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Gang-involved youth experience multiple forms of marginalization and persistent health inequities. Yet, research comparing gang and non-gang youth routinely emphasizes violence risk, gang desistance, and legal system intervention. There remain considerable gaps in our understanding of health decision-making and service needs for these youth. Further, gang-involved youth are not homogenous. Given their marginal experiences, variation in health behaviors and outcomes may be attributable, in part, to difference in social identities and ecological contexts. Research is needed to examine how marginalized identities and environmental and systemic factors inform variation in health decision-making among gang-involved youth. This has implications for addressing service needs and improving health.

This three-paper multimethod dissertation includes a scoping review of the youth gang literature, and two secondary analyses of a cross-sectional, state-wide survey of school-based youth. The search and selection strategy for the scoping review followed the PRISMA-ScR guidelines and resulted in a sample of 69 articles for inclusion and analysis. The secondary analyses draw upon a sample of 4,164 self-identified gang-involved youth respondents from the Healthy Youth Survey (HYS). Analyses focused on demographic characteristics, health behaviors, and factors related to the family, peer, school, and neighborhood domains. This research is broadly informed by developmental, ecological, and intersectional perspectives, and specifically by health vulnerability and health lifestyle theories.

The aims of this dissertation are to: 1) summarize what is known about the link between youth gang involvement and health link in order to identify gaps and inform future research, and 2) examine heterogeneity in mental, physical, and sexual health among gang-involved youth, including how social identity and ecology influence potential variation. Paper one includes a descriptive and thematic analysis of published studies to address three questions: 1) What is the relationship between gang involvement and health? 2) What individual and environmental factors are cited as important to this relationship? and 3) What role does the gang itself play in shaping health decision-making and outcomes? Papers two and three will build on these findings. Latent class analysis will be used to test for unobserved patterns of health decision-making among the HYS sample of gang-involved youth. Paper two will examine patterns of sexual health decision-making (e.g., condom use, number of partners), while paper three will examine patterns of physical health decision-making (e.g., diet, activity, sleep). For both, factors theorized to increase health vulnerability as identified in the scoping review will be examined via group difference testing followed by associations with mental health outcomes.

Findings will have implications for research and practice with gang-involved youth. For instance, results suggest heterosexuality within the gang subculture is not universal, and those who identify otherwise may be at heightened vulnerability for sexual health risk. Adapting screening tools, practitioner education and harm reduction strategies can increase responsiveness to identity and variability in the youth gang context to improve health. Research will be needed to ensure adapted approaches are feasible, acceptable, and effective.