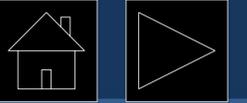# Gang membership amongst military-connected youth in California

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INTRODUCTION

Recent studies have found that military-connected students confront many challenges such as secondary traumatization that may stem from a parent's deployment, combat stress reactions, and difficulties in community reentry. These challenges are largely unrecognized in public school settings. It is possible that the multiple moves and deployments of family service members are associated with military-connected students' gang affiliation and involvement with school violence. This study explores: (1) Do military-connected youth report higher prevalence of gang membership? (3) Are the military-connected youth or those who report family member deployment at higher odds of being a self-reported gang member controlling for demographic characteristics, school relocations, and school violence behaviors?

METHODS

The core and military modules of the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) were administered to every secondary school in the eight consortium school districts participating in the *Building Capacity in Military-Connected Schools* project. A total of 13,682 students completed the surveys, which includes a representative sample of 7th, 9th, and 11th graders from 21 secondary schools.

Dependent Variable
Gang membership was assessed by a single question, which asked whether the respondent considered himself or herself to be a member of a gang. Students who answered affirmatively were classified as gang members and those who responded negatively were classified as non-gang members.

Independent Variables
The demographic variables included grade (7th, 9th, or 11th), gender, and race/ethnicity. Race/ethnic categories consisted of Asian American/Pacific Islander, Black, White, Latino and mixed races/ethnicities. Fighting was assessed by whether students had been involved in a physical fight at school in the past year (yes vs. no). Weapon carrying was comprised of reporting that the student had brought a gun or knife to school in the past 12 months (yes vs. no). Military connection characteristics included number of deployments of a family member overseas in the past 10 years (none vs. one or two or more), number of times the student changed schools due to family relocation in the past five years (zero to three vs. four or more), and whether the student had a family member currently serving in the military (no one, parent, or sibling).

METHODS con't

Analytic Plan
The Statistical Analysis System (SAS) version 9.4 was used in the analysis. Frequency distributions and cross-classification tables (χ^2 analysis) were performed to compare socio-demographic characteristics and key variables possibly related to gang membership, including, military connection and deployments. Logistic regression was employed to predict the probability of yes vs. no for being a member of a gang. All analyses controlled for students' clustering in schools.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics
The overall prevalence rate of gang membership for the sample is 8% (N=1,077). Males (10.4%) reported significantly higher rates of gang membership than females (5.4%), and minority students reported higher rates than their White peers. Compared to civilian students, military-connected students with a parent (9.7%) or sibling (9.1%) serving reported a higher prevalence rate of gang membership then students with no military connection (7.6%).

Multivariate Statistics
Multivariate results indicate that students who reported being in fights (OR=2.16, 95% CI=1.91-2.45) or bringing a weapon to school (OR=5.25, 95% CI=4.12-6.68) had higher odds to be gang affiliated than students reporting no fights or weapon carrying. Changing schools four or more times in the past 5 years was also associated with an increased odds of gang membership (OR=1.53, 95% CI=1.18-1.98). Additionally, compared to students who reported no familial deployments, experiencing one familial deployment increased the odds of gang membership by 44% (CI=1.04-1.98), while two or more family member deployments was associated with a 39% (CI=1.12-1.73) increase.

RESULTS CON'T

Table 1. Logistic Regression of Gang Membership in 2011 California Healthy Kids Survey (n=10,005).

Predictors	Gang Membership Odds Ratio (95% CI)
Grade	
7th (reference)	1.00
9th	1.07 (0.85-1.37)
11th	1.21 (0.91-1.61)
Gender	
Female (reference)	1.00
Male	1.46 (1.22-1.74)*
Race/Ethnicity	
White (reference)	1.00
Asian/AI/AN/PI/HI	0.91 (0.63-1.31)
Black	1.96 (1.21-3.16)*
Latino	1.57 (1.25-1.97)*
Mixed	1.12 (0.84-1.50)
Physical fight at school	
No (reference)	1.00
Yes	2.16 (1.91-2.45)*
Carried weapon to school	
No (reference)	1.00
Yes	5.25 (4.12-6.68)*
Military-connection	
None (reference)	1.00
Parent	0.81 (0.60-1.10)
Sibling	1.10 (0.76-1.59)
Changed school in past 5 years	
None to three	1.00
Four or more	1.53 (1.18-1.98)*
Deployments	
None	1.00
One	1.44 (1.04-1.98)*
Two or more	1.39 (1.12-1.73)*

Note: *Denotes significant odds ratio (p < .05).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The main findings of this research—that students who experience deployments and multiple changes in school are at a greater risk for gang membership—have several research and practice implications. Although military-connectedness was not found to be a significant predictor of gang membership, some of the experiences associated with military families are. The findings indicate that experiencing at least one deployment is associated with an elevated risk for gang membership. Deployments tend to have a negative impact on military children, often resulting in a reduction in school engagement and possible social withdrawal. These deployment-related behavioral issues are similar to that of gang members who have been found to feel alienated, marginalized, and disconnected from schools.

A key contribution of this study is that it highlights the unintended consequences deployments and multiple changes in schools may have on military-connected students. Given the secondary traumatization one experiences as a result of multiple deployments and relocation transitions, which may include losing a sense of belonging and important social support networks, it is possible that military-connected students become a vulnerable group susceptible to gang involvement and related school violence behaviors.

These findings present several opportunities for prevention in school settings. First, schools should make a concerted effort in identifying military-connected students on campus, determine whether they have experienced deployments, and/or whether they have changed schools multiple times in the past five years. Knowing this information upfront can allow schools to implement support programs that provide military-connected students the sense of belonging and acceptance they yearn. Activities that improve engagement and meaningful participation in school may decrease the negative effects of deployments or multiple moves.