. population only has an unemployment rate of 4.0% while all Native Americans have a rate of 11.1%. Lastly, life on reservations brings about greater health disparities for Native Americans. The risk of alcoholism mortality is 6x higher than the national average, and homicide rates are double the national average (Hailer, 1998). However, the main health disparity for those on reservations is the rates of suicide. While Native Americans already experiences higher rates of suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts and suicide completions, life on the reservation brings about a new horror level. For example, on a North Dakota tribal reservation, the rates of suicide were 5x higher than the surrounding non-tribal lands (Dorgon, 2010). While that is one reservation, the state of North Dakota found that on their reservation lands, there were at least 6 attempts and 1 completion every five days. Life on a tribal

reservation can influence an individual from socioeconomic status to mental health issues. Current research on Native Americans is limited in its consideration for reservation status of their participants. Overlooking reservation status, researchers have potential of misinterpreting results due to the disparities of living on reservations versus not.

Taking into account the historical trauma of being exiled and forced onto reservations, the current environmental plight of Native Americans can be linked to settler colonialism and its continued erasure of culture. Many times, Native Americans were moved from their more prosperous lands to make room for white settlers, and exiled to unfamiliar, harsh lands, which has contributed to furthering Native disparities.

Native American Gang Membership

Native participation in gangs went unnoticed until the early 1990s, Native participation in gangs. Studies have shown a rough estimate 15% of Native youth were currently involved in gangs according to a 2008 study (Theriot & Parke, 2008). While African American/Black (35.3%) and Hispanic/Latino (46.2%) gang membership may be higher than Natives, it is hard to compare considering the National Youth Gang Survey does not include Native Americans as their own race/ethnicity, but instead groups them in "All Other" where they are an obscure percentage of the 7.0% (National Youth Gang Survey, 2012). Despite making up a small percentage of youth gang members, Native youth gang membership is on the rise. Since 1994, Native gang presence and membership has doubled with 400 gangs and 4,500 gang members (Freng, 2012).

Native vs Non-Native Youth Gang Members

Hailer (1998) still remains one of the only studies that examined the similarities and differences in Native youth gang membership versus non-Native youth, particularly those on reservations. A key similarity between Native youth gang members and other gangs was the

opportunities provided in their environment. Hailer found that tribal reservations closely

resemble the conditions of inner cities found in gang literature, with low employment levels,

high poverty, and high levels of substance abuse. Their shared plights have left room for gangs to

emerge and thrive.

One key difference Hailer found that made Native youth gang members dissimilar from

non-Native gang members is the phenomenon she calls "between cultures." Native youth on

tribal reservations are exposed to the traditionalist views of those in the tribe who wish to bring

back a traditional, culturally relevant way of life while the outside society pulls them away from

these values. This can be seen in schools with non-Native, non-reservation gang youth who bring

in the outside gang culture to Native youth who attend schools of the reservation. The push and

pull relationship between a youth's identity is unique to Native gang members who may choose a

gang identity to divert themselves from the identity crisis of "between cultures. When examining

the role of identity, Native youth may be more highly susceptible to gang membership due to

loss of cultural identity. For example, Hailer (1998) mentions that Native youth rarely have rites

of passage into adulthood in the current day due to assimilation. These rituals once gave youth,

especially young men, a sense of purpose and ties to their Native persona. With the loss of these

traditions, Native youth may be searching for outlets that increase their sense of identity which

gang membership has been shown to do.

PRESENT STUDY

Native Americans are disproportionately experiencing poverty, violence, and negative

mental and physical health symptoms than other races which research has shown can be linked to

their oppression and historical trauma endured after assimilation, genocide, and exile. Their

disparities offer less positive life opportunities, compared to their non-Native peers, with the

potential to change their life course trajectory away from a life of antisocial behaviors, low

employment, and lack of education. At the same time, gang membership is a turning point in life that once joined, can negatively affect one's life by slowly knifing off opportunities and entrenching one in gang culture. Gang membership is associated with an increase in antisocial behaviors, violence, poverty, and negative mental and physical health symptoms. If Native youth are already disproportionately experiencing these negative life aspects, then joining a gang will only double down on their potential negative life trajectory. Instead of lifting them out of conflicts, it will further knife off positive life opportunities that are already scarce on reservations and in the United States as a whole.

Gang Membership and Cultural Strength

The historical loss and associated loss symptoms experienced by Native peoples must be considered when examining Native youth's reasoning for becoming a gang member. To further research on HLS and HLAS, this study seeks to include presence of a cultural identity; strength of cultural ties to one's Native culture as a predictor for youth gang membership. In their study of Native women, Walters and Simoni found that culture factors can be used as a buffer for Native women and stressors that lead to poor health outcomes (i.e. cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, death). Their Indigenist stress-coping model used culture as a protective factor for poor health outcomes. To support their findings, the present study will examining the association between cultural strength and Native health and well-being outcomes. It is predicted that those with stronger cultural ties will be less likely to have poor health outcomes and dropping out of school than those who report having weaker cultural ties.

Next, the present study will use the examine the use of cultural strength as a protective factor could illuminate for whom Native gang membership is attractive. This study predicts that Native youth who are more strongly connected to their culture and identity will be less likely to engage in gang membership. Those Native youth who do not join gangs may not endure the

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enhancement of negative life aspects that come with being a Native gang member such as higher rates of suicide, victimization and more.

Self-Harm and School Dropouts

Native youth experience disparities in self-harm, suicidal thoughts and actions and educational attainment that are linked to HLS and HLAS, along with high rates of poverty and unemployment. The rates of negative life aspects will be greater for Native youth who are gang members than non-gang members due to the effects of gang membership. While other Native youth may experience the shortage of positive opportunities (i.e. healthy lifestyle, employment, education) associated with being an Indigenous person in the United States, Native youth gang members may experience a vacuum of these opportunities through the knifing off of positive opportunities associated with Sampson and Laub's turning point theory, and more room for entrenchment into delinquent activities and the consequences of delinquency. This study predicts that if a Native youth identifies as a gang member, then they will experience more negative life aspects such as poor health outcomes and increased victimization.

RQ1: Are strong ties to a Native youth or young adult's culture associated with health and well-being?

> H1a: If a Native youth has strong ties to their Native culture, then they will be less likely to engage in acts of self-harm, thoughts of suicide and attempt suicide than Native youth who report to have weaker cultural ties.

> H1b: If a Native youth has strong ties to their Native culture, then they will be less likely to dropout of school than those who report to have weaker cultural ties.

RQ2: Are strong ties to a Native youth or young adult's culture associated with their engagement in gang membership?

H2: If a Native youth reports to have a strong relationship to their culture, then they will be less likely to become a gang member than a Native youth with weaker culture ties.

RQ3: Does being a gang member further exacerbate the health and well-being disparities resulting from colonization for Native youth?

H3a: If a Native youth is a gang member, then they are more likely to experience negative life outcomes reported as thoughts of self-harm, and committing acts of self-harm than already severely disadvantaged Native youth who are not gang members.

H3b: If a Native youth is a gang member, then they are more likely to experience negative life outcomes in the form of dropping out of school than already severely disadvantaged Native youth who are not gang members.

METHODS

Participants

The present study examines data from the Effect Methods to Assess Exposure to Violence and Victimization Among American Indian and Alaska Native Youth: The Trial Youth Victimization Study (TYVS). The study included three study sites located in Alaska and New Mexico: one was conducted on a reservation, or tribal land while the other two were in urban locations (Melton & Chino, 2021). The participants were 359 Indigenous youth and young adults between the ages of thirteen and twenty years old. However, participants who did not report on their engagement in gang activity, (N=5, 1.4% of the full sample) were excluded from the study's analyses, resulting in a sample size of 354 surveyed Indigenous youth.

Measures

Demographics. Age and gender were used as demographic covariates. Age was coded as a continuous variable while gender was coded as a binary variable with males as the reference category (0= Male; 1=Female). Due to the low number of transgender and gender non-conforming participants (*N*=6), these participants were removed from analysis to avoid misrepresenting their experiences and/or having an underpowered analysis regarding gender.

Tribal Lands. Given the historical consequences of Native people being forced onto government-sanctioned reservations (i.e., decreased quality of life through unemployment, poverty, increased mental health issues, and victimization), whether or not youth lived on tribal lands was included as a covariate. Participants were asked to report where they usually live (such as a reservation or other tribal jurisdiction: 0 = "Full time on tribal lands", 1= "Part-time on and off tribal lands", and 2= "Full time off of tribal lands."

Gang Involvement. Participants were asked to report if they had any involvement with a violent gang in the past twelve months. Participants either reported "No personal gang involvement", or "Yes, I am a (initiated) member of a gang." (0=No, 1=Yes).

Culture as a Source of Strength. On a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (always), participants were asked "Does your culture help you to be strong?".

Self-Harm. Participants were asked to report on their frequency of self-harm practices, behaviors, and thoughts for the past twelve months via three items. Participants reported if they had cut or burned themselves, with response options: 0= "No", 1= "Thought about it but did not do it", or 2= "Yes". Additionally, youth reported whether they had ever thought about suicide (0=No, 1=Yes), and if they had ever attempted suicide (0=No, 1=Yes).

School Drop-out Participants reported whether or not they had dropped out of school. The dichotomous response choices were "Yes, I dropped out of middle or high school", or "No, I did not drop out of middle or high school" (0= No, 1=Yes).

<center>**Analytical Plan**</center>

RQ1: Are strong ties to a Native youth or young adult's culture associated with health and well-being?

      To address the first research question, the present study will conduct bivariate correlations to examine the relationship between a Native youth or young adult's cultural strength and two categories of negative life outcomes: self-harm and school dropout.

RQ2: Are strong ties to a Native youth or young adult's culture associated with their engagement in gang membership?

To answer the second research question, the present study will use a binary logistic regression to examine the relationship between a Native youth or young adult's cultural strength and their engagement in gang membership.

Using age, gender and tribal status as covariates, the study aims to evaluate how a Native person's strong or weak connection to their Native culture can predict their gang status. The predicted outcome is reported gang membership.

RQ3: Does being a gang member further exacerbate the health and well-being disparities resulting from colonization for Native youth?

To address the third research question, the present study will use three binary logistic regression models and a multinomial logistic regression model to examine the relationship between a Native youth or young adult who identifies as a gang member and two categories of negative life outcomes: self-harm and school dropout.

First, using age, gender, tribal status and cultural strength as covariates, the study aims to evaluate how a Native person's gang status can predict poor health outcomes, as operationalized through self-harm (i.e., cutting and burning; thoughts of suicide; and attempting suicide). Two binary logistic regression models will be conducted with thoughts of suicide and attempts of suicide as the outcomes, respectively. A multinomial logistic regression model will be conducted with self-harm behaviors as the outcome.

Second, the present study will use a binary logistic regression model to conduct analyses on the relationship between a Native youth or young adult who self-identifies a gang member and dropping out of school. Keeping age, gender, tribal status, and cultural strength constants,

the study aims to evaluate how a Native person's gang status can predict school dropout. The predicted outcome is one's current educational status.

RESULTS

Descriptive Analyses

First, descriptive analyses were conducted (see Table 1). In the present study, there are more female participants (51.9%) than male participants (48.1%). Of these participants, 52.8% lived full-time on tribal lands, 12.6% were part-time on and off tribal lands, and 34.6% were full-time off of tribal lands. On average, participants were around 16-17 years old (M=16.71; SD=2.370). For culture strength, participants on average rated their strength on the higher side of the 1-6 scale with most the average being culture gives them strength frequently (M=4.62; SD=1.580). Of the sample, 32% had thoughts of suicide; 15.1% had attempted suicide; and 3.9% had dropped out of school. Lastly, when reporting on self-harm, 12.5% of participants reported "thought about it but did not do it" and 13.1% answered "Yes". Importantly, 5.6% of participants reported being gang members.

Bivariate Analyses

Bivariate correlations were conducted among study variables to ensure that all model variables were related as expected (see Table 2). Of the covariates, age was significantly positively correlated with tribal living status (r= .259, p= <.001); gang membership (r= .222, p= <.001); self-harm (r= .222, p= <.001); thoughts of suicide (r=.190, p=<.001); attempted suicide (r=.227, p= <.001); and school dropout (r=.231, p= <.001). Gender was significantly positively correlated with self- harm (r= .139, p=.009) and thoughts of suicide (r= .132, p= .014), and negatively correlated with gang membership (r= -.183, p <.001). Tribal living status was significantly negatively correlated with cultural strength (r=-.453, p=<.001). It was significantly positively correlated with gang membership (r= .171, p=<.001); self-harm (r=.241, p= <.001); thoughts of suicide (r= .096, p=.021); and school dropouts (r=.166, p=.002). Gang membership was not significantly associated with thoughts of suicide (r=.051, p=.338); and attempted suicide

(r=.103, p=.054). However, it was significantly positively correlated with self-harm (r=.138, p=.009); and school dropout (r=.139, p=.009).

Cultural strength was not significantly associated with gang membership (r=-.081, p=.128). However, in support of RQ1, cultural strength was significantly negatively correlated with self-harm (r=-.188, p=<.001)); thoughts of suicide (r=-.141, p=.009); attempted suicide (r=-.137, p=.010); and school dropouts (r=-.117, p=.028).

Binary Logistic Regressions

Model 1 (see Table 3) used binary logistic regression to test the relation between cultural strength and gang membership, while age, gender and tribal living status were used as covariates [r^2=.290 , X^2(5, p <.001) =33.964). The hypothesized relation between cultural strength and gang membership was not statistically significant (OR= .868, p= .452). However, the relationship between tribal status and gang membership was statistically significant (OR= 5.904, p= .027), such that participants who lived part-time on and off tribal lands were 490.4% more likely to report being a gang member in the past year. Also, the relation between cultural strength and age was statistically significant (OR= 1.533, p=.007), such that those who were older were more 53.3% more likely to use their culture as a source of strength than younger youth. Lastly, the relation between cultural strength and gender was statistically significant (OR= .107, p=.004), such that males were 89.3% more likely to use their culture as a source of strength than females.

Model 2 used a binary logistic regression to test the relation between gang membership and thoughts of suicide while age, gender, tribal living status, and cultural strength were used as covariates [r^2=.099, X^2(6, p<.001) =24.590]. The hypothesized relation between gang membership and suicidal thoughts was not statistically significant (OR=1.304, p=.632). However, the relation between gender and thoughts of suicide is statistically significant (OR=1.998, p=.006), such that male participants are 99.8% more likely to have thoughts of

suicide than female participants. Also, the relation between age and thoughts of suicide is statistically significant (OR=1.175, p=.004), such that older youth are 17.5% more likely to contemplate suicide than younger participants. Lastly, the relation between cultural strength and thoughts of suicide is statistically significant (OR=.822, p=.021), such that those with a weaker cultural ties are 17.8% more likely to contemplate suicide than those who report a stronger cultural ties.

Model 3 (see Table 5) used binary logistic regression to test the relation between gang membership and attempted suicide, while age, gender, tribal living status and cultural strength were used as covariates [r^2=.102, X^2 (6, p=.003)=20.046]. The hypothesized relation between gang membership and suicide attempts was not statistically significant (OR=1.177, p=.802). However, the relation between attempted suicide and age were statistically significant (OR=1.278, p=.001), such that those youth who are older are 27.8% more likely to attempt suicide than younger youth. Lastly, the relation between cultural strength and attempted suicide is statistically significant (OR=.796, p=.036), such that those with a weaker cultural connection are 20.4% more likely to attempt suicide than those with a stronger cultural ties. .

Model 4 (Table 6) used binary logistic regression to test the relation between gang membership and dropping out of school, while age, gender, tribal living status and cultural strength were used as covariates [r^2= .343, X^2(6, p <.001) =35.710]. The hypothesized relation between reported drop-out and gang membership was not statistically significant (OR= 1.512, p=.608). However, the relation between dropping out to school and age was statistically significant (OR=2.450, p=.002), such that youth who are older are 145.0% more likely to drop-out than youth who are younger.

To examine the relation between gang membership and self-harm, a multinomial logistic regression model was planned. However, 0 gang members had engaged in self-harm behaviors, so the model was dropped from the study.

DISCUSSION

Culture and Poor Life Outcomes

In alignment with previous Indigenous-based research, the present study found that culture connectiveness does have an impact on the Native population. When predicting whether a stronger cultural connection will decrease the likelihood of poor life outcomes, operationalized as self-harm, suicidal thoughts, attempted suicide and school dropouts, our hypothesis was supported. Those who reported a stronger cultural connection were significantly less likely to engage in self-harm, have thoughts of suicide, make a suicide attempt or drop out of school. This finding further highlights the need for the Native-based studies to continue to incorporate culture as a protective factor for the Native population.

Culture and Gang Membership

When predicting whether a stronger cultural connection will decrease the likelihood of gang membership, results showed that our hypothesis was not supported. Those who reported a strong cultural connection were not significantly less likely to be a gang member than those who reported to have a weak cultural connection. This is likely due to the low base rate of youth who reported being gang members (5.6% of the sample), which made it difficult to detect an effect.

However, those who reported living part-time on and off tribal lands were significantly more likely to report being a gang member than those who lived full time on tribal lands. In gang literature, there is support of gang diffusion or "migration", between urban and rural communities (Maxson, 1998) This gang developmental process is seen through "gang migrants", youth who are already established gang members in their former jurisdiction, who migrate into a new jurisdiction bringing in their previous gang influences; (Moore, Vigil & Garcia, 1983; Maxson, 1998). The motives for migration vary: some transcending borders to escape the influences of the gang, some rotating between the two to establish different "branches" of the

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gang; but mostly, people migrate to seek out social advantages (i.e., increased job stability, better school systems, and safer environments). While it usually pertains to the diffusion relationship between urban-rural communities, Native American criminologists have often used the same framework for the diffusion relationship between tribal and non-tribal communities (Donnermeyer et. al., 2000; Whitbeck et. al., 2002; Hailer & Hart, 1999). The emergence of Native gangs has been linked to the migration of those from outside tribal lands that introduced these tribal communities to mainstream gangs and increased gang-like activities (i.e., higher rates of violent crime and delinquency). For example, one study found that reservations with gangs reported that their nearest off-reservation school had gangs (Hailer & Hart, 1998). This is important because it creates a pathway for the 90% of Native youth who attend non-tribal schools in non-tribal jurisdictions to be exposed to gang activity that then seeps back into tribal lands (National Indian Education Association, 2008). However, there is also evidence that some Native gangs, especially present day, have emerged from tribal lands themselves (Hailer & Hart, 1999; Maxson, 1998; and Grant & Feimer, 2007). Culture can be a center of gang bonding in Native gangs due to the shared experiences of their environment (i.e., job instability, poor education), shared historical trauma, or shared characteristics (i.e., tribal affiliation). So, those youth who are living part-time on and off reservation lands may be more likely to become a gang member because they may be experiencing the effects of diffusion that try to penetrate the boundaries of tribal lands while also experiencing the presence of gangs that have emerged from tribal lands. Being exposed to both of these environments rather than just one, could be the reason why this particular group of Native youth were significantly more likely to select into being in a gang.

The results could also be the effects of what Hailer witnessed in their examination of the differences between Native and non-Native gang members (1998). They found that youth in

"Indian Country" often felt like they were "between cultures": a personal dilemma that fuels pressures from one's Native community and the outside world. Their Indigenous strain comes from those in the community who want to revert to traditional Native ways (i.e., rituals, holistic health, and community-orientation) while the outside world tempts them through exposure to potential rewards (i.e., illegally obtained funds, feeling of belonging, and illicit substances). This identity crisis can leave Native youth to examine outlets that help to establish their own identity in their two worlds, and unfortunately, one of these outlets is becoming a gang member.

Gang Membership and Poor Health Outcomes

When examining the relationship between Native gang membership and poor health outcomes, our hypothesis was not supported. There was no significant difference in self-harm, suicidal thoughts or attempted suicide between Native gang members and non-gang members, again potentially due to power issues arising from the low base rate of gang members. Indeed, for self-harm, the prevalence of cutting and burning oneself as a Native gang member was too low to conduct analyses. While these are the results of individual level testing of self-harm and suicidal ideation, further examination of the environment and its gang affiliation must be examined. As shown in a study conducted in a prison, those surrounded by a higher gang percentage, their own or non-affiliated gangs, resulted in less life threatening and non-life threatening self-harm (Rhodes, 2022). Rhodes (2022) explained two potential reasonings for this finding: 1) there is increased social support coming from the gang that can dilute the feelings of hopelessness that promote suicidal ideation and self-harm; and 2) the violence among gangs in the unit are a substitute for self-violence (Day et al., 2015). So, if these areas on or off tribal lands are gang-infested, there is a possibility the high prevalence of gangs may attribute to the low reporting of self-harm, suicidal ideation, and attempted suicide.

Age was significantly related to both suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts. As Native youth increased in age, their likelihood of having suicidal ideations (i.e., thoughts and attempts) increases. These results follow national and global trends that show that suicide and suicidal ideations are most prevalent in those age 15-19 (Duarte et. al, 2020; Lee et. al., 2019; Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). One study of suicide trends found that suicide was the second leading cause of death for 15–19-year-olds (Duarte et. al., 2020) This revelation was also examined by Lee (2018), and they found that between 2006-2015, 63% of suicides were those 17-19 compared to 37% of participants who were 13-16. So, it is unsurprising that our results showed how age can predict outcomes such as suicidal thoughts and attempts when this age group has a high prevalence of completed suicide. For suicidal thoughts only, gender was a significant factor in predicting this outcome. If Native youth were male, then they were almost twice as likely to report considering suicide in the last year than Native female youth. This follows global trends of suicidal thoughts: while females are more likely to engage in self-harm and unsuccessful attempts at suicide (De Munck, Portzky & Van Heeringen, 2009; Shain et. al, 2016), males are more likely to have completed suicide (Lee, 2018). Lee et. al. found that 67% of completed suicides from 2006-2015 were males compared to the female rate of 33%. So, while our results may not show significance in gender for attempted suicide, the frequency of male youth reporting suicidal thoughts is concerning considering they may be more likely to take lethal, and sadly successful, action.

Lastly, a participant's reporting on their cultural strength was significantly related to both suicidal thoughts and attempted suicide. For youth who reported their culture often helped them to be strong, they are less likely to be engaged in suicidal ideation than those who reported their culture does not often help them to be strong. Again, our results coincide with previous Native literature that cultural connectiveness and strength can be protective factors in combatting certain

aspects of Indigenous health such as suicidal ideation (Whitbeck et. al., 2004; Walters & Simoni, 2002; Brockie, 2015; Brockie, 2018; Currie, 2013). Considering that suicide is the second leading cause of death for Native Americans 10 to 34 years old, the need to find ways to build up one's engagement with their culture, and there for their perception of how their culture can be a helpful tool, is dire (SAMHSA, 2020).

Gang Membership and School Dropouts

When examining the relationship between Native gang membership and school dropouts, our hypothesis was not supported. There was no significant difference in drop-out rates between Native youth who were gang members and not gang members. However, our analysis found there is an association between age and school dropouts for our sample of Native youth and young adults: as participants grow older, they are more likely to drop-out of school than younger Native American youth. According to the National Center for Education Statistic in 2021, since 2012 American Indian/Alaska Natives have the highest high school drop-out rate than any other race or ethnicity (2021). Because Native youth are 10.2% more likely to drop-out compared to the national rate of 5.1% with the second leading group being Hispanics at a 7.8% high school drop-out rate, there is a need to understand at what age in school that educational interventions should occur to combat this rate. Native-based studies have uncovered several reasons for why Native students are more likely to not graduate, or dropout than non-Native students such as disproportionate disciplinary actions (i.e., increased referrals, suspensions, and expulsions); held back at higher proportions; and more impacted by risk factors for dropping out (i.e., missing a day for sickness, cutting class, and being home alone afterschool) than their non-Native counterparts (Locklear et. al., 2020; Wallace et. al., 2008; Brown & Tillio, 2013; Gastic, 2017; Dever et. al., 2016). It could be that our sample of older youth and young adults have endured

these disproportionate experiences, often felt by Native youth, longer than their younger

counterparts leading to their increased rate of school dropouts.

IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Implications

When examining the present study's results, it is important to address the contemporary issues facing Native Americans that are caused by settler colonialism, acculturation, and discrimination. It is not ethical to make policy without efforts to lower disparities facing the Indigenous Peoples of America because they are directly linked to historical trauma. First, efforts need to be made to address how low socioeconomics, job instability, low educational attainment, mental health issues (i.e., depression, suicide, PTSD, substance use), and physical health issues (i.e., sexual and violent victimization) are most certainly the fault of hundreds of years of colonization and erasure. After so much historical trauma, it is not enough to only suggest how to increase culture as a strength, or resiliency factors but instead must address how the discrimination is ongoing and still creating these disparities seen today.

For the Native youth gang members who live part-time on and off tribal lands, a culturally adaptive approach would be key in diminishing the potential pressures put on these youth from inside and outside of tribal lands (Bernal, Jimenz-Chafey & Domenech Rodriguez, 2009). While the focus of treatment would not be establishing a culture connection, it would take into account the specific conditions of Native life in America (i.e., health disparities, low education levels, high unemployment and poverty, etc.), which are often associated with gang membership as well. By taking these factors into account, there is an increased ability to understand why Native youth are choosing to give into gang activity due to their positionality in society rather than centering their actions related to Western society.

There are also several efforts that in gang resistance that are rooted in cultural aspects and the rebuilding against a collective trauma that resemble a culture-specific approach (Falvicov, 2009;

Puyallup Tribe of Indians, n.d.). One such effort supported by tribal council funding, The

Puyallup Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) Program in Tacoma,

Washington, combines the G.R.E.A.T. curriculum (i.e., school-based gang and violence

prevention sessions) with cultural and language aspects that may not be available outside of the

program such as meeting with elders; gathering to sing, dance and drum together; use of

indigenous lands and plants; and traditional storytelling, artistry and more (Puyallup Tribe of

Indians, n.d.). During their time in the program, participants have shown how strengthening their

cultural connectiveness has decreased their gang involvement and positive perceptions about

gang affiliation.

For the youth who showed suicidal ideologies (i.e., thoughts of suicide and attempted

suicide), literature on establishing a zest for life could help alleviate the feelings often associated

with suicide especially for older youth and males (Fraser et. al., 2015; Shahram et. al., 2021).

One study showed that establishing traditional rituals can offer as a protective factor to suicide

by using traditional Inuit hunting activities that center around land use and affirming one's

identity (Fraser et. al., 2015). Other cultural protective factors to suicide include rebuilding

connections to the land, community and family (Barker, Goodman & DeBeck, 2017; FitzGerald

et. al., 2017). *Culture Forward,* a research guide developed by through listening sessions with

stakeholder (i.e., tribal elders, Native youth leaders, teachers and the health board), highlights

five cultural themes that participants attributed to target disproportionate suicide rates: 1) how

one can harness social connectedness as a strength; 2) connections to land and elders to thrive; 3)

traditional practices and knowledge (i.e., language and rituals); 4) emphasizing Native youth

having their own tribal autonomy for change; and 5) tribal and community leaders continuously

empowering and caring for youth (O'Keefe et. al., 2022). These connections root Indigenous

youth who before claimed a sense of hopelessness often felt through discrimination and

colonialism into a culture that promotes Native well-being. In a society where Native youth are the highest rates of suicide, regardless of gender, it is dire that Native youth are enculturated to save them from this devastating outcome.

To help address the significant rate of school drop-out for older Native youth, the education system needs to evaluate why Native students are disengaging from their educational pathway. If Native students are facing higher discrimination in the way of disproportionate disciplinary practices and graded repetitions, there is a need to address underlying biases that were embedded into our society in the initial colonization of the United States since these biases were once an educational tool to "kill the Indian" (e.g. mandated Native boarding schools).

In order to better prepare educators and administrators, the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) and the National Indian Education Association (NIEA) (2010) have created guidelines to creating a positive learning environment for Native youth (Sprague et. al, 2013). First, they emphasize the need for personnel preparation on Native culture, values and ideologies in order to combat the use of microaggressions and biases. When allowing for different cultural viewpoints, it puts behaviors and attitudes in a better perspective for educators that could dissuade them from misinterpreting these behaviors as negative. For example, a key attribute of retention rates in non-Native schools is understanding of absenteeism. Educators have recognized that Native youth tend to "stop out", or stop coming to school for many days while not fully dropping out (Rosen, Warkentein & Rotermund, 2019). While this is seen as abnormal and often taken as a youth dropping out in Western-centered society, this custom is innate to Natives. Students often use these times to connect with family and community during urgent times because these cultures uphold these values over that of personal growth and duties, even if that is formal education. When students return to school, schools that embrace differing cultural

views are willing to adjust to the absent student's needs while others may not be as willing to help considering these are often unexcused and unexplained absences. Second, the organizations emphasize the need to promote a positive identity development and belonging by incorporating traditional elements of Native life. Implementing this in tribal and non-tribal schools would combat the effects of setter colonialism that disallows Native empowerment. Lastly, they emphasize the need to incorporate parents into the educational system in an effort to engage further in cultural practices (NCAI & NIEA, 2010). If parents are involved, it increases a Native student's sense of belonging and adds an advocate for not only the child but also the Native community the family is a part of. The NCIA and NIEA believe that these guidelines will contribute to decreasing the disparities in disciplinary actions through better understanding of the Native population of students, and their historical and contemporary positioning. While it is important to incorporate these practices at all educational levels, the present study highlights the implementation of these practices may be more beneficial for older Native youth (i.e., high schoolers) than younger Native youth.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this data set is unique in its inclusion of cultural strength and connection, it does have its limitations. First, while this study was based on the life-course theory of turning points, the data were cross-sectional, which does not allow for causal connections on whether gang membership truly changed the trajectory of a Native youth compared to Native non-gang members. Moving forward, longitudinal research will help us better understand the true nature of these interactions. If the survey could test the before- and after-effects of gang membership, it would allow us to examine the models of selection, facilitation and enhancement after joining a gang. If future research shows a difference in self-harm, suicidal thoughts and attempts after joining a gang, it will support the model of social facilitation in gangs as these actions are

increased due to the gang membership. However, if it remains stable, it will support the selection model that these actions were already present in the gang members and not due to being in a gang. Lastly, if we see that there is the presence of these poor health outcomes before gang membership that increased after joining a gang, it will support the model of enhancement in that gang membership exacerbates self-harm, suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts. This same way of thinking can be applied to how educational attainment changes over time for gang members if this was a longitudinal study. It would allow research to corner how Native youth are impacted by gang membership in line with current gang activity literature.

Second, only a small number of Native youths reported to be gang members in the past year (n=20), causing analyses to be underpowered. With a larger sample, we may see more significant associations between all the models tested. Thirdly, while this is a Native-based survey, the inability to identify tribe, or nation of the youth could impact the results tested. The effects of settler colonization and erasure have led to Indigenous Peoples being grouped together as if one when truly, Nations are not the same from values to practices to language and more. It may be that some tribes have managed to implement more culture buffers to decrease gang membership, decrease suicide and suicidal ideologies, and increase educational attainment than others. To address these limitations, future directions should be rooted in expansion of the survey into different cities and tribal lands, Oklahoma being an area of potential. Despite being a less populated state, Oklahoma has a massive gang presence in urban areas such as Tulsa and Oklahoma City but also in rural areas such as Lawton and Bartlesville with around 15,000 gang members total (Oklahoma Gang Investigation Association, n.d). Also, Oklahoma is unique in its positioning in relation to Indigenous Peoples due to its legacy as "Indian Territory", which stemmed from the forced relocation of the Five Civilized Tribes in the Trail of Tears and the other 33 recognized Nations, but also in its current criminal justice climate (United States

Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Oklahoma, 2022). Decided in 2020, the *McGirt v. Oklahoma* ruling granted federally recognized tribes the criminal jurisdiction over crimes committed on tribal lands or by a Native person (2020). This increased sovereignty has allowed Nations located in Oklahoma to implement their own punishments but also their own preventative and intervention measures. So, future examination may show that there are some additional buffers in these locations that stray youth away from gang membership compared to those outside of the state.

Lastly, this is a call for future research to examine gang membership as its own poor health outcome, especially for Native youth who disproportionally endure poorer health outcomes. As stated, current gang literature shows the effects gang membership has on an individual can increase poor life outcomes such as increased PTSD, suicide and suicidal ideation, rates of offending, substance use and other mental and physical health outcomes. So, it is fair to say that being in a gang itself is detrimental to the individual. By placing gang membership as a health outcome for Indigenous Peoples, we could use models such as the Indigenist stress-coping model to truly test if cultural connections such as rituals, language, and identity can be a protective factor of engaging in gang membership.

CONCLUSION

The present study sought to better understand the population of Native youth who are gang members compared to those who are not gang members through examining cultural strength, health disparities, and school drop-out rates. This comparison of Native gang members vs non-gang members sought to further the gang literature that has established gang membership as a turning point that has detrimental effects on one's life course in a field that rarely focuses on this population. While there were no significant differences between our gang members and non-gang members in these outcomes, we found evidence that the positionality of Native youth—specifically, tribal living status-- plays a part in these outcomes. Future research on this population in a gang-related context should focus on using cultural buffers such as a strengthened sense of strengthened identity, resiliency programs and traditions (i.e., land-connection, rituals, etc.) to mediate the effects of poor mental health and school dropouts in order to dissuade Native youth from many negative life aspects, and potentially, gang membership. It is the hopes of the author that it would lessen the effects of settler colonialism in different aspects of Native youth life while also protecting against gangs.

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Table 1: Descriptive statistics.

Variables				
	N	*%*	**Mean**	**SD**
Age	359	13-20	16.71	2.370
	Frequency	*%*	*Valid %*	
Gender				
Male	169	47.1%	48.1%	
Female	182	50.7%	51.9%	
Tribal Living Stats				
Full-time on	189	52.6%	52.8%	
Part-time on/off	124	34.5%	34.6%	
Full-time off	45	12.5%	12.6%	
Cultural Strength				
Never	13	3.6%	3.7%	
Rarely	26	7.2%	7.4%	
Sometimes	68	18.9%	19.3%	
Frequently	41	11.4%	11.6%	
Very Frequently	31	8.6%	8.8%	
Always	174	48.5%	49.3%	
Gang Membership				
No	334	93.0%	94.4%	
Yes	20	5.6%	5.6%	
Self-Harm				
No	265	73.8%	74.2%	
Thought about it but did not do it.	45	12.5%	12.6%	
Yes	47	13.1%	13.2%	
Thoughts of suicide				
No	240	66.9%	86.0%	
Yes	113	31.5%	32.0%	
Attempted Suicide				
No	303	84.4%	84.9%	
Yes	54	15.0%	15.1%	
School Dropouts				
No	345	96.1%	96.1%	
Yes	14	3.9%	3.9%	

Table 1 (cont'd)

Total	**359**

Table 2: Bivariate correlations matrix.

Correlations

		Age of Respondent	Gender	Tribal living status	Cultural strength	Gang membership	Self-harm	Thoughts of suicide	Attempted suicide	School Dropouts
Age of Respondent	Pearson Correlation	1	-.092	.259[**]	-.041	.222[**]	.210[**]	.190[**]	.227[**]	.231[**]
	N	359	351	358	353	354	357	353	357	359
Gender	Pearson Correlation	-.092	1	-.029	-.010	-.183[**]	.139[**]	.132[*]	.041	-.095
	N	351	351	350	345	346	349	346	349	351
Tribal living statues	Pearson Correlation	.259[**]	-.029	1	-.453[**]	.171[**]	.241[**]	.096	.109[*]	.166[**]
	N	358	350	358	352	353	356	352	356	358
Cultural strength	Pearson Correlation	-.041	-.010	-.453[**]	1	-.081	-.188[**]	-.141[**]	-.137[*]	-.117[*]
	N	353	345	352	353	350	352	348	352	353
Gang membership	Pearson Correlation	.222[**]	-.183[*]	.171[**]	.128	1	.138[**]	.051	.103	.139[**]
	N	354	346	353	350	354	353	349	353	354
Self-harm	Pearson Correlation	.210[**]	.139[*]	.241[**]	-.188[**]	.138[**]	1	.534[**]	.505[**]	.208[**]
	N	357	349	356	352	353	357	352	356	357
Thoughts of suicide	Pearson Correlation	.190[**]	.132[*]	.096	-.141[**]	.051	.534[**]	1	.562[**]	.141[**]
	N	353	346	352	348	349	352	353	353	353

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Table 2 (cont'd)

Attempted suicide	Pearson Correlation	.227**	.041	.109*	-.137*	.103	.505**	.562**	1	.116*
	N	357	349	356	352	353	356	353	357	357
School Dropouts	Pearson Correlation	.231**	-.095	.166*	-.117*	.139**	.208**	.141**	.116*	1
	N	359	351	358	353	354	357	353	357	359

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 3: Binary logistic regression examining cultural strength and gang membership.

Predictors	OR	95% CI	p
Age	1.533	[1.127, 2.086]	.007***
Full-time on tribal lands		[1.32, 4.51]	.084
Part-time on/off tribal lands	5.904	[1.226, 28.432]	.027***
Full-time off tribal lands	3.243	[.722, 14.554]	.125
Culture gives strength	.868	[.601, 1.254]	.452
Gender	.107	[.023, .495]	.004***

Table 4: Binary logistic regression examining gang membership and thoughts of suicide.

Predictors	OR	95% CI	p
Gang membership	1.304	[.441, 3.859]	.632
Gender	1.998	[1.216, 3.283]	.006***
Full-time on tribal lands			.483
Part-time on/off tribal lands	1.413	[.680, 2.934]	.355
Full-time off tribal lands	.888	[.487, 1.618]	.699
Age	1.175	[1.053, 1.312]	.004***
Culture gives strength	.822	[.696, .971]	.021***

Table 5: Binary logistic regression examining gang membership and attempted suicide.

Predictors	OR	95% CI	p
Gang membership	1.177	[.330, 4.198}	.802
Gender	1.425	[.743, 2.735}	.286
Full-time on tribal lands			.513
Part-time on/off tribal lands	1.473	[.594, 3.656}	.403
Full-time off tribal lands	.861	[.390, 1.901]	.712
Age	1.2782	[1.101, 1.492]	.001***
Culture gives strength	.796	[.642, .986}	.036***

Table 6: Binary logistic regression examining gang membership and school dropouts.

Predictors	OR	95% CI	p
Gang membership	1.512	[.311, 7.344]	.608
Gender	.411	[.113, 1.502]	.179
Full-time on tribal lands			.2.65
Part-time on/off tribal lands	1.715	[.201, 14.631]	.622
Full-time off tribal lands	3.775	[.684, 20.849]	.128
Age	2.450	[1.376, 4.362]	.002***
Culture gives strength	.778	[.517, 1.170]	.228