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Project Title

**Gender differences in gang-involved youth and juvenile justice outcomes:
Findings from the Rio Grande Valley**

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study examined the experiences of girls and young women within gang ecologies in the Rio Grande Valley, a unique transnational border region in Texas. Drawing on interviews with 150 girls and young women ages 14–25, focus groups and interviews with 26 community stakeholders, and analysis of local juvenile justice administrative data, the research revealed distinct patterns of female gang involvement shaped primarily by relationship-based pathways.

Many participants held a liminal “hang around” status where they were connected to gang ecologies through family, romantic partners, or friends without formal membership. The transnational context of the region included cross-border connections, exposure to border-related violence, and border crossing experiences shaping participants’ vulnerabilities. Gang-labeled girls involved with the juvenile justice system demonstrated significantly higher rates of trauma, substance use, and court order violations compared with their non-gang labeled counterparts.

However, multivariate analysis revealed that while having a gang label increased the likelihood of more severe disposition outcomes for boys, it had no significant independent effect on disposition severity for girls. The findings suggest that interventions for this population of girls and young women should be developmentally appropriate and trauma-informed, address family dynamics and substance use, and be anchored within the distinctive transnational context of border communities.

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The research team was made up of individuals with complementary skills and perspectives throughout the research process. Sarah Covington, MPH, assisted with the quantitative analysis that informed the findings and conclusions. Natalie Cholula, MA, ADB, assisted with qualitative analysis, writing, and quality assurance methodology that strengthen the findings of the research. Alejandro Campos, MA, contributed to qualitative analysis, ensuring methodological consistency in the data interpretation. Ellie Miller, MA, Diego Quezada, MSW, and Denise Hernandez, MA, supported the research by reviewing and editing transcripts to ensure all identifying information was removed while preserving the integrity and context of participants' experiences.

Critical to this work was the dedicated team of local researchers who brought both professional expertise and cultural knowledge to the project: Modesto Vasquez, MS, Tania Diaz, MS, Joana Juarez, BA, Zoraya Berlanga, MS, Anna Pena, BA, and Norma DeAnda, BA. Their skilled implementation of interviews and community-based organization training not only ensured adherence to established protocols but also created culturally responsive research environments where participants could share their experiences authentically.

This work builds upon the foundation established by Angie Wolf, PhD, Caroline Glesmann, MA, and Evident Change researchers through their original Girls and Gangs study. Their prior scholarship and consultation provided valuable context and methodological insights that informed the present investigation.

The collaborative partnerships with community-based organizations were fundamental to this research. They included Cameron County Juvenile Justice Department, Tropical Texas Behavioral Health, BCFS Health and Human Services, and Hidalgo County Juvenile Probation Department. Representatives serving on the advisory board contributed valuable insights grounded in their professional experience while their organizations facilitated essential participant connections.

The Evident Change research team acknowledges with profound gratitude the girls and young women who participated in this study. These individuals chose to share their personal experiences and insights despite the challenges they have faced. Their expertise—based on lived experience—represents a cornerstone of this research and provides critical knowledge that academic training alone cannot replicate. Their contributions have significantly advanced understanding within the field and will inform more responsive and effective approaches to address the needs of similar populations.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: GIRLS AND GANGS IN THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY, TEXAS

With support from the National Institute of Justice (NIJ-2019-15270), this study investigated the experiences of girls and young women with gangs in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, a unique transnational border region. Using an integrated mixed-methods approach, the research team used three key approaches: (1) interviews with 150 girls and young women aged 14–25; (2) interviews and focus groups with 26 community stakeholders; and (3) quantitative analysis of juvenile justice administrative data. The study reveals distinctive patterns of associations of girls and young women within gang ecologies in this transnational community shaped by family connections, intimate relationships, substance use and abuse, and the region's transnational context.

A. KEY FINDINGS: INTERVIEWS WITH GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

1. RELATIONSHIP-BASED PATHWAYS TO GANG INVOLVEMENT

Rather than traditional recruitment or initiation that research has found to be common among males associated with gang ecologies, girls and young women primarily enter gang ecosystems through pre-existing relationships.

- **Friendship networks (54.9%)** constituted the most common pathway, with participants describing both casual exposure and deliberate recruitment through friends.
- **Family connections (49.3%)** created powerful pathways where family members (siblings or parents) normalized gang activity or directly facilitated gang connections.
- **Intimate partner influence (21.1%)** positioned young women at the intersection of romantic commitment and gang affiliation, often placing them in positions within intergang rivalries.

Many participants operated in a liminal “hang around” status—recognized as gang-connected by both members and authorities despite not self-identifying as gang members—demonstrating the inadequacy of binary conceptualizations of gang membership.

2. NATURE AND LEVEL OF PARTICIPATION

Participants engaged in various gang-associated activities while often rejecting formal member identification.

- **Violence and weapons (40%):** Participants reported being engaged in fighting, gun possession, and gun violence, often motivated by protecting gang-affiliated friends or family.
- **Drug-related activities (27.3%):** Drug selling and smuggling tended to occur at intersections of economic necessity, familial responsibility, and gang loyalty.
- **Property crimes (20%):** Theft and other property offenses emerged from unstructured socializing with gang-affiliated peers.
- **Border-related activities (12.7%):** The region’s transnational character facilitated potential involvement in human trafficking and smuggling operations.

3. TRANSNATIONAL CONNECTIONS

Cross-border connections with Mexico represented a significant contextual factor for more than one third (35.3%) of participants.

- **Regular visits to Mexico (83%)** were common, primarily for family connections (41.5%) and vacation (26.4%).
- **Experiences with cartel violence (17.3%)** created fear, trauma, and family disruption.
- **Border crossing experiences (16.7%)** shaped participants’ identities and understanding of the border region.

4. FAMILY CRIMINAL JUSTICE INVOLVEMENT

Nearly one quarter (22%) of participants reported family members' involvement with the criminal justice system.

- **Paternal criminal justice involvement (16.7%)** was most common, creating patterns of disrupted father-daughter relationships.
- **Maternal criminal justice involvement (5.3%)**, while less common, often created more significant caregiving disruptions.

5. FAMILY-BASED RESILIENCE AND VULNERABILITY

Family relationships emerged as both risk and protective factors.

- **Parental relationships:** 59.8% of participants reported supportive parental relationships characterized by trust, communication, and structured oversight while 66.3% described unsupportive relationships marked by substance use, ineffective communication, and instability.
- **Sibling dynamics:** 75.3% described positive sibling bonds that provided emotional support and guidance while 31.5% reported unsupportive sibling relationships.

6. TRAUMA, MENTAL HEALTH, AND RESILIENCE

Participants described complex interplays between traumatic experiences, mental health, substance use, and resilience.

- **Intimate partner violence (28%):** Participants reported physical abuse, controlling behaviors, and isolation in romantic relationships.
- **Mental health needs (36%):** Depression, anxiety, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and self-harming behaviors were common, with 10.7% reporting suicide attempts.
- **Substance use and dependency (31.3%):** Benzodiazepines, cannabis, alcohol, cocaine, and methamphetamine were used as coping mechanisms and facilitated through gang connections.
- **Resilience (84.7%):** Despite significant adversity, participants demonstrated remarkable capacity to set goals, engage in self-reflection, and develop healthy coping mechanisms.

B. KEY FINDINGS: STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

Stakeholders—including direct care providers, law enforcement personnel, and agency leadership—identified several key themes.

1. RISK FACTORS FOR GANG INVOLVEMENT

- **Family instability:** Parental absence, single-parent households, and foster care were identified as primary risk factors.
- **Economic vulnerability:** Limited employment opportunities in the region push young women toward gang-affiliated activities, including drug trafficking and cross-border smuggling.
- **Trauma and abuse:** Domestic abuse and trauma create pathways where gang involvement offers perceived power and escape.

2. FEMALE ROLES IN GANG ECOLOGIES

- Young women often take on supporting roles in theft, trafficking, and assaults, sometimes serving as strategic assets in conflicts with rival gangs.
- Girls may facilitate recruitment for sex trafficking by establishing relationships with vulnerable peers.
- Gang involvement has become less visible, with more girls operating as associates rather than as formal members.

3. GANG EXIT CHALLENGES

- Young women face greater obstacles to gang exit compared with their male counterparts, with fewer clear pathways out.
- Geographic relocation emerged as the most viable disengagement strategy, often requiring permanent departure from neighborhoods or cities.
- Economic entanglement through debt bondage systems creates significant exit barriers.

4. PROMISING PRACTICES AND SERVICE GAPS

- **Cross-system collaboration:** Partnerships between juvenile justice, behavioral health, and community organizations enhance service delivery.
- **Gender-responsive programming:** Programs focusing on social-emotional development and job-readiness skills show promise.
- **Service gaps:** Stakeholders identified critical needs for gender-specific services, particularly inpatient substance abuse treatment, residential placements, and specialized services for sexual abuse survivors.

C. KEY FINDINGS: ADMINISTRATIVE OUTCOMES STUDY

Analysis of juvenile justice administrative data revealed significant differences between gang-labeled and non-gang-labeled youth, as well as gender disparities in the impact of gang labeling on disposition outcomes.

1. DISTINCT PROFILES OF GANG-LABELED GIRLS

Gang-labeled girls demonstrated markedly different profiles from their non-gang-labeled female counterparts across multiple domains.

- **Offense frequency:** Gang-labeled girls had 2.7 times the mean number of total offenses (5.6 compared with 2.1).
- **Substance use:** Gang-labeled girls showed three times higher mean scores for alcohol and drug abuse (4.6 compared with 1.4).
- **Court order violations:** The most dramatic difference appeared in violations of court orders, where gang-labeled girls had means eight times higher than non-gang girls (1.6 compared with 0.2).
- **Offense complexity:** Gang-labeled girls had significantly higher offense counts per referral (mean 2.1 versus 1.3).
- **Disposition severity:** Gang-labeled girls received more severe dispositions (mean 2.5 versus 1.4).
- **Trauma:** Gang-labeled girls showed substantially higher trauma scores (mean 2.2 versus 1.0).

2. GENDER DIFFERENCES IN GANG LABELING EFFECTS ON DISPOSITIONS

Despite the significant differences in profiles, multivariate analysis revealed important gender disparities in how gang labeling affects judicial outcomes.

- **For boys:** Gang labeling significantly predicted more severe dispositions even after controlling for other factors, with 1.77 times higher odds of receiving restrictive sanctions.
- **For girls:** When controlling for relevant factors (offense characteristics, trauma, substance use, violations), gang labeling itself showed no statistically significant relationship with disposition severity, suggesting that these underlying factors—rather than the gang label—drive disposition decisions for girls.

3. DIFFERENTIAL IMPACT ON SPECIFIC DISPOSITION TYPES

- **For boys:** Gang labeling was a significant independent predictor of state commitment (2.9 times higher odds) and adult certification (2.0 times higher odds).
- **For girls:** The strongest predictors of disposition severity were violations of court orders, trauma history, and substance use patterns, not gang labeling itself.

4. PREDICTORS OF GANG LABELING

- **For girls:** Alcohol/drug involvement (57% increase in odds per unit increase) and violations of court orders (73% increase per violation) were significant predictors of receiving a gang label.
- **For boys:** Ethnicity emerged as significant, with Hispanic males showing substantially higher odds of gang labeling than non-Hispanic males.

D. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. RECONCEPTUALIZE FEMALE GANG ASSOCIATION

- Develop assessment and intervention approaches that capture the full spectrum of associations related to gang ecologies, including peripheral involvement.
- Recognize the “hang around” status as a distinct vulnerability requiring specialized intervention.

2. IMPLEMENT GENDER-RESPONSIVE APPROACHES

- Develop relationship-focused interventions that address family connections, intimate partner relationships, and friendship networks.
- Implement comprehensive developmentally appropriate trauma screening and trauma-specific interventions within juvenile justice settings.
- Integrate substance use treatment that addresses both personal use and exposure to family members' substance use.

3. ADDRESS TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXT

- Develop culturally and community-responsive programming acknowledging bicultural, transnational identities.
- Create specialized interventions for border-related activities, such as human trafficking and smuggling.
- Enhance cross-system collaboration across juvenile justice, immigration, education, mental health, and child welfare systems.

4. STRENGTHEN FAMILY-BASED APPROACHES

- Implement family systems interventions addressing dynamics correlated with risk of association within gang ecologies and substance use within family contexts.
- Develop targeted support for children with system-involved parents.
- Incorporate intimate partner violence prevention and intervention components into systems responses and supports.
- Support family reunification with targeted services addressing substance use and risks associated with intimate partner and community violence.

5. REFORM JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM POLICIES AND PRACTICES

- Review gang association and designation processes by juvenile justice and law enforcement staff to address potential biases in identification and case processing.
- Examine barriers to court order compliance, particularly for youth with trauma histories.
- Implement developmentally appropriate trauma-informed practices that address underlying needs rather than respond with increasingly restrictive placements.
- Develop and implement specialized diversion pathways for youth with peripheral gang involvement.

6. PURSUE STRATEGIC RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

- Evaluate family interventions specifically designed for girls and young women at risk of association with transnational gang ecologies.
- Investigate intersections between trauma recovery and gang desistance.
- Examine how juvenile justice professionals and court systems conceptualize and respond to male versus female gang association and involvement.
- Develop, implement, and test interventions for the “hang around” status to prevent deeper gang involvement.

D. CONCLUSION

This study revealed that girls and young women in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas navigate complex social worlds where gang association and involvement is often embedded within familial, romantic, and friendship networks rather than existing as a discrete criminal or delinquency-oriented affiliations. The findings highlight the need for more nuanced, developmentally appropriate, gender-responsive, and contextually sensitive approaches to diversion and interventions that recognize both their vulnerabilities and their role in their relationships within the community.

The distinctive transnational context of the Rio Grande Valley emphasizes the importance of region-specific approaches that account for the unique sociocultural dynamics of border communities. Addressing female gang involvement requires integrated strategies that span multiple systems and domains, recognizing the interconnected nature of family, community, and individual factors that shape girls’ pathways into and out of gang ecologies.

I. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Gang activity persists as a significant public health and safety concern across the United States, with the most recent comprehensive assessment—the 2012 National Youth Gang Survey—documenting an estimated 850,000 members in over 30,700 gangs nationwide (National Gang Center, 2012). Even though the survey ended in 2012, its longitudinal design (tracking 63% of agencies consistently since 1996) provides the last clear national snapshot of gang trends in America. The absence of any comparable nationwide data collection effort since then has created a significant knowledge gap in the understanding of contemporary gang dynamics (Cahill, Howell, & Egley, 2024).

Research examining the experiences of girls and young women with gangs historically has been dominated by studies conducted in the United States (Pyrooz & Densley, 2024), with a notable concentration on the country's interior regions. Specifically, gang research has largely focused on major urban centers like Chicago, Baltimore, Los Angeles, and New York (Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule, 2012; Fleisher, 2018; Hagedorn, 2017; Robinson et al., 2009; Williams, 2023), creating a significant gap in our understanding of gang dynamics in unique transnational contexts, particularly along the US–Mexico border. These border regions present distinctive gang ecologies shaped by cross-border movement, transnational criminal organizations, and unique socioeconomic factors that substantially differ from the interior urban environments currently dominating the literature. This geographic imbalance in research focus has limited our understanding of how gang structures, recruitment patterns, and, in particular, female involvement may differ in these border contexts.

Beyond these geographic limitations, a more complex picture emerges. While official law enforcement reports typically suggest girls and women constitute only 10% of gang membership, researchers consistently identify this as a significant undercount (Cahill, et al., 2024; Tewari, Berdychevsky & Stodolska, 2024). Current research has begun to suggest patterns of female victimization may evolve as gangs see an increase in membership among girls and women (Howell & Griffiths, 2018; Valasik & Reid, 2021), though understanding of these dynamics is generally missing from the literature.

The existing knowledge base has evolved over time, revealing complex and multifaceted patterns and contexts regarding girls and young women in the ecology of gangs. Recent research suggests that girls and young women typically engaged in less severe activities compared with their male counterparts (Deuchar, Harding, McLean & Densley, 2020). More specifically, girls and women within gang ecologies hold a paradoxical position because they are simultaneously participants in active gang activity and vulnerable to become victims of those activities (Gutierrez-Adams, et al., 2020). This dual status arises particularly within gang ecologies characterized by dominate aggressive masculinity, where male members often perpetuate dynamics of sexual conquest and female objectification (Valasik & Reid, 2021).

Recent developments have complicated the understanding of female gang involvement. Over the past decade, data collection on gangs has become increasingly limited due to legal challenges in major urban centers questioning the constitutionality and reliability of law enforcement–run gang databases (Pyrooz & Densley, 2024). This has created knowledge gaps precisely when more nuanced information is needed. At the same time, locations with larger gang populations have shifted their approach, addressing community violence through a public health framework rather than focusing exclusively on gang structures. This

approach examines gun violence from both perpetrator and victim perspectives within broader community contexts.

Before these data collection challenges emerged, historical data provided some insights into female gang participation. According to a 2013 survey by the National Gang Intelligence Center (NGIC), 45% of suburban counties and smaller cities and 50% of rural counties reported that more than half their gangs included female members (NGIC, 2013; Sickmund & Puzzanchera, 2014). Urban areas presented a more varied picture, with only 23% of jurisdictions reporting similarly high levels of female representation, suggesting different membership dynamics in urban gang structures compared with their suburban and rural counterparts (NGIC, 2013; Sickmund & Puzzanchera, 2014).

Self-reported data from earlier gang research also revealed age-related patterns in female participation, with one study finding that girls comprised 45% of self-identified gang members at age 11, though this percentage decreased to 31% by age 15 (Esbensen and Carson, 2012).

While these historical studies established important baseline statistics on female gang involvement, they primarily measured prevalence without examining the qualitative dimensions of participation.

To address these knowledge gaps, Evident Change's Girls and Gangs I research initiative (funded by OJJDP grant #2011-JV-FX-0001) provided foundational insights through interviews with 125 young women in multiple California cities. This study identified a substantial portion of gang-involved females (about 60% of study participants) who operated as "associates" rather than formal members (Wolf et al., 2015; Wolf, Bogie, Castro, Glesmann, & Yusuf, 2017). Their experiences and roles diverged significantly

from those of formally initiated female gang members, highlighting the importance of examining both formal and informal gang involvement to fully understand female participation.

The pathways to gang exposure for girls and young women frequently occur through neighborhood contexts (Sutton, 2017). However, their association to gangs was more commonly facilitated through family members such as brothers, uncles, and romantic partners (Salinas & Santos, 2023). Importantly, Guitierrez-Adams et al. (2020) found that even when exposure to gangs was facilitated through family members and visible in the home, family members opposed their young female relative's decision to join a gang, revealing a complex familial dynamic surrounding gang involvement.

Desistance from gang life is also complex, with research revealing developmental, psychological, and safety reasons for leaving gangs (Whitney-Snel, Valdez, & Totaan, 2020). Among women, disengagement from gangs is motivated by experiences of physical violence, either as victims or witnesses, while being involved with or associated with gangs (Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule, 2014). Additional research shows that motherhood and self-reflection are significant factors in young women's decisions to leave gangs (O'Neal, Decker, Moule, & Pyrooz, 2016). The literature on girls' and women's disengagement from gangs highlights their resilience in making life changes that provide a sense of safety for themselves and their loved ones.

A. EVOLVING ROLES IN GANG ECOLOGIES

Recent research suggests self-identified female gang members report increasing participation in activities traditionally associated with male gang members, often working harder than their male counterparts to attain status and respect (Deuchar, et al., 2020). This evolution reflects a broader shift from supportive roles toward more active participation, particularly in previously male-dominated domains like

drug trafficking and violence (Anderson et al., 2003; Gover, Jennings, & Tewksbury, 2009; Wolf et al., 2015, Wolf et al., 2017). Despite these shifts, professionals working with gang-involved youth noted a persistent challenge in accurately documenting female gang involvement because female members are “difficult to ascertain the true nature and extent of [their] involvement in gangs, in part because they were less visible on the streets” (Havard, Densely, Whittaker, & Wills, 2022).

B. TRANSNATIONAL BORDER REGIONS: UNIQUE CONTEXTS FOR FEMALE INVOLVEMENT IN GANG ECOLOGIES

The invisibility of female involvement in gang ecologies is particularly pronounced in border regions, where gang dynamics intersect with complex historical, cultural, and transnational factors absent from interior urban contexts. Research on gangs along US border regions indicates a long history of conflict between settled White residents and Mexican/Mexican American communities with deep ties to the area. These studies have focused on specific locations such as El Paso, Texas; and Las Cruces, New Mexico; and Southern California (Durán, 2018; Tapia, 2020). For example, Durán’s (2018) ethnographic study of gangs in the border regions along Texas and New Mexico draws on a historical analysis of colonialism and law enforcement practices that created limited economic opportunities and social isolation for Mexican/Mexican American residents, thereby establishing conditions conducive to gang development as a response to marginalization.

More specifically, the Rio Grande Valley in Texas exemplifies these dynamics, with a strong historical connection to Mexico creating a distinct transnational culture and community. The region represents an environment characterized by cross-border or transnational interdependencies that permeate multiple

aspects of everyday life for its residents, including economic opportunities, family connections, and entertainment that mix with criminal organizations on both sides of the border. These legitimate transnational connections exist alongside and sometimes intersect with criminal organizations operating on both sides of the border, creating a complex social ecology that differs markedly from interior urban gang environments.

C. THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY: GANG ACTIVITY AND TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS

In 2023, the Rio Grande Valley emerged as a critical nexus in gang activity and transnationalism, leading the nation with 181 out of 282 gang encounters coming from the region, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection (Kise, 2023). Recent reports indicate the region hosts several prominent street gangs, including the Tri-City Bombers, Po Boys, Latin Kings, and MS-13 (KRGV, n.d.; Texas Department of Public Safety, 2015). More specifically, Cameron County's 1,276 square miles encompass diverse communities, from the county center of Brownsville (directly across the border from Matamoros, Mexico) to coastal South Padre Island.

The 2018 Texas Gang Threat Assessment revealed a complex criminal ecosystem where Mexican cartels and Texas gangs have developed sophisticated collaborative networks. This partnership, exemplifying transnational organized crime, facilitates multidirectional trafficking operations: drugs and weapons flow between Texas and Mexico while human trafficking victims are exploited across borders. The Texas Department of Public Safety's analysis highlights how cartels recruit Texas gang members to engage in both drug and human trafficking activities between Texas and Mexico (TDPS, 2017 and 2018).

This transnationalism enables Mexican cartels to leverage Texas gangs for cross-border criminal activities where gang members are recruited and tasked by cartels to carry out acts of violence in both Texas and Mexico. For example, the Gulf Cartel and its factions, including Los Metro and Los Ciclones, actively targeted migrant communities in both Matamoros and Reynosa (TDPS, 2015 & 2017; Global Guardian, 2024). The U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Diplomatic Security identifies these Transnational Criminal Organizations as the primary security threat in the area, particularly due to their ongoing territorial conflicts (U.S. Department of State, 2019).

These organizations have expanded their operations beyond drug trafficking to include extortion, migrant smuggling, and human trafficking for multiple exploitative purposes, including labor, sexual exploitation, and organ harvesting (Correa-Cabrera, 2017; Risley, 2010; Texas Attorney General's Office, 2011; U.S. Department of State, 2012, 2013; Global Guardian, 2024). Gang members involved in human trafficking, including commercial sex trafficking and compelling prostitution of adults and minors, exploit their victims with force, fraud, or coercion, including recruiting and grooming them with promises of affection, employment, or a better life (TDPS, 2018).

Certain vulnerability factors increase trafficking risk, including recent migration or relocation, runaway or unhoused youth, children involved in the welfare system, and individuals with substance abuse or mental health concerns (National Human Trafficking Hotline, 2023). In 2023, the National Human Trafficking Hotline identified 900 cases of human trafficking in Texas, with child victims accounting for about 27% of these cases while 584 of the total cases included some element of sex trafficking.

Given the unique cultural and geographical context of the Rio Grande Valley—including its proximity to the US-Mexico border, distinctive social dynamics, and transnational character—this shifting landscape of female gang involvement warrants a contextually sensitive approach to fully understand girls’ and young women’s relationships within local gang ecology and culture. Traditional studies of interior urban gangs have failed to capture the nuanced ways that border dynamics influence female gang participation, necessitating region-specific research that accounts for these distinctive characteristics.

D. SUMMARY AND CURRENT STUDY

The extant literature demonstrates that gang dynamics are fundamentally shaped by local contexts, with neighborhood environments significantly influencing gang formation, persistence, and associated violence (Belknap & Bowers, 2016; Bellair & McNulty, 2009; Hall, Thornberry, & Lizotte, 2006). For girls specifically, the normalization of gang activity within their social ecology increases their likelihood of involvement (Wolf et al., 2015), highlighting the complex interplay between individual choices and community factors. Despite growing recognition of female gang participation nationwide, critical gaps remain in the understanding of how these dynamics manifest in border regions. The evolution of gang structures along the US-Mexico border—characterized by sophisticated collaborations between Mexican cartels and Texas gangs—has created unique criminogenic environments that traditional urban-focused research fails to capture.

While the Texas Department of Public Safety assessments provide valuable information about transnational criminal activities in the region, they notably omit analysis of female participation in these networks (TDPS, 2017 & 2018). This oversight is particularly significant given three converging factors:

(1) rising trends in female gang involvement nationally; (2) established connections between victimization and gang affiliation; and (3) escalating violence associated with transnational gang–cartel collaborations.

Building on the methodological approaches established in the original Girls and Gangs study (Wolf et al., 2015, 2017)—which revealed how intersecting factors of ethnicity, community context, and identity significantly shape female gang experiences—the current study examines these dynamics specifically within the unique transnational context of the Rio Grande Valley of Texas.

By investigating how the border environment influences female gang involvement, victimization patterns, and pathways to desistance, this study aimed to address the critical knowledge gaps while providing insights essential for developing more effective, gender-responsive intervention strategies in border communities. More specifically, the study examined the experiences and risks faced by females involved with gang ecologies, including both formal members and those with informal associations through social, familial, or romantic connections.

II. OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Evident Change—in partnership with the Cameron County Juvenile Justice Department (CCJJD), Tropical Texas Behavioral Health (TTBH), BCFS Health and Human Services, and Hidalgo County Juvenile Probation Department—conducted a comprehensive investigation of the contextual influences of the association, involvement, and desistance from gangs and gang-related activities for girls and young women in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. The research design employed an integrated mixed-methods approach, examining both quantitative and qualitative data to capture the complex interplay between individual experiences and community contexts that shape female gang involvement. Through both a temporal and multidimensional analysis, the study pursues two primary objectives:

- **Objective 1:** Synthesize the various types of information and data collected to begin to fill gaps in the existing knowledge of girls’ participation in and desistance from gang involvement.
- **Objective 2:** Provide practical information on local girls’ gang involvement and desistance directly to partners, stakeholders, and the field to enhance and support their intervention work.

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the reasons for involvement and the nature and level of participation of girls in gang structures, gang crime, and gang-associated violence?
2. What characteristics of gangs allow for or encourage girls’ participation and/or association with gangs and gang-associated violence?
3. What unique contextual aspects of the Rio Grande Valley influence girls’ involvement or affiliation in gang-related activity, especially transnational gang activity, and what are the ramifications of these factors for intervention strategies and practices?
4. What common methods or strategies do gang-involved girls use to hasten desistance?
5. Do providers believe they have the knowledge and skills to work with gang-involved girls and access to sufficient and appropriate programming and services for these girls?
6. What promising practices have service providers, outreach workers, and others used to engage with girls involved with gangs and to facilitate girls’ avoiding or leaving gangs?

7. Do girls and young women who are gang-affiliated or gang-involved experience worse outcomes than their non-gang-involved counterparts within the juvenile justice system?

III. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

A. GIRLS AND GANGS II ADVISORY BOARD

The study established a Girls and Gangs Advisory Board (GGAB-II) to provide strategic guidance and community oversight. CCJJD facilitated the development and coordination of GGAB-II, which consisted of community leaders with expertise in policy development and program implementation, particularly in interventions targeting at-risk and gang-involved female youth in Cameron and Hidalgo counties.

The GGAB-II served multiple methodological and operational functions in collaboration with the Evident Change research team. These functions included: facilitating stakeholder engagement and community buy-in; establishing credibility with the target population; developing empirically sound inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure sample representativeness; aligning methodological approaches with community safety protocols; maintaining data quality standards; and ensuring that findings and recommendations reflected community needs and enhanced evidence-based practices for gang intervention among female youth.

The GGAB-II provided essential consultation throughout the research process by establishing formalized communication channels that facilitated systematic discussions regarding implementation barriers, procedural efficacy, and emerging study themes. This iterative feedback mechanism enabled

stakeholders to incorporate preliminary insights into existing protocols during the active data collection phases rather than waiting until final analyses were conducted.

The GGAB-II's involvement proved particularly valuable given the documented historical mistrust of institutional authorities among the study population. The board's diverse composition enhanced participant engagement, strengthened data reliability, and ensured authentic representation from the community. Furthermore, this collaborative structure cultivated interorganizational relationships and catalyzed collective action initiatives based on study findings, thereby enhancing both the ecological validity and translational impact of the research.

B. YOUNG WOMEN'S ADVISORY BOARD

During the project, the Young Women's Advisory Board (YWAB) emerged as a cornerstone of the GGAB-II, following recommendations made during formative GGAB-II meetings in 2021. This methodological innovation directly addressed the need to center authentic voices of system-impacted girls and young women in examining gang involvement in the Rio Grande Valley. Over the course of the study, the YWAB consisted of three to 10 women ages 18 to 25 who were system-impacted and have direct association with or involvement in gangs within the region. These strategically recruited participants convened biannually for intensive consultation sessions (up to three hours), deliberately operating independently from the main GGAB-II to safeguard confidentiality and cultivate uninhibited dialogue and discussion.

The YWAB fulfilled multiple essential functions to enhance methodological rigor across the research process. Foremost, it ensured research approaches and strategies authentically capture the distinctive

sociocultural landscape of the Rio Grande Valley, including transnational community dynamics and border-related conflict and violence. YWAB members provided invaluable guidance on developing culturally responsive participant recruitment and refined region-specific language and terminology for interview protocols. Throughout the study, they reviewed preliminary findings and discussed potential implications, offering perspectives informed by their lived experiences. Their involvement helped to identify and address methodological barriers while ensuring the study's alignment with community needs and ecological considerations.

Initially, the research design included plans to integrate the YWAB with the formal GGAB-II during the later stages of data collection and analysis. However, as the study evolved, the research team recognized that maintaining separate groups would better preserve authentic voices and prevent power dynamics that might inhibit open dialogue. Rather than merging the groups, the research team functioned as knowledge brokers between them, with team members specifically selected for their ability to reflect and understand the system-involved background, cultural experiences, and linguistic nuances of participating girls and young women.

The YWAB's systematic involvement strengthened both the construct and ecological validity by ensuring contextually appropriate operationalization of research variables and facilitating accurate translation of findings to community stakeholders. Their participation established crucial trust and credibility with potential study participants while enabling ongoing feedback loops between researchers and community stakeholders. This structured approach to incorporating perspectives represents a significant advancement in participatory research methodology, particularly in studies involving vulnerable populations and sensitive

community issues. Through their consistent and sustained engagement, the YWAB ensured the research remained anchored in community reality while maintaining methodological integrity and translational impact.

C. INTERVIEWS WITH GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

RECRUITMENT AND SAMPLE SELECTION

To answer research questions 1 through 4, a dual-phase recruitment strategy was implemented, combining structured outreach from community-based organizations (CBOs) with respondent-driven snowball sampling to engage 150 girls and young women ages 14 to 25. The GGAB-II provided strategic guidance on recruitment to help identify potential participants who met referral criteria. CBOs were trained to complete an initial screening with participants to identify specific eligibility criteria for focusing on girls and young women who had knowledge of or experience with neighborhood networks.

To ensure consistent and appropriate recruitment messaging, the research team provided specialized training to CBO staff, including language guidance that emphasized using non-stigmatizing terminology (e.g., “social, community, and neighborhood networks” instead of “gangs”). CBOs then referred those meeting the initial screening criteria to the research team to determine study eligibility. The GGAB-II met with the research team quarterly for updates on recruitment progress and recommendations needed to address emerging challenges in participant engagement and to ensure the study remained responsive to local community dynamics and concerns.

Snowball recruitment was initiated by members of the YWAB. YWAB members, along with other girls and young women within the target age range (regardless of their study eligibility), functioned as

recruitment ambassadors who identified potential participants from their social networks. This methodological approach facilitated both direct referrals, where ambassadors provided contact information for prospective participants; and indirect engagement, where ambassadors encouraged peers to independently initiate contact with the research team. This strategy enhanced participant recruitment and diversity while accessing traditionally hard-to-reach populations through trusted intermediaries.

To enhance participation in the referral network, the study implemented a structured incentive protocol (\$25 gift card) for successful referrals. This respondent-driven sampling and recruitment methodology conferred multiple methodological advantages, including (1) leveraging established community trust networks to overcome traditional recruitment barriers; (2) facilitating access to typically underrepresented or difficult-to-engage populations; and (3) optimizing resource allocation through cost-effective participant recruitment.

To maximize recruitment reach, strategically designed informational materials featuring study parameters, eligibility criteria, and contact protocols were distributed throughout the community. YWAB members functioned as distribution partners, strategically positioning recruitment materials within youth- and young adult-centered environments, thereby extending the study's visibility into spaces frequented by the target population. Prospective participants within the 14–25 age demographic could self-initiate involvement through designated communication channels (text/call) listed on the recruitment materials.

D. INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS WITH STAKEHOLDERS

To answer research questions 5 and 6, in-depth interviews and small focus groups were conducted with 26 key community stakeholders between May and August 2024. Due to a compressed three-month

data collection timeline—driven by COVID-related constraints and recruitment challenges—the study employed a flexible stakeholder engagement approach to maximize participation within these limitations. Participants could choose between focus groups or individual interviews based on their availability and preferences. Subsequently, two focus groups were conducted with stakeholders who could participate collectively, while remaining participants were interviewed individually. This adaptive methodology enabled the research team to capture diverse stakeholder perspectives through both group dynamics and in-depth individual insights, while accommodating the complex scheduling demands of busy professionals serving this population. Participants included seven direct care providers, including program managers, case managers, contract specialists, transition specialists, Texas Workforce Commission advocates, and program supervisors. Direct service providers described their roles as working closely with system-involved youth, including those in detention, probation, alternative education, and foster care. While they reported frequently working with at-risk girls, their experiences with direct gang involvement among young women were limited, explaining that girls are often connected to gangs through relationships rather than active membership.

Thirteen law enforcement personnel participated, including juvenile probation officers (JPOs), JPO supervisors, and a disciplinary school administrator. These stakeholders described their roles as overseeing youth on court supervision; monitoring compliance with probation terms; and collaborating with families, schools, and service providers. They noted that while gang structures have become less visible, girls often enter the system due to familial ties, trafficking involvement, or association with gang-affiliated peers.

Six agency leadership members participated, including chief JPOs, deputy directors of county juvenile justice agencies, the director of crime and prevention for a school district, and directors of a health

and human services CBO. As leaders, they described their roles as focused on policy, program development, and cross-sector collaboration, and they prioritize prevention and rehabilitation, emphasizing early intervention, education, and mental health services.

IV. ANALYSIS AND OUTCOMES

A. INTERVIEWS WITH GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

1. CODING AND ANALYSIS

Interviews with girls and young women were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008). Interviews were translated (when conducted in a language other than English) and transcribed prior to analysis. This method centered participants' narratives and experiences, recognizing that personal stories reveal insights that might remain hidden in more structured analytical frameworks.

The research team prioritized the perspectives of participants and leveraged their insider knowledge of the local community context, Hispanic cultural nuances, and gang dynamics of the region. The narrative-focused analysis allowed researchers to honor the complexity and authenticity of the participants' accounts while examining how they constructed meaning from their experiences.

NVivo 12 software facilitated the systematic coding and organization of these rich narratives. This analytical strategy aligned precisely with our research objectives: to understand not merely the factual elements of gang involvement but the subjective meaning-making processes within the distinctive cultural, social, and geographic landscape of the Rio Grande Valley.

The thematic narrative analysis process began with thorough data immersion, with researchers conducting multiple close readings of interview transcripts.¹ Deep textual immersion through close reading proved essential to the thematic analysis, enabling researchers to uncover layered meanings, subtle narrative patterns, and implicit themes that conventional analytical approaches might overlook.

This interpretive depth was particularly valuable when examining the distinctive linguistic landscape of the Rio Grande Valley, where Spanglish²—a dynamic hybrid language integrating English and Spanish elements—functions as the primary communicative medium within the community. The research team’s attentiveness to these bilingual expressions revealed how language itself embodied participants’ cultural positioning and identity formations.

By meticulously analyzing the specific words, phrases, and idiomatic expressions employed during interviews, researchers developed nuanced insights into how participants linguistically constructed and communicated their experiences, capturing cultural connotations and emotional resonances that would have been lost through translation or standardized coding approaches alone. The authentic linguistic expressions in Spanglish were deliberately preserved throughout the transcripts, with contextual English translations provided by trained students from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley Translation & Transcription Lab who understood relevant community and cultural context.

¹ Instead of focusing only on the external traits of a text or conversation (e.g., time and date), a close reading considers only the internal traits of the text or conversation. The purpose of a close reading is to examine what the text contains at various levels, such as linguistic and contextual elements. <https://methods.sagepub.com/ency/edvol/the-sage-encyclopedia-of-communication-research-methods/chpt/close-reading>

² Spanglish definition: <https://prizedwriting.ucdavis.edu/spanglish-language-chicanos>

This preservation proved to be methodologically critical, as numerous Spanglish terms, idioms, and cultural references contained embedded meanings that defied direct English translation—linguistic nuances that carried significant analytical value for understanding participants’ experiences. Throughout this immersive familiarization phase, researchers systematically documented emergent patterns through analytic memos capturing initial impressions, recurring narrative elements, and potential thematic structures that would later inform the development of our interpretive coding framework.

A subset of 13 interview transcripts was strategically selected for line-by-line consensus coding. To ensure a comprehensive and nuanced analysis, a team of four coders reflecting the diverse expertise and perspectives from the research team was developed. This coding team included individuals with experience in gang culture, deep understanding of Hispanic culture, knowledge of gender dynamics, and familiarity with the local context of the Rio Grande Valley. This methodologically deliberate composition ensured analytical sensitivity to the intersectional factors shaping participants’ narratives.

This coding team convened weekly for collaborative consensus-building sessions, inductively developing the codebook directly from the emergent patterns in participant accounts rather than imposing predetermined definitions and frameworks. Through iterative analytical dialogue, the team systematically refined the hierarchical coding structure, establishing conceptually robust parent codes and their corresponding child codes. All methodological decisions, coding refinements, and analytical challenges were meticulously documented in a comprehensive Excel tracking system, creating an audit trail that enhanced analytical transparency and rigor throughout the coding process.

The research team implemented a comprehensive protocol to maintain analytical consistency as new researchers joined the project. Each new researcher received a copy of the codebook with definitions and examples, followed by a one-on-one walkthrough of each code by an original team member from the initial group of four coders. The training included review of already-coded transcripts, a one-page summary of coding methods, and, for those unfamiliar with NVivo, dedicated software training over a two-month period.

Prior to beginning coding, new researchers completed foundational readings on narrative analysis methods. The integration process culminated in a calibration exercise where new coders independently analyzed portions of the original consensus-coded transcripts, with their coding patterns systematically compared against established patterns using NVivo's coding stripes visualization tool. Only after demonstrating 90% coding alignment were researchers authorized to code new transcripts independently.

Since the team worked remotely, all coders had access to a dedicated Microsoft Teams channel where they could ask real-time questions during coding sessions. The majority of coding decisions were made collectively through team consensus, with the principal investigator making final decisions in rare instances where team consensus could not be reached. Throughout this process, researchers maintained reflexive journals documenting their positionality and potential interpretive biases, creating an additional layer of analytical transparency. Weekly team meetings served as forums to reconcile coding discrepancies and refine the analytical framework.

The research team paid meticulous attention to Spanglish expressions and their contextual meanings, leveraging the team's cultural and local knowledge. The coding framework integrated both codes preserving participants' authentic terminology and conceptual codes derived from theoretical frameworks, ensuring

balanced representation of emic perspectives (insider viewpoints of gang-involved youth) and etic (e.g., researcher-driven) analytical interpretations.

Through analytical dialogues that leveraged the team's diverse disciplinary backgrounds and cultural positionalities, the research team constructed the study codebook featuring precisely defined conceptual categories accompanied by exemplar quotes with detailed annotations explicating their cultural connotations and contextual meanings. This intentionally collaborative approach to coding the initial transcript subset fostered interpretive richness, enabling nuanced analytical insights grounded in relevant cultural, social, and geographical contexts before proceeding to analyze the remaining interview corpus.

Similar codes were grouped to form potential parent and child codes through an iterative process of comparison and contrast. To aid in this process, word clouds were generated from the potential codes, which helped to visualize reoccurring terms and concepts. These word clouds provided a visual representation of prominent ideas in the data and helped guide the thematic analysis. These potential codes were subsequently reviewed and refined through team discussions, where the research team critically examined the coherence of codes and their relationship to the original data, ensuring that the richness of the narrative was not lost in the analysis. As the research team coded all available interviews, the team monitored for data saturation, noting when new codes and patterns ceased to emerge. This process ensured the analysis captured the full range of experiences and perspectives in the final dataset.

To ensure methodological rigor in identifying and categorizing themes, the research team established a systematic framework for classifying findings based on prevalence across participant narratives.

- Themes mentioned by 25 or more participants were classified as **major themes** representing widely shared experiences within the sample.
- Within these major themes, **subthemes** were identified as significant patterns that made up the major themes, typically mentioned by 11 or more participants. Subthemes represented distinct elements within the broader thematic structure that warranted separate analysis while remaining connected to the overarching major theme.
- **Emergent themes**, mentioned by 10 or fewer participants, were documented to capture unique or evolving patterns that, while less prevalent, offered valuable insights into potentially overlooked aspects of girls and young women's gang involvement.

This stratified approach balanced the need to identify dominant patterns while remaining attentive to less common but potentially meaningful experiences, particularly important when studying historically marginalized populations whose perspectives may not align with dominant narratives. The thematic structure presented in the findings section reflects this methodological framework, with explicit indication of theme prevalence to provide transparency regarding the evidentiary basis for analytical claims.

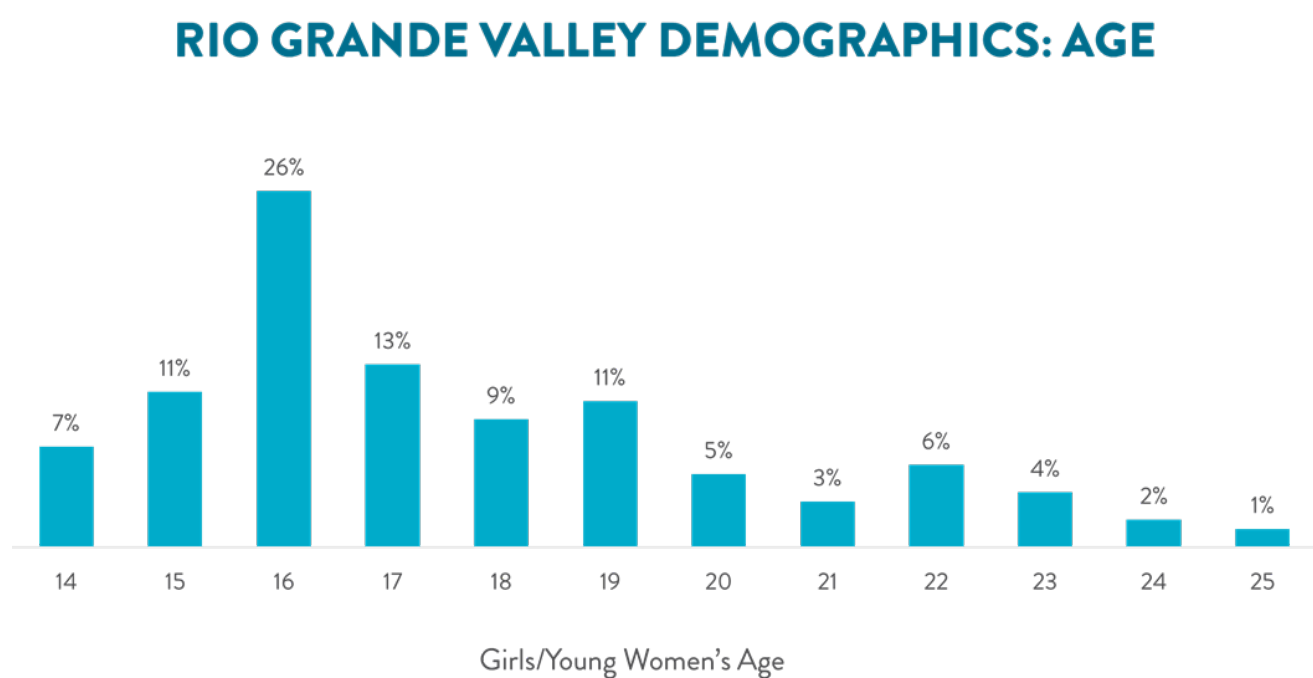
2. PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

The demographic characteristics of study participants provide essential context for understanding the findings and their applicability to the broader population of interest. This section presents key demographic patterns observed within the sample (N = 150), including age distribution, racial and ethnic identification, family composition, educational attainment, juvenile arrest history, and geographic distribution across the Rio Grande Valley.

a. Age Distribution

Participants’ ages ranged from 14 to 25 years old, shown in Figure 1. Analysis of age distribution reveals a significant concentration in mid-adolescence, with 44.7% of participants between ages 14 and 16. The modal age was 16 (26.0% of the sample), with a mean age of 17.8 and median of 17, indicating a modest positive skew. The distribution tapers considerably in the older age categories, with only 7.3% of participants in the 23–25 range. This developmental concentration must be considered when interpreting developmental trajectories, educational experiences, and future orientation patterns observed in the thematic analysis.

Figure 1. Age Distribution (N = 150)



b. Race and Ethnicity

Ethnicity data indicate that 95.3% of participants identified as Hispanic/Latinx, Mexican, or Mexican American. Racial identification showed greater variability, with 48.0% identifying as Hispanic, 28.7% as White, and 12.7% as Mexican American. The distinction between racial and ethnic self-categorization

reflects the complex nature of identity construction within this bicultural border context. The free-response methodology employed for demographic questions yielded categories that frequently transcended traditional racial and ethnic classification systems, suggesting a more fluid conceptualization of identity characteristic of bicultural, bilingual regions with significant transnational connections. The predominance of Hispanic/Latinx identification confirms appropriate sampling representation for the region under study.

Table 1 provides an overview of the self-disclosed race and ethnicity identities of study participants.

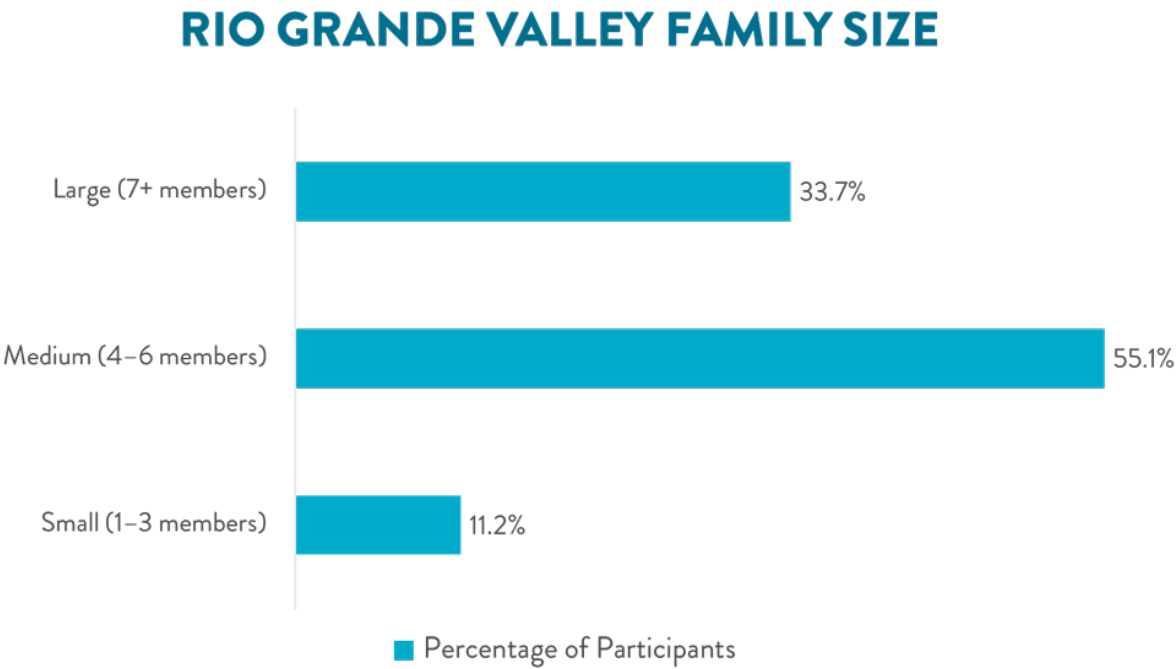
TABLE 1		
PARTICIPANT RACE AND ETHNICITY DISTRIBUTION		
SUBCATEGORY	PARTICIPANTS (n)	PERCENTAGE (%)
Racial Identity (N = 150)		
Hispanic	72	48.0%
White	43	28.7%
Mexican American	19	12.7%
Mexican	1	0.7%
Indian	1	0.7%
Unknown/Not Reported	14	9.3%
Ethnic Identity (N = 150)		
Hispanic/Latinx	132	88.0%
Mexican	8	5.3%
Caucasian/White	4	2.7%
Mexican American	3	2.0%
Indian	1	0.7%
Arab	1	0.7%
Unknown/Not Reported	1	0.7%

*All race and ethnicity identification were self-disclosed perceptions of self as reported by study participants.

c. Family Composition

Of the study participants who reported family composition information (n=89, 59.3% of total sample), medium-sized households (four to six members) predominated (n=49, 55.1%), followed by large households with seven or more members (n=30, 33.7%), as shown in Figure 2. Small households of one to three members represented only 11.2% of the sample. This distribution aligns with documented cultural patterns in Hispanic/Latinx communities, where extended family households and larger family units frequently exceed national averages.

Figure 2. Family Composition



d. Educational Attainment

Table 2 provides an overview of the educational status of participants who shared educational information in their interviews (n=80 or 53.3% of the total sample). Of those, 66.3% had not completed

high school at the time of data collection. This includes participants with age-appropriate enrollment and those with a discontinued education. High school credential attainment (diploma or equivalent) was documented in 12.5% of cases while postsecondary educational participation was reported by 21.3% of participants, predominantly comprising undergraduate enrollment rather than degree completion.

Table 2 provides an overview of the educational attainment within the sample. Educational attainment patterns must be contextualized within the sample’s age distribution because many participants had not yet reached typical educational completion milestones. Nevertheless, the elevated high school non-completion rate warrants consideration as a potential reflection of regional educational barriers and may significantly influence life-course trajectories observed in the analysis.

TABLE 2		
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT (N = 80)		
SUBCATEGORY	PARTICIPANTS (n)	PERCENTAGE WITHIN SAMPLE REPORTING
Still in School	26	32.5%
8th grade	2	2.5%
9th grade	7	8.8%
10th grade	5	6.3%
11th grade	9	11.3%
12th grade	3	3.8%
High School Completion	10	12.5%
GED	3	3.8%
High school diploma	7	8.8%
Postsecondary	17	21.3%
Trade school	1	1.3%
Undergraduate	14	17.5%
College graduate	2	2.5%
Discontinued	27	33.8%
Dropped out of middle school	5	6.3%
Dropped out of high school	22	27.5%

TABLE 2		
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT (N = 80)		
SUBCATEGORY	PARTICIPANTS (n)	PERCENTAGE WITHIN SAMPLE REPORTING
TOTAL		
Study participants reporting education information	80	53.3%

Note: The educational status of 46.7% (n=70) of study participants is unknown. Table 2 reflects findings only among participants who included information on their education status as a part of their interview.

e. Juvenile Arrest History

Among the 150 participants, 60 (40.0%) self-reported at least one arrest during their juvenile years. The most frequent specific charges were running away from home (n=25, 16.7%) and drug-related offenses (n=26, 17.3%), highlighting how status offenses and substance use often served as entry points into the juvenile justice system.

The prevalence of status offenses like running away and substance-related charges suggests potential underlying issues that may include family conflict, instability, and substance use problems. These underlying factors were indeed prominent themes in our qualitative interviews, providing context for understanding pathways to juvenile justice involvement. Table 3 provides an overview of the self-reported juvenile arrest history of study participants.

TABLE 3				
JUVENILE ARREST HISTORY BY OFFENSE CATEGORY (N = 150)				
OFFENSE CATEGORY*	FIRST ARREST n (%)	SECOND ARREST n (%)	THIRD ARREST n (%)	FOURTH ARREST n (%)
No arrest	90 (60.0%)	120 (80.0%)	141 (94.0%)	146 (97.3%)
Violent crimes against persons	31 (20.7%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Property crimes	7 (4.7%)	6 (4.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Drug/weapon offenses	13 (8.7%)	9 (6.0%)	4 (2.7%)	0 (0.0%)
Public order/ administrative	9 (6.0%)	15 (10.0%)	5 (3.3%)	4 (2.7%)

Note: Violent crimes against persons include aggravated robbery, assault, assault with deadly weapon, assault on family, assault on police officer, deadly conduct, and domestic dispute. Property crimes include burglary, criminal mischief, shoplifting, stolen vehicle/grand theft, and theft. Drug/weapon offenses include drug possession/distribution and possession of firearm. Public order/administrative offenses include warrants, trespassing, running away, resisting arrest, fighting, harassment, and evading arrest.

The juvenile arrest data revealed several notable patterns. Violent crimes against persons represented the most common category for first arrests (20.7%) but did not appear in subsequent arrests; public order/administrative charges increased for second arrests (10.0%) compared with first arrests (6.0%), potentially reflecting increased monitoring after initial system contact; and arrests declined across subsequent interactions (with 20.0% experiencing a second arrest, 6.0% a third arrest, and 2.7% a fourth arrest). This pattern should be interpreted in the context that many participants were interviewed while in juvenile detention facilities, indicating their justice system involvement was ongoing rather than resolved. The data illustrate how status offenses and substance-related behaviors frequently function as pathways into the juvenile justice system for girls and young women in the Rio Grande Valley.

f. Geographic Distribution

Most study participants resided in Cameron County (63.3%), with highest representation in the cities of Brownsville (29.3%) and Harlingen (25.3%), as shown Figures 3 and 4 and Table 4. Hidalgo County made up 32.7% of the sample, with notable participation from the cities of Edinburg (11.3%) and McAllen (5.3%). Willacy County representation was minimal (4.0%), and Starr County had no participants.

This distribution corresponds to documented population density patterns in the Rio Grande Valley, with greater representation from eastern population centers. The concentration in Brownsville and Harlingen reflects both demographic density and methodological sampling considerations. Geographic distribution represents an important analytical variable, as experiences and perspectives may demonstrate meaningful variation across distinct communities within the broader region.

Figure 3. Geographic Distribution by County (N = 150)
Rio Grande Valley
(Hidalgo, Cameron, Willacy and Starr Counties)

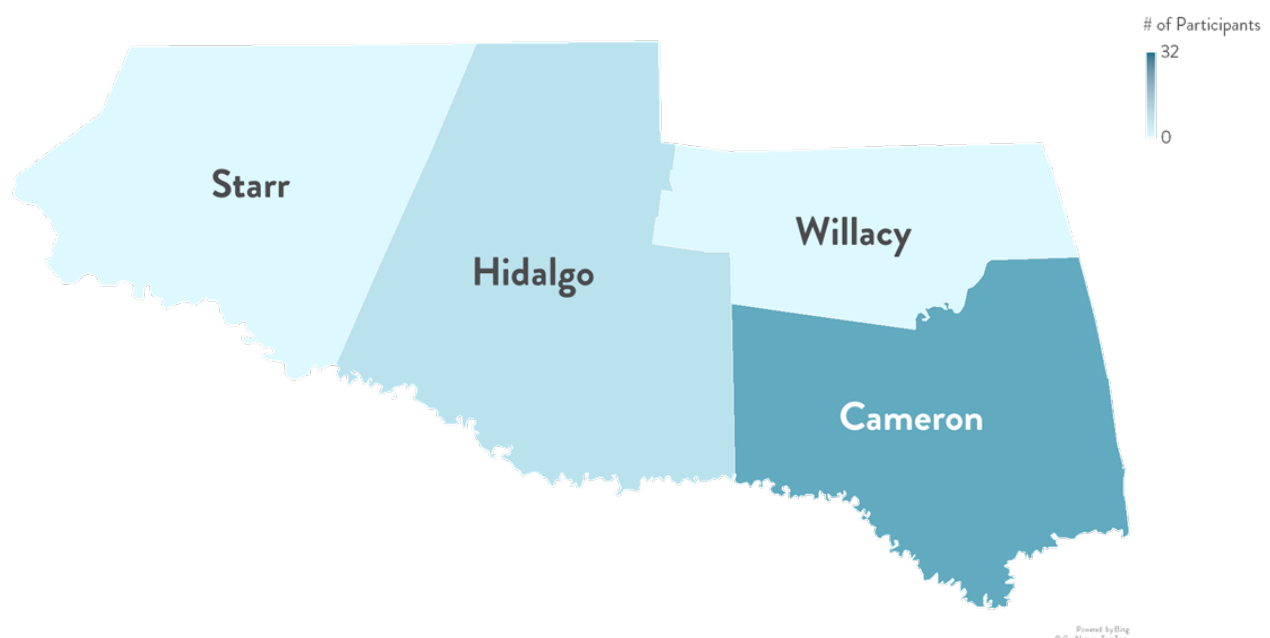
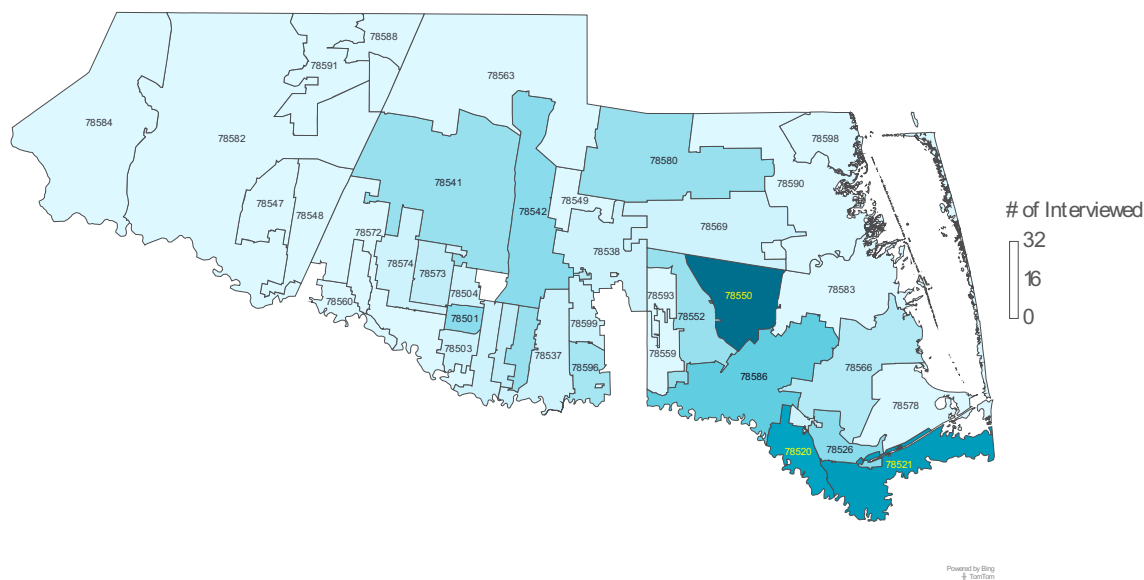


TABLE 4			
GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION BY COUNTY, CITY, AND ZIP CODE			
CITY	ZIP CODES	PARTICIPANTS (n)	PERCENTAGE
Cameron County		95	63.3%
Brownsville	78520, 78521, 78522, 78523, 78526	44	
Harlingen	78550, 78551, 78552, 78553	38	
Los Fresnos	78566	3	
Olmito	78575	1	
San Benito	78586	9	
Hidalgo County		49	32.7%
Alamo	78516	5	
Donna	78537	1	
Edcouch	78538	1	
Edinburg	78539, 78540, 78541	17	
Elsa	78543	3	
McAllen	78501, 78502, 78503, 78504, 78505	8	
Mercedes	78570	3	
Mission	78574	3	
Pharr	78577	1	
San Juan	78589	2	
Weslaco	78596, 78599	5	
Willacy County		6	4.0%
Lyford	78569	1	
Raymondville	78580, 78598	5	

Figure 4. Geographic Distribution by ZIP code (N = 150)



3. FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

Six major themes emerged, illuminating the complex dynamics of gang-involved girls and young women in the Rio Grande Valley. The findings reveal interconnected dimensions of experience that challenge the traditional simplistic narratives about female gang participation while highlighting the contextual specificity of the Rio Grande Valley as a site where gender, ethnicity, geography, and socioeconomic factors converge to shape unique and distinctive pathways and patterns related to gang association.

1. **Relationship-Based Pathways** maps the diverse routes through which girls and young women enter gang ecosystems, revealing both common patterns and individualized routes influenced by familial, social, and structural factors.
2. **Nature and Level of Participation** identifies how organizational hierarchies and gendered power relations within gangs shape female participation, revealing both constraints and opportunities for agency within this structure.
3. **Transnational Connections** describes how the distinctive geopolitical positioning of the Rio Grande Valley creates unique conditions that influence gang involvement and activities.

4. **Family Criminal Justice Involvement** documents the experiences of girls and young women navigating family systems affected by incarceration and criminal justice contact, highlighting how these dynamics shape pathways toward or away from gang ecosystems.
5. **Family-Based Resilience and Vulnerability** examines how family dynamics create either protection from or susceptibility to gang involvement through communication patterns, role flexibility, boundary-setting, educational support, and behavioral modeling.
6. **Trauma, Mental Health, and Resilience** identifies the complex interplay of traumatic experiences, psychological well-being, substance use, and adaptive responses among participants. This theme reveals how intimate partner violence, mental health challenges, and substance dependency create pathways of vulnerability within gang ecologies while also highlighting participants' remarkable capacity to develop coping strategies, set goals, and envision futures beyond their immediate circumstances despite significant adversity.

The following sections examine each theme in detail, supported by participant narratives and contextualized within the broader literature on female gang involvement. Together, these interconnected thematic areas—spanning pathways to gang association, patterns of participation, transnational influences, family criminal justice involvement, and family dynamics—provide a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding female gang involvement in this unique border region context.

a. Major Theme 1: Relationship-Based Pathways (N = 71, 47.3%)

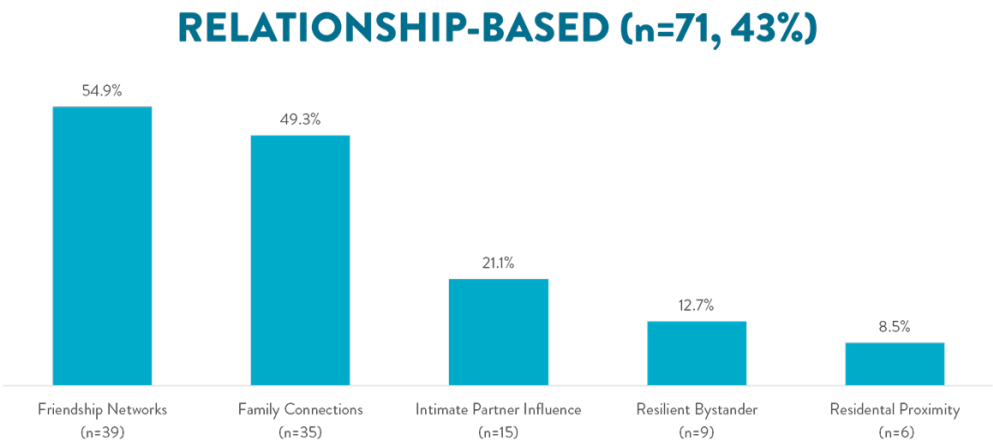
Pre-existing relationships were a predominant pathway into gang association for girls and young women in the Rio Grande Valley, directly addressing the study's central research question regarding female pathways to gang involvement.

While traditional gang research has often approached female gang involvement through deficit-oriented perspectives of social deviance and delinquency (Moore & Stuart, 2022), these findings reveal a more textured reality that centers the experiences of girls and young women on their own terms. As Bloch (2022) notes, the “vast majority of gang life is not bound up with violence, but rather, is spent engaging in

non-criminal, mundane place-making and ‘hanging around.’” Similarly, our participants consistently described their existing relationships as creating complex sociospatial contexts that facilitated gang exposure and involvement.

These relationships—with family members, friends, and intimate partners—served as primary channels through which young women navigated the social and physical spaces where gang interaction occurs. Rather than viewing gang association through a singular lens of criminality or survival, our data reveal how the everyday geographies of young women’s social worlds—their homes, neighborhoods, schools, and social circles—become critical yet often overlooked factors in their pathways to gang involvement. Figure 5 illustrates the five distinct relationship-based pathways identified in our analysis. Importantly, these pathways are not mutually exclusive; many participants reported multiple relationship influences simultaneously. For example, a participant might experience both friendship networks (54.9% of relationship-based cases) and family connections (49.3% of cases), creating overlapping spheres of influence that collectively shaped their trajectory towards gang involvement.

Figure 5. Relationship-Based Pathways Subthemes and Emergent Themes



i. Subtheme 1: Friendship Networks (n=39, 54.9%)

Peer relationships represented the most common relational pathway to gang association among our participants. Participants described how friends who were already gang-involved created both casual exposure and more deliberate recruitment opportunities.

Many participants emphasized the social and recreational nature of their gang-connected friendships, as one 17-year-old explained: *“Yeah [my friends are from] Westside. I’m not always with them, like, I only chill with them from time to time. Like, just to chill and stuff like, whenever we drink ... sometimes they’ll take me out to just have a drink or so”* (Participant 9245, age 17). This quote illustrates a pattern of casual, intermittent socializing with gang-involved peers, creating pathways to gang exposure that participants often did not recognize as meaningful gang association despite law enforcement and community perceptions to the contrary. Such friendship-based associations frequently blurred the line between ordinary teenage socializing and gang involvement, with young women moving fluidly between conventional and gang-connected social circles.

Other participants described more direct recruitment attempts through friendship networks. As one participant recalled: *“I’ve had a couple of friends who were like a part of it [gangs], and they tried to get me to do something with it”* (Participant 9247, age 18). These more explicit recruitment efforts through friendship networks demonstrate how peer relationships not only normalize gang association but can serve as active conduits to deeper involvement.

ii. Subtheme 2: Family Connections (n=35, 49.3%)

Family connections emerged as a predominant relational pathway to gang involvement in the Rio Grande Valley. Participants described how having family members—particularly siblings, cousins, or parents—in gangs created both direct recruitment opportunities and normalized gang activity. Within the close-knit family structures common in the region, young women frequently described a form of passive integration into gang life through familial proximity rather than active recruitment. This familial pathway reflects the distinctive cultural landscape of the Rio Grande Valley, where strong familial bonds and multigenerational households create porous boundaries between individual and collective identities, facilitating the intergenerational transmission of gang affiliation through everyday interactions, shared physical spaces, and embedded social networks.

Family relationships often created complex dynamics where gang involvement became intertwined with family loyalty and respect. As one participant explained: *“Um, I wanted to be officially [in the gang] but I was waiting for my cousin to get out. So right now, he’s doing time. And, um, I told him, I was gonna join in out of respect for him”* (Participant 9360, age 16). This illuminates how family connections function as more than mere access points to gang ecosystems: They often generate perceived obligations where gang membership becomes transformed into an expression of familial solidarity, respect, and honor. For young women navigating both family expectations and gang structures, these overlapping loyalty systems create distinctive pathways into gang involvement that cannot be adequately captured through conventional frameworks focusing solely on delinquency or peer influence.

For other participants, family connections served as direct entry points to formal gang membership.

As one young woman recounted: “[I am in] Los Sureños. I started getting involved with my siblings. Eventually, one of the main Sureños came over. He’s like, how would you like to be a Sureño? I was like Sureña”

(Participant 9331, age 17). This pathway demonstrates how family members can function not just as passive influences but as active bridges to gang leadership and formal recruitment.

iii. Subtheme 3: Intimate Partner Influence (n=15, 21.1%)

Romantic relationships with gang-involved partners created pathways to gang association for a subset of our participants. These intimate partnerships often positioned young women at the intersection of romantic commitment and gang affiliation, creating complex loyalties and social identifications. As one participant simply stated: “So then I know some Latin Kings, but then I know Sureños because my boyfriend is Sureños” (Participant 9398, age 16). This exemplifies how romantic relationships function as conduits that integrate young women into gang networks through everyday intimacy and shared social spheres.

For these participants, gang association developed not through deliberate recruitment but through relational embeddedness, where romantic partnerships created social geographies that naturally expanded into gang territories and networks, illustrating how interpersonal dynamics shape female pathways to gang involvement in ways distinct from traditional male recruitment patterns.

These intimate partner connections sometimes placed young women in precarious positions within intergang rivalries. As another participant explained: “Okay, so the guy I was dating was from Northside ... [but] the guy I like is Westside. That’s when the Westside guy wanted to fight the Northside [guy]” (Participant 9384, age 15). This sheds light on how young women’s romantic attachments could function as flashpoints within

existing gang animosities, transforming personal relationship choices into potential catalysts for intergang conflict. For these young women, navigating romantic relationships became inextricably entangled with navigating gang territorial boundaries and loyalty systems, creating distinctive vectors of vulnerability where intimate choices carried significant consequences within broader gang ecosystems.

iv. Emergent Theme 4: Resilient Bystander Resistance (n=9, 12.7%)

The analysis identified a distinct subgroup the research team operationalized as “resilient bystanders,” young women who maintained firm boundaries against gang involvement despite significant exposure through their social networks. These participants consistently demonstrated active resistance to gang influence while navigating environments where gang presence was pervasive. As articulated by one participant: *“I know like two, three people are in gangs. I really don’t focus on people like that because they [are] really problematic”* (Participant 9267, age 16). This exemplifies the strategic cognitive and relational distancing mechanisms used by resilient bystanders, who demonstrated sophisticated risk assessment capabilities and protective boundary-maintenance practices.

These young women explicitly recognized the potential negative consequences of gang association and actively constructed social and psychological barriers despite sustained exposure within their immediate environments. Their narratives revealed how maintaining non-gang identities within gang-saturated environments demanded continuous conscious effort and deliberate decision making rather than passive circumstance, highlighting the agentic dimensions of gang resistance within contexts where association represents a normalized trajectory. Simply put, for these participants, gang-involved individuals represented a recognized risk they intentionally avoided.

Some resilient bystanders expressed even stronger resistance based on personal negative experiences with gang violence. One participant explained: *“No, I never involved myself with them because the Sureños that I was telling you about, he was the one that shot my sister. My sister messes with some gang-affiliated people”* (Participant 9393, age 15). This account demonstrates how direct trauma related to gang violence could motivate young women to establish firm boundaries against gang association.

v. *Emergent Theme 5: Residential Proximity (n=6, 8.5%)*

Living arrangements—whether sharing homes with gang members or residing in gang-controlled territories—created immersive pathways to gang association for a small but notable subset of participants. These residential connections often resulted in unavoidable daily exposure to gang culture, activities, and networks. As one participant explained: *“My best friend that I used to live with, her whole family was in a gang. They were, um, WSL (West Side Locos)”* (Participant 9287, age 16). This narrative illustrates how shared living spaces function as sites of gang socialization, where young women are exposed to gang life through the mundane routines of daily cohabitation. For these participants, gang association became embedded in their domestic lives, making separation from gang influence particularly challenging.

Even temporary living arrangements could create pathways for exposure to gang ecology, as another participant described: *“We got a hotel from the 18th to the 25th. But usually, the only guy that would stay there would be my boyfriend. But since there were older guys ... which was my cartel friend or my gang member friends, they would go”* (Participant 9398, age 16). This demonstrates how precarious, transitional, or improvised housing situations functioned as critical sites for intensified gang interaction, where spatial proximity facilitated relationship development with gang-affiliated individuals.

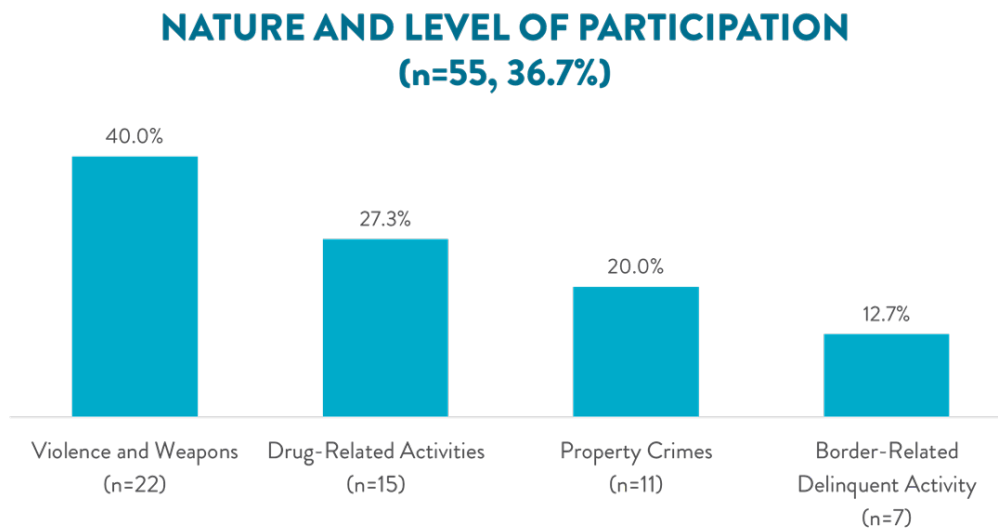
For young women experiencing housing instability, these temporary shared spaces created sustained contact with gang networks, normalizing gang presence within their immediate social environment. These transient living arrangements positioned young women at vulnerable intersections of housing insecurity and gang exposure, where the immediate need for shelter and social connection outweighed concerns about potential risks associated with gang proximity.

b. Major Theme 2: Nature and Level of Participation (N = 55, 36.7%)

The analysis revealed a complex behavioral pattern wherein a substantial cohort of participants engaged in illegal activities alongside gang-affiliated individuals while explicitly rejecting formal gang member identification for themselves. Figure 6 provides a demonstration of the “nature and level of participation” dimension of the study’s primary research question. It demonstrates how relationship-based associations can lead to involvement in delinquent activities without formal gang membership.

Participants in the study maintained a distinction between their engagement in these activities and gang membership itself, even as they navigated social worlds where gang-affiliated individuals played central roles. This pattern demonstrates the inadequacy of binary conceptualizations of gang involvement and highlights the existence of fluid participation continuums where young women exercise agency in determining their level of affiliation while still operating within gang-influenced social spheres.

Figure 6. Nature and Level of Participation Sub and Emergent Themes



i. Subtheme 1: Violence and Weapons (n=22, 40%)

A significant subset of participants reported engagement in various forms of violence and weapons possession, including fighting (n=7), gun possession (n=3), and gun violence (n=12). These activities often reflected complex dynamics of protection, retaliation, and status within gang-adjacent social spheres.

Some participants described engaging in violence to defend friends with gang affiliations, as one participant explained: *“As a matter of fact, yesterday I was going to fight with a Sureños because he told me he was out looking for my friend’s son, and he’s a Puerto”* (Participant 9224, age 20). This illustrates how participants became entangled in gang-related conflicts through their social connections, sometimes taking active roles in confrontations despite not claiming gang membership themselves. These protective motivations demonstrate how relationship networks functioned as powerful mechanisms drawing even peripheral associates into violent encounters within gang conflict structures.

Other participants described how growing up around gang culture led to fighting on behalf of gang-affiliated friends without considering themselves gang members: *“Like not part of a gang, but I grew up with people who been throwing up like ‘Souths’ (gang signs made with hands) and all that stuff. So, like I was always backing it up, you know? Like, I will get into it, literally it’s embarrassing, but I would get into fights for that”* (Participant 9230, age 20). This reveals how cultural immersion in gang-affiliated social circles created loyalty and willingness to engage in violence even among young women who explicitly distanced themselves from formal gang membership.

The participant’s reflexive characterization of these behaviors as “embarrassing” demonstrates sophisticated identity management processes and critical self-awareness regarding her violence participation, revealing the internal tensions between her non-gang self-conception and established behavioral patterns of physical confrontation in defense of gang-affiliated associates. This complex positioning illustrates how young women navigate liminal spaces within gang ecosystems, participating in gang-associated violence while maintaining psychological distance from gang identity.

ii. Subtheme 2: Drug-Related Activities (n=15, 27.3%)

Drug-related activities emerged as a predominant domain of participation, with 15 participants reporting involvement in drug selling and smuggling. These activities often developed through relationship pathways, particularly with intimate partners or family members.

For some participants, drug distribution operated at complex intersections of economic necessity, familial responsibility, and gang loyalty, as articulated by one 16-year-old: *“Like I was selling drugs to get food like for them [her siblings] and shit. ... But they don’t know who the accomplices [are], ’cause like I can’t give up my*

gang like that” (Participant 9320). This reveals the complex intersection of economic necessity, family responsibility, and gang loyalty that characterized some participants’ involvement in drug-related activities.

Even when primarily motivated by subsistence needs and familial obligations, participants’ descriptions revealed powerful normative commitments to gang loyalty codes that superseded potential cooperation with authorities, demonstrating how gang-affiliated drug economies create complex moral geographies for young women navigating both material deprivation and gang social structures.

Other participants articulated complex identity positions that emphasized their peripheral status while simultaneously acknowledging their direct involvement in serious drug offenses. One participant stated: *“I was around people who were [gang-involved] but not, not myself. Actually, I’m on probation for something that I did for a friend in 2019. Um, um, I crossed a kilo of Xanax bars at [specific location]”* (Participant 9337, age 24). This illuminates the cognitive dissonance between self-perception as non-gang-affiliated and active engagement in significant transborder drug smuggling activities directly connected to gang distribution networks.

The participant’s characterization of high-stakes criminal enterprise as something done “for a friend” reveals sophisticated neutralization techniques that minimize the significance of her actions while maintaining identity distance from formal gang structures. This account highlights the ambiguous liminality many young women cultivated even while engaging in high-risk criminal behavior that directly supported gang operations, demonstrating how relational frameworks allow participation in serious organized crime without necessitating internalized gang identification.

iii. Subtheme 3: Property Crimes (n=11, 20%)

Property crimes constituted the third most common form of illegal activity, with participants reporting involvement in stealing (n=7), burglary (n=1), and related offenses (n=3).

These activities often emerged from unstructured socializing with gang-affiliated peers rather than organized criminal enterprises. As one participant explained: *“Um, so, we were hanging out, um, at first in the park. And we decided, like, we didn’t have nothing to do. So, we decided to go rob somebody’s house”*

(Participant 9360, age 16). This narrative illuminates how property crimes emerge from spontaneous, opportunity-driven decision making during routine social gatherings rather than planned criminal activity.

The participant’s casual framing of residential burglary—presenting it as an improvised solution to boredom—reveals the normalization of delinquent behavior within certain peer ecosystems, even absent formal gang direction or organization. This pattern demonstrates how immersion in gang-adjacent social networks can facilitate criminal opportunity structures and normalize property crimes through peer influence mechanisms, even when such activities occur outside formal gang structures.

Other participants framed property crimes through a lens of personal empowerment rather than gang activity. One participant explained: *“I mean, they decided [it was] a gang, talking about gang affiliations and all that. I just saw it as a way to escape. I mean, we would go steal cars, we had guns, we had everything we wanted, obviously. I think for me, it was more of a feeling of power”* (Participant 9361, age 16). This reveals the disconnect between institutional categorization by authorities and the participant’s phenomenological experience, where delinquent activities represented access to previously unavailable resources, personal autonomy, and psychological empowerment rather than gang identification. The narrative reveals how young

women's engagement with property crimes could function as mechanisms of agency and self-determination within otherwise constrained social environments, challenging conventional frameworks that reduce female participation in delinquent activities to gang affiliation or male influence. For this participant, criminal behavior constituted a form of resistance against structural limitations and a pathway to experiencing subjective power within a social context where legitimate avenues to resources and autonomy were systematically restricted.

iv. Emergent Theme 4: Border-Related Delinquent Activity (n=7, 12.7%)

The distinctive transnational geography of the Rio Grande Valley manifested in a subset of participants' involvement in border-related criminal activities, including human trafficking (n=2) and people smuggling (n=5). These activities leveraged the region's proximity to Mexico and often involved transnational criminal connections. One participant explained: *"I was under investigation too ... because they were all in like moving stuff from like the Valley. No like moving—also that, and moving people too"* (Participant 9367, age 14). This narrative from an exceptionally young participant illustrates how even early adolescents became entangled in border-related criminal investigations, highlighting both the early age of exposure and the serious legal consequences that could result from these activities. The participant's reference to "moving stuff" and "moving people" reflects the overlapping nature of drug and human smuggling operations in the region. This demonstrates how the geopolitical positioning of the Rio Grande Valley creates unique opportunity structures that shape distinctive patterns of youth involvement in transnational illicit activities not found in non-border regions.

Other participants described how border-related criminal opportunities were often presented through casual social connections as straightforward economic opportunities while obscuring the legal implications, as one participant explained: *“So, there was just somebody like a friend of yours, that, hey, we’re gonna go, we’re gonna go pick up, pick up the people, you want to go make some money, kind of like that”* (Participant 9235, age 22). This narrative demonstrates how recruitment into border-related criminal activities often occurred through informal social networks rather than formal gang structures, with financial incentives presented in casual, non-threatening ways. This recruitment pattern reveals the intersection between young women’s economic vulnerability and the region-specific criminal opportunity structures endemic to the US-Mexico border zone. The participant’s account demonstrates how the normalized presentation of smuggling activities as routine “money-making” opportunities may facilitate entry into transnational crime through seemingly benign social pathways, creating circumstances where young women could become entangled in serious federal offenses through what appeared to be ordinary social interactions with peers.

v. Cross-Cutting Pattern: The “Hang Around”

Our analysis identified significant cross-thematic patterns that cut across both major themes, illuminating the complex interrelationship between relational pathways to gang association and the subsequent nature of participation in delinquent activities. This pattern represents a distinctive positionality within gang ecosystems that transcends conventional binary classifications of gang membership, revealing more nuanced modes of affiliation and involvement that characterize young women’s experiences in the Rio Grande Valley.

vi. *The “Hang Around” Status: An In-Between Position in Gang Association (n=74, 49.3%)*

The results of the study identified a distinctive pattern “hang around” association—an intermediate, transitional position where many young women were recognized by both gang members and law enforcement as gang connected despite their frequent assertions that they were not in a gang. This ambiguous status characterized both how participants entered gang ecosystems (through relationships rather than formal initiation) and how they participated in gang-related activities (through peripheral involvement rather than core or formalized membership roles).

This liminal “hang around” positioning creates contextual conditions in which young women participate in a range of illegal activities alongside gang-affiliated individuals without the formal protections, recognition, or identity that comes with official membership. This unique structural location generates distinctive vulnerability patterns and opportunity structures that differentiate their experience from both male gang members and uninvolved female peers.

The recognition of this intermediate positionality is essential for developing nuanced intervention strategies that address the complex realities of gang association without formal membership, challenging conventional binary frameworks that have historically dominated both scholarly discourse and institutional responses to gang involvement.

vii. *Gendered Dimensions: Beyond Auxiliary Status*

This study revealed sophisticated gender patterns that transcended simplistic frameworks of female subordination across both relationship pathways and participation in delinquent activities. While some participants described experiences that positioned them in subordinate or auxiliary roles to male gang

members, others demonstrated significant autonomy in both their gang associations and criminal activities. The relationship pathways showed varied gender dynamics: Some young women entered gang ecosystems through male family members or romantic partners, while others formed primary gang connections through female friendship networks that operated with considerable independence from male-dominated gang structures.

Similarly, patterns of participation ranged from auxiliary support roles to direct involvement in violent activities and independent drug sales. One participant recounted:

“They had stolen a phone from us. So, we were like, ‘Oh we have a gun. Let’s meet up and stuff.’ But we didn’t have a gun, we just wanted the phone. It was, uh, two other guys and a girl ... [and] he pulled up with another guy, and the other guy stabbed one of the guys I was with, so they had to call the cops. ... That’s why we ended up getting locked up, because he couldn’t walk or nothing. ... But I’m not like that anymore. I’m always home, taking care of the kids” (Participant 9278, age 16).

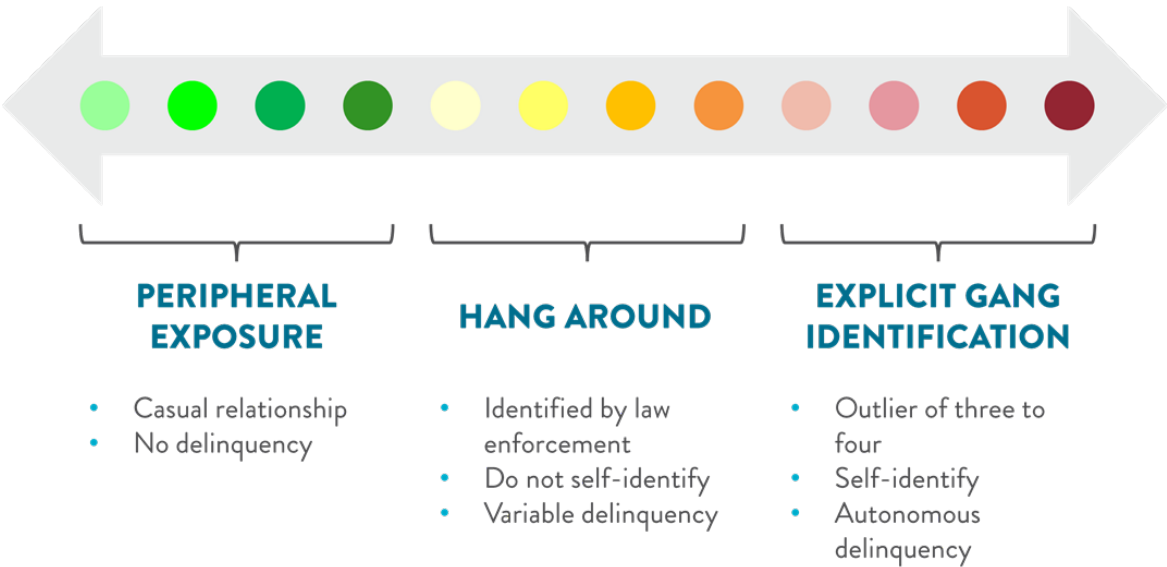
This diversity in gendered experiences fundamentally challenges reductive characterizations of female gang association as merely derivative of male gang membership. Such oversimplified frameworks fail to capture the complex realities of how young women navigate and exercise agency in gang-adjacent spaces. The results of this study indicate that gender operates as one influential factor among many that shape—but does not deterministically dictate—the nature of gang association or participation in delinquent activity, with numerous study participants demonstrating significant initiative and strategic decision making within their contextual constraints.

The observed gendered differences in participation patterns appeared more closely connected to structural opportunity differentials and gendered social expectations than to intrinsic patterns of female

subordination within gang hierarchies. This finding suggests that effective intervention strategies must recognize the varied positionalities young women occupy within gang-adjacent social networks rather than presuming homogeneous patterns of gender-based exploitation or control.

Figure 7 shows the continuum of this theme’s results, which revealed a diverse positioning of participants in the ecology of gangs in the Rio Grande Valley. At one end were young women with peripheral gang exposure through casual friendships and correspondingly minimal participation in delinquent activities—the “hang arounds.” At the other end were the small number of outliers (three or four participants) who progressed to explicit gang identification and high levels of autonomous participation in delinquent activity, as exemplified by statements such as, “We’re West Side and shit, and I did a drive-by, I stole cars” (Participant 9320, age 16).

Figure 7. Gang Association Continuum



This continuum suggests that the relationship between gang association and criminal participation is neither binary nor linear, but rather multidimensional and complex, with various combinations of association type and participation level possible. Understanding this complexity is essential for developing nuanced intervention strategies that address both the relationship pathways and the nature of criminal participation.

c. Major Theme 3: Transnational Connections (N = 53, 35.3%)

Cross-border connections with Mexico represented a significant contextual factor for more than a third of the girls in our study. These connections manifested through different patterns of movement across the US–Mexico border and family ties that created complex cultural identities and social affiliations. Participants’ experiences with visits to Mexico, exposure to cartel violence, and specific border crossing events collectively shaped their understanding of transnational life.

This pattern addresses the “contextual factors” component of our research question by demonstrating how navigation between these two cultural worlds can shape girls’ vulnerability to or protection from gang involvement. The young women in our study often described how their experiences spanning the US–Mexico border created feelings of belonging or disconnection that influenced their social relationships, including their proximity to gang-affiliated peers who could “understand” their complex cultural positions. These numbers are not mutually exclusive. For example, a participant might have both regular family visits to Mexico and experience with border crossing events, thus being counted in multiple categories within the “Transnational Connections” theme.

i. Subtheme 1: Visits to Mexico (n=44, 83%)

Visits to Mexico represented a varied transnational connection among participants, with distinct patterns of engagement. Among the 53 participants with transnational connections, most visited Mexico either frequently (n=26, 49.1%) or rarely (n=19, 35.8%) while a smaller number never crossed the border (n=9, 17%).

For those who frequently visited Mexico, the primary motivations were seeing family (n=12, 22.6%), followed by vacation (n=7, 13.2%), medical purposes (n=3, 5.7%), religious activities (n=2, 3.8%), educational reasons (n=1, 1.9%), and work (n=1, 1.9%). Family connections were often described in terms of socializing and maintaining ties, as one participant explained: *“Um, I just went [to Matamoros] every weekend, like, just to hang out with my cousins and just go party”* (Participant 9273, age 16). Another participant highlighted the multipurpose nature of her visits: *“And I would still go, from time to time. For example, [I] do my nails, do my hair, go to the doctor, go to the dentist, or like visit family”* (Participant 9297, age 22).

Similarly, among those who rarely visited, family connections (n=10, 18.9%) and vacation (n=7, 13.2%) were the main reasons, with medical purposes (n=2, 3.8%) being less common. Vacation visits often involved shopping or tourism, though some participants expressed safety concerns: *“But, um, I guess you could say I don’t really feel safe over there. When I used to go, I would go mainly for, like, the food or, like, to go shopping”* (Participant 9304, age 18). Others described more traditional vacation destinations: *“I went twice for vacation, like to Puerto Vallarta and I went to San Miguel”* (Participant 9381, age 19).

When combining both frequency categories, a significant majority (n=44, 83%) of participants maintained some level of connection with Mexico, with family visits (n=22, 41.5%) and vacation

(n=14, 26.4%) representing the most common reasons for cross-border movement. One participant simply stated: *“I honestly have family in Mexico, so like I don’t really mind it. I also love going for the food”* (Participant 9359, age 19).

Emergent Theme 1: Religious Activities, Educational Reasons, and Work-Related Travel (n=4, 0.09%)

While family visits and vacation purposes represented the primary motivations for cross-border movement, participants described several less-common reasons for traveling to Mexico. Medical care emerged as a pragmatic consideration, with participants crossing the border to access health care services: *“Yes, I go very often [to Matamoros] because my, my mom’s side of the family lives over there. And sometimes we receive medical assistance over there”* (Participant 9311, age 16). This quote illustrates how medical visits were often intertwined with family connections, suggesting that cross-border health care access represented both economic practicality and cultural familiarity.

Other emergent elements included religious activities (n=2, 3.8%), educational reasons (n=1, 1.9%), and work-related travel (n=1, 1.9%), reflecting the diverse ways participants maintained transnational connections. The significant number of participants who never visited Mexico (n=9, 17%) highlights varying degrees of connection to Mexico even within communities with strong cultural ties to the border region.

ii. Subtheme 2: Cartel Violence and Border Security (n=26, 17.3%)

Experiences with and awareness of cartel violence emerged as a subtheme within transnational connections, with 26 participants (17.3% of the total sample) describing how it impacted their border crossing patterns, family relationships, and sense of security.

In contrast to the beneficial aspects of transnational movement reflected in family visits and vacations, cartel violence represented a darker dimension of cross-border connections that created fear, trauma, and disruption. More specifically, family victimization by cartel violence was reported by multiple participants, as illustrated by one young woman: *“So one time, they thought my brother was selling so they raided the house and took my brother. ... They [Narcos] wanted to kidnap my dad and my brother”* (Participant 9223, age 17). This quote reveals how cartel activity created immediate physical threats to family members, potentially disrupting family structures and creating acute trauma for participants. Such narratives demonstrate the interpersonal consequences of cartel violence beyond abstract security concerns, revealing its capacity to fundamentally rupture familial bonds and generate lasting psychological harm.

In addition, participants described the violent loss of romantic partners or close connections. For example, one participant explained: *“But my partner was killed on July 7th of this year [in San Fernando]. Um, he had a confrontation, right with the government soldiers, I don’t know how. ... They called and gave me the news that he had been killed”* (Participant 9339, age 22). This powerful testimony demonstrates how cartel violence created grief and trauma that transcended national boundaries, affecting participants’ emotional well-being and potentially their vulnerability to other risk behaviors. Such experiences underscore the far-reaching psychological consequences of cartel violence that extend well beyond immediate geographic proximity to violent events.

iii. Subtheme 3: Border Crossing Experience (n=25, 16.7%)

Accounts of border crossing experiences—revealing the practical, emotional, and sometimes challenging aspects of transnational movement that shaped participants’ experiences and perceptions of the

border region—were shared by 25 participants (16.7% of the total sample). Their accounts provided detailed descriptions of crossing between the United States and Mexico.

Participants described formative crossing experiences that remained vivid in their memories, often involving family separation and reunification: *“When they [parents] first came by themselves, it was my dad and my mom first, and then once they tried it, they saw how it would work. That’s when they went back for us. ... Like I remember that ... but I guess it was like this really traumatic-like event”* (Participant 9264, age 18). This demonstrates how border crossing sometimes created significant emotional impacts that participants carried with them into adolescence and young adulthood.

Other participants described border crossing situations involving risk and uncertainty of a safe passage: *“I remember my mom selling her car, her Nissan, and I remember that I went through a risk because two men crossed me ... and I remember my mom picked me up at a Stripes. I remember she gave me a very strong hug and brought me to some apartments where we were going to start a new life”* (Participant 9374, age 16). This illustrates how border crossings could represent a significant life transition marked by both danger and the promise of new beginnings.

The narratives related to border crossings consistently revealed the complex interplay between formal border security apparatuses and informal crossing networks, with participants detailing diverse strategies for navigating those often-competing attributes of the region. Such intricate border dynamics established distinct social contexts for participants residing in transnational border communities, potentially modulating their vulnerability to or resilience against local gang involvement. This intersection of

transnational movement and local risk environments demonstrates how migration experiences may function as critical mediating factors in youth developmental trajectories within border regions.

d. Major Theme 4: Family Criminal Justice Involvement (N = 33, 22%)

Family criminal justice involvement emerged as a contextual factor for nearly one quarter of study participants. This involvement manifested predominantly through paternal contact with the justice system, generating multifaceted family dynamics and potential mechanisms influencing pathways toward risk behaviors and social affiliations. Such findings underscore the intergenerational implications of criminal justice involvement, revealing how parental—particularly paternal—incarceration or legal system engagement may function as a critical determinant in adolescent developmental trajectories and risk pathways.

i. Subtheme 1: Paternal Criminal Justice Involvement (n=25, 16.7%)

Paternal involvement with the criminal justice system emerged as a prevalent contextual factor, with 25 participants (16.7% of the total sample) reporting that their fathers had experienced arrest, incarceration, or other forms of justice system contact. This finding suggests a pattern of disrupted or complicated father–daughter relationships mediated by the criminal justice system. One participant explained: *“My dad was locked up for multiple things. I’m not sure what. I just know that it was gang-related and stuff like that”* (Participant 9330, age 17). This illustrates how paternal criminal justice involvement was often accompanied by vague understanding of the specific crimes involved, yet a clear awareness of gang connections.

Other participants had more detailed knowledge of their fathers’ criminal histories. One young woman shared: *“No, my dad’s doing 20 years in federal. No, yeah, he was doing home invasions. He’s been in and*

out since he was a teenager, too” (Participant 9332, age 15). This demonstrates not only the serious nature of some fathers’ offenses but also patterns of chronic criminal justice involvement that spanned generations.

Emergent Theme 1: Maternal Criminal Justice Involvement (n=8, 5.3%)

While less common than paternal involvement, maternal contact with the criminal justice system was reported by eight participants (5.3% of the total sample). The lower prevalence of maternal criminal justice involvement reflects broader gendered patterns in justice system contact but potentially creates even more significant disruption when it does occur. One participant explained: “Yeah, well my mom is in prison right now. And I noticed that she was like, getting back to like doing drugs, like she would do crack” (Participant 9288, age 16).

Challenges like this are created when mothers become involved with the criminal justice system, often revealing the intersection of substance abuse and criminal justice involvement. The participant’s awareness of her mother’s drug use and subsequent incarceration highlight how maternal criminal justice involvement frequently exposes daughters to multiple risk factors simultaneously, potentially creating more complex pathways to their own risk behaviors.

Cross-Cutting Patterns: Connecting or Concurrent Contextual Vulnerabilities

Distinctive patterns emerged across the major themes, revealing how border region dynamics and family criminal justice involvement created layered contextual factors shaping potential pathways to gang involvement. The border region created a unique set of circumstances through participants’ varied transnational experiences, from routine family visits and vacation travel to direct encounters with cartel violence and challenging border crossing situations.

This unique social geography fostered an environment where the coexistence of ordinary transnational connections (family visits, health care access) alongside exceptional experiences (cartel violence, undocumented crossings) created complex identity formations and social affiliations that could influence vulnerability to or protection from gang involvement. These findings suggest border proximity shaped not only participants' physical mobility but also their sense of cultural belonging and social navigation skills within communities where gang presence often overlapped with transnational networks.

In addition, while paternal incarceration frequently disrupted financial support and male role modeling, maternal incarceration typically created more significant caregiving disruptions, sometimes necessitating placement of children with extended family. For some participants, these contextual factors converged, creating potential compounding effects where the simultaneous navigation of transnational connections and family criminal justice involvement may have created particular vulnerability pathways. This convergence suggests that understanding girls' pathways to gang involvement requires attention to how multiple social contexts interact and compound rather than operate in isolation, highlighting the need for intervention approaches that address these interconnected contextual vulnerabilities rather than focusing on singular risk factors.

e. Major Theme 5: Family-Based Resilience and Vulnerability (N = 130, 86.7%)

Family relationships represented a fundamental contextual factor for participants. Descriptions of family relationships were not mutually exclusive, as participants spoke to having both supportive and unsupportive relationships with one or more parents as well as with siblings.

These relationships manifested through different patterns of support or detachment that created complex emotional landscapes and social affiliations. Participants' experiences with parental communication, structured oversight, sibling bonds, and responses to family disruptions collectively shaped their capacity for resilience against negative influences. This pattern demonstrates how family dynamics can either enhance protection from or increase vulnerability to gang involvement. Participants described how their experiences within family systems created feelings of belonging or disconnection that influenced their social relationships, including their susceptibility to negative peer influences.

i. Subtheme 1: Parental Foundations (n=122, 93.8%)

Parental relationships represented a varied foundation among participants, with distinct patterns of support and detachment. Among the 122 participants who discussed parental dynamics, many reported having healthy and supportive relationships with their parents (n=73, 59.8%) while a larger number described experiencing unhealthy or unsupportive parental relationships (n=81, 66.3%) with an additional subset reporting no parental relationship with at least one parent (n=21, 17.2%).

Of the 122 participants who provided information about their parental relationships, 53 (43.4%) reported a supportive relationship with one parent and unsupportive or no relationship with another. For those with supportive parental relationships, the primary characteristics described were trust and open communication, parental involvement in education, and structured oversight of social activities. One participant explained: *"I'm super lucky that I can talk to them about anything, they've been supportive. They're always 100% supportive, and whatever I do or decide to do. And if I needed to talk to my mom about things, like, absolutely anything, I can go and talk to her and if I needed to talk to my dad, like I can do that"*

(Participant 9293, Age 21). This illustrates how consistent emotional availability creates a foundation of trust that enables young women to seek guidance when facing challenges, potentially preventing them from turning to problematic peer relationships for advice.

Parental flexibility and willingness to adapt to their child's needs were also noted as contributing to improved relationships. One participant reflected: *"I feel like her like understanding what I want [made things better] and not always wanting to make it like her way. Like, I feel like things have changed a lot. Like she sees the way that I want my stuff to be done. And she's really understanding my way, you know?"* (Participant 9267, age 16). This demonstrates how parental adaptation to adolescents' growing autonomy needs can strengthen rather than weaken relationships.

Structured parental oversight—such as use of curfews, limits on social media, and approval of friend groups—emerged as an instrumental protective factor in shaping decision-making skills for participants. One participant explained:

"Yeah, there's gang activity there. But they [my parents] did straight up tell me that they didn't like the classes. And they just didn't like how, how dangerous it seemed. ... They had me at a pretty young age. So, like, there wasn't um, there wasn't so much room for the school to progress, I guess. So, they knew what it was being at the school as high schoolers. So, they just preferred something better for me" (Participant 9252, age 19).

This demonstrates how parental awareness of school environments can influence parental decisions about children's education. Having experienced the same school themselves, the participant's parents perceived it as unsafe and sought a better option. Their concerns about safety and academic quality reflect

broader patterns of parental decision making, where firsthand knowledge of an environment shapes efforts to provide a different experience for their children.

Participants also reported receiving explicit education about gang risks from their parents: *“Um, they were really open about telling, um, me that maybe ’cause I was the oldest, so I had to understand. But they were open to telling me about how, how like my uncle was in a gang and like he was incarcerated. ... And they were always, um, looking out for me, what I was doing and who I was hanging out with”* (Participant 9252, age 19).

Participants indicated that parents with lived experience with gang ecologies described the consequences of gang involvement. By monitoring their child’s social circles and discussing these risks openly, parents aimed to steer them away from similar paths.

Those reporting unsupportive parental relationships described unstable home environments, substance use and abuse issues, and ineffective communication. One participant described the impact of parental addiction: *“Ever since I was young, it’s been really difficult with my dad, you know. Everything I went through—like I said, my dad is a drug addict. So, my mom, at that time, really, I wasn’t her main focus.”*

(Participant 9225, age 17). This highlights the vulnerabilities initiated or triggered by parental substance use and abuse. Participants described that when a parent is living with substance abuse, they become emotionally and physically unavailable, leaving the other parent saddled with the competing priorities of managing the addiction crisis and providing consistent care and support to the children.

In addition, communication barriers were identified as a source of relationship breakdowns: *“She’s just not really good at communicating her thoughts with us or communicating her problems. She’s so quick to get angry instead of actually trying to work things out with us, and she’s a very impulsive person”* (Participant 9266,

age 16). This pattern of reactive impulsivity, combined with a lack of conflict resolution, can model unhealthy ways of managing interpersonal challenges. As a result, youth may struggle to develop effective communication and coping skills, leading them into a pathway of seeking validation in peer groups attached to the gang ecology that provide them with a sense of unconditional belonging.

Economic hardships and parental absence, whether due to work demands or incarceration, were reported as contributing to participants' sense of isolation and educational disengagement. Participants described being raised by extended family members, with varying degrees of support. One participant shared:

“Well, I used to live with my mom first, but growing up uh, it was like a kind of a broken home. And my mom wasn’t really always there. ... And I was going really downhill in school. That’s when I had dropped out. Because nobody was there to really encourage me. ... And so, I, that’s when I moved to San Benito with my tia [aunt]. And from there that’s when I got back to school and everything” (Participant 9228, age 18).

Participants who had experienced parental abandonment described long-term emotional and psychological impacts: *“My mom does not talk to me. I don’t talk to her, ever since she kicked me out. I don’t want to talk to her because it hurts that my own mom kicked me out. Like, you don’t do that to your kid”* (Participant 9229, age 20). This reveals the emotional wounding that parental rejection creates, potentially undermining basic trust in relationships and increasing vulnerability to groups promising unconditional loyalty and family-like bonds.

ii. Subtheme 2: Sibling Dynamics (n=73, 56.2%)

Sibling relationships played an important role in shaping participants' vulnerability or resilience to external negative influences, including gang involvement. Of the 73 participants who identified sibling

dynamics in their interviews, 55 (75.3%) described healthy and supportive bonds, and 23 (31.5%) reported unhealthy or unsupportive relationships. It should be noted that 10 participants (13.6%) reported both healthy/supportive and unhealthy/supportive sibling relationships.

For those with positive sibling relationships, sibling relationships were characterized by closeness, shared experiences, and mutual understanding. Some described their siblings as both family and friends, emphasizing strong bonds despite occasional disagreements. One participant described: *“Well, he’s, he just turned 19 and I’m 22. So, like, we’re kind of close. And growing up, we used to like fight a lot but like childish stuff. ... But we’re close, because I mean we always live together, and we share interests, and yeah, if we fight it’s for not important reasons”* (Participant 9284, age 22). This demonstrates how sibling relationships can tolerate conflict while maintaining connection, a resilience that contrasts with the more fragile peer relationships common in adolescence and may provide a buffer against seeking acceptance into peer groups affiliated with the gang ecology.

Living together or in close proximity to each other, coupled with going through similar life experiences, seemed to strengthen sibling relationships. Some participants expressed gratitude for their siblings’ guidance and practical support: *“Especially when I was getting older, and my siblings were already of age to leave the house. My brother stayed, and my sister left. But regardless, they would always help out with us. Back-to-school supplies, sorry. And like uniforms and shoes and things like that for me, for going to school”* (Participant 9315, age 24).

Another topic that emerged included how older siblings assumed parental roles. One participant described this dynamic: *“I really like my, my brother. He’s probably like, he holds more authority than, or respect,*

I guess, over my, my mom and my dad. ... Because my brother was, he's, he kind of is my parent, my only parent. 'Cause whenever I need something, he's, he's always there" (Participant 9266, age 16). This demonstrates how siblings can fill critical developmental needs for guidance, consistency, and emotional support—needs that might otherwise create vulnerability to gang recruitment that often targets youth seeking structure and mentorship.

Beyond practical and emotional support, siblings also served as social anchors. Participants spoke about their siblings' achievements and took pride in their accomplishments while considering their sibling as their closest companions, and at times replacing friendships. Many participants described their siblings as their primary or even exclusive social connections:

"I only stuck with my brother because I didn't, I didn't have any, like, permanent friends. I saw him as like a permanent friend, because he was always there with me. So, my mom says, we grew up amargados [bitter] and stuff, and that we never socialized with other people because we didn't have other people to socialize with" (Participant 9311, age 16).

This reliance on siblings for social connection reveals both protective elements—insulation from potentially negative peer influences—and potential vulnerabilities, as limited social networks might increase susceptibility to external groups promising expanded social opportunities.

The dynamics of sibling relationships also emerged as an important factor, with younger siblings mimicking behaviors of older siblings. One participant reflected:

"She started kind of like messing up too. Because I did. And I remember one time my dad did tell me that the only reason why my sister never got locked up or started doing whatever she was doing was because she wanted to be like me ... 'cause she saw it and she thought it was cool. Or she thought it was okay. 'Oh, because you're doing it, so I'm going to be just like you'" (Participant 9314, age 20).

This account illustrates the transmission of risk behaviors through sibling modeling, highlighting how younger siblings' admiration can lead to emulation of problematic behaviors that might include gang-associated activities.

While some sibling relationships were supportive, others reflected emotional distance. One participant reported their strained household dynamics:

“Uh, well, we’re all pretty distant. When I get home I usually just eat, and go to my room, and I stay in my room for the rest of the day. And then my mom, she goes to the room too. My brother when he gets out of work, he sometimes goes to my room, and stays there for a while. Either him or his girlfriend. But other than that, we’re all just pretty much in our room” (Participant 9258, age 16).

This description of a household with minimal interaction illustrates sibling patterns of disconnection can affect all relationships within the system, creating potential vulnerability to outside influences that might offer more meaningful connection.

These results indicate sibling relationships represent a critical and often overlooked dimension in understanding vulnerability to or protection from gang involvement. When positive, these relationships provide emotional support, practical assistance, surrogate parenting, and social connection that may reduce susceptibility to gang recruitment. Conversely, negative sibling modeling can directly transmit risk behaviors while emotional disconnection between siblings may create vulnerability to external groups offering alternative forms of belonging.

These findings point to the potential value of gang prevention approaches that leverage sibling bonds, particularly by engaging older siblings as positive models and strengthening communication between siblings in families experiencing disruption or disconnection.

Notes on Other Significant Relationships

Beyond parents and siblings, extended family members emerged as valuable protective factors in our participants' lives. Most notably, our analysis revealed that a substantial number of participants (n=18) reported being raised by or living with grandparents for significant periods of time, highlighting the prominent role of intergenerational caregiving. These grandparent-headed households provided stability when parents were unavailable. In addition, aunts and uncles held supporting roles, particularly in educational advocacy.

Participants described situations where these extended family members intervened during educational crises, preventing school dropout or facilitating re-engagement with educational institutions after disruptions. Community institutions—including schools, religious organizations, and partners' families—constituted additional layers of support for many participants. These external resources often became more powerful during major life transitions, creating expanded support networks that helped participants navigate challenges and maintain resilience despite family difficulties.

Cross-Cutting Patterns: Family-Based Resilience and Vulnerability

Study findings revealed several interconnected patterns that move beyond specific family relationships to create either protection from or vulnerability to negative influences, including potential gang involvement. The quality of communication emerged as a cornerstone toward both desistance and resilience, with open and honest conversations strengthening family bonds and enhancing protective factors associated with gang involvement. In contrast, patterns of avoidance, anger, and unresolved conflicts eroded those

bonds, increasing susceptibility to peer groups associated with the local gang ecology that offers a sense of belonging.

This communication quality was closely linked to role flexibility within family systems. Families with adaptable roles were better able to maintain developmental support during times of crisis or disruption by allowing extended family members to step in and assume caregiving roles. In contrast, rigid systems lacking backup caregivers created significant vulnerability when primary relationships faltered. Also, monitoring and boundary-setting served as protective factors, especially when balanced with emotional support.

f. Major Theme 6: Trauma, Mental Health, and Resilience (N = 141, 94%)

Most participants described a complex interplay of traumatic experiences, psychological well-being, and substance use. This multifaceted theme emerged as central to understanding the lived experiences of girls and young women navigating gang ecologies in the Rio Grande Valley.

While existing literature often dichotomizes gang-involved young women as either perpetrators of criminal behavior or passive victims, our findings revealed a more complex reality where criminal involvement, victimization, and resilience coexist. These young women navigate complex contexts where trauma intersects with remarkable strength, where mental health challenges overlap with adaptive coping, and where substance use encompasses both vulnerability and personal agency—revealing multidimensional lives that cannot be reduced to simple categorizations of either victimhood or deviance.

The experiences described by participants highlight how trauma and violence shaped participants' trajectories within gang ecologies, how substance use intertwines with both gang dynamics and coping strategies, and how resilience manifests even amid significant adversity and gang exposure.

This theme encompasses four interconnected subthemes: Intimate Partner Relationships (28.0%), Mental Health Challenges (36.0%), Substance Use and Dependency (31.3%), and Resilience and Adaptive Responses (84.7%). These findings underscore the need for trauma-informed, strengths-based intervention approaches that recognize both the vulnerabilities and capabilities of young women in gang-associated environments while addressing the complex psychological, relational, and substance-related factors that influence their engagement and disengagement with gang ecosystems.

i. Subtheme 1: Intimate Partner Relationships (n=42, 28.0%)

Among the participants, 42 (28.0%) reported being in unsupportive or unhealthy relationships with an intimate partner, with recurring patterns of domestic violence, controlling behavior, substance use, infidelity, and criminal involvement. They described experiences of physical abuse within these relationships, often accompanied by emotional manipulation and control. In addition, participants described intimate partner violence in relationships as shaping their ability to make independent choices and, in many cases, resulting in prolonged cycles of victimization. For example, one participant recalled how her partner controlled every aspect of her daily life:

“He was abusive, like he would hit me, he wouldn’t let me go out, he wouldn’t let me go to my mom’s house. Like I had to be home like all day, couldn’t have a phone and stuff like that. So, it only lasted like three, four years. And then, uh, I don’t know out of nowhere I just bought a car. So, I made plans on my own like, ‘Well you know what, I’m taking off. I’m leaving him’” (Participant 9243, age 24).

Physical violence was frequently described as serving both a punishment and a mechanism of control. Substance use was also described as a factor that intensified the severity and unpredictability of violence within these relationships. One participant described:

“When I was 13, he hit me, ’cause he was drunk and I, and I was, I was singing with my friend. ... And he punched me and I, and I knocked out. I guess I like, I honestly think I like blacked out because all of a sudden I just felt myself like getting up from the floor... just because I was singing, and because I wasn’t paying attention to him” (Participant 9244, age 17).

Another participant recounted an experience where her partner attempted to strangle her when she expressed her desire to leave the relationship:

*“He had gotten drunk with the neighbors ... and he’s like, ‘Where the f*** are my keys?’ And I was like, ‘I don’t f-ing got your keys!’... His homeboy comes in and he’s like, ‘Aye, [boyfriend’s name], let’s go look in the car, like you don’t gotta be screaming at her.’ And then he’s like, ‘Why the f are you defending her? Like, are you two something or what?’ ” (Participant 9367, age 14).*

These illustrate how physical violence served as both a form of punishment and control. Intimate partner violence was also accompanied by extreme social isolation, limiting the participant’s ability to seek support from family or friends.

Some described intentionally being cut off from loved ones. One participant reflected on the controlling behaviors of her partner: *“She put me through so much and not only that, like she was abusive... like I couldn’t talk to my family. I couldn’t go out with my family. ... She would get mad because I was talking to my friends that were girls. ... She would hit me in the restroom. Like she would shove me, push me, hit me”* (Participant 9365, age 15). This account demonstrates how social isolation was used as a tool of control, where the participant’s girlfriend prevented her from maintaining relationships with both her family and female friends, effectively cutting off potential support networks.

Substance use was also described as having a role in relationships, with some describing a gradual normalization process that embedded substance use into their daily interactions. One participant described:

“It was toxic. He did, he was, he did sell. And well, I’m not gonna lie. I did—I do smoke. We did smoke weed. ... And well at that time he used to always bring me weed. ... When I didn’t want to smoke, like, he’d always make me want to smoke” (Participant 9346, age 16).

Substance use was also described as a complex mechanism of control and dependency within relationships. One participant explained how her partner’s involvement with drugs influenced their relationship dynamic: *“Whenever he got out, he would call me, but he had a lot of problems with his ex and stuff. ... We would fight, and I guess, I would use him a lot for bars too, like, we would fight, and he would give me more bars to make me happy, type of thing. ... I broke it off because I didn’t like how it was”* (Participant 9372, age 16).

When examining these collectively, a clear pattern of overlapping facilitators emerges, suggesting intimate partner violence and substance use functioned as key facilitators shaping participants’ social vulnerabilities. Many experienced isolation, dependency, and repeated cycles of abuse, reinforcing their exposure to violence and criminal environments. Conversely, participants who managed to exit these relationships often described feelings of relief, clarity, and renewed independence. These findings indicate a need for interventions focused on healthy relationship education, substance use support, and domestic violence prevention for young women in high-risk environments.

The intersection of intimate partner violence and gang involvement creates a particularly complex dynamic for many participants. While intimate relationships function as pathways into gang ecosystems for some young women, as noted in Theme 1 (Relationship-Based Pathways), these same relationships often evolved into mechanisms of control and abuse that limited participants’ autonomy and increased their

vulnerability within gang contexts. This cyclical pattern of relationships facilitating gang exposure and becoming subsequent sites of trauma highlights how young women's gang involvement is often inextricably linked to gendered experiences of violence, control, and dependency that complicate simplistic narratives of female gang participation.

ii. Subtheme 2: Mental Health Needs (n=54, 36.0%)

Mental health needs were a recurring theme, with participants reporting struggles with depression, anxiety, ADHD, PTSD, and self-harming behaviors. Of the 150 participants, 54 (36.0%) reported receiving a formal mental health diagnosis and treatment while 34 (22.7%) described experiencing perceived and undiagnosed mental health issues.

These experiences highlight the widespread prevalence of mental health needs and the barriers participants faced in seeking support. Depression was one of the most frequently mentioned mental health struggles with participants describing academic pressure, family dysfunction, and trauma as contributing factors. One participant linked her early experiences of neglect and family separation to long-term mental health struggles:

“I always, like, when I would see counselors or whatever, we always came to the conclusion that it was because I felt neglected by my dad. When I was little, he left—he got deported when I was around 5. I would call him, and he’d be like, ‘Oh yeah, I’m gonna go see you next week.’ And he’d never come. So that’s kind of where it started. ... I feel like it just got worse over the years” (Participant 9256, age 18).

Participants described that seeking therapy was either delayed or discouraged, often due to cultural familial beliefs that mental health struggles should be endured rather than treated. One participant shared:

“When I got diagnosed, I told my mom, ‘Hey, I’ve had these symptoms since I was in middle school.’ And she’s like, ‘Why didn’t you tell me anything?’ And I’m like, ‘I did—you just told me I wasn’t getting enough sleep or exercise.’ It’s not like they don’t believe in mental health, but they think Mexican people are stronger and that we’ll just get over it” (Participant 9280, age 19).

Participants who had endured trauma, violence, or abuse described symptoms commonly associated with PTSD, including paranoia, flashbacks, and anxiety attacks. Some struggled to manage these symptoms in structured environments like school. One participant explained:

“When my teachers would get in my face, it would give me PTSD. I would see my cousin on top of me... I didn’t know it was PTSD at the time, but now I’m diagnosed. I would have anxiety attacks in the restroom, crying, hyperventilating, not knowing what was going on. ... But teachers just thought I was skipping class” (Participant 9232, age 17).

In extreme cases, anger and aggression emerged as external expressions of internal distress toward loved ones. One participant recounted a violent breakdown that resulted in self-harm: *“I tried killing my family just because I have really bad anger issues and they got me mad. ... I was chasing them with a knife, and then I started cutting myself” (Participant 9398, age 16).*

Anxiety was also widely experienced by participants with mental health issues. For example, after receiving a formal diagnosis for anxiety, participants shared their experience of being prescribed medication to address their symptoms. One participant shared how her medication use escalated into addiction: *“After I got prescribed those [Xanax], I started taking them a lot because I liked the way they made me feel. ... I started noticing that I was really depressed. I would get suicidal thoughts. ... I wouldn’t eat, I was really skinny, like I was weighing like 90 pounds. ... I got bad” (Participant, age 17).*

Another participant recounted:

“I was taking prescription medication, and I began to abuse it. ... I was trying to forget and trying to numb, so I began to abuse prescription medication where I would take it ... and then I would keep it for me later. That’s why I had to get admitted to a lot of hospitals—whether it be overdose or, um, or just suicides or drug abuse” (Participant 9307, age 17).

Additionally, 16 (10.7%) participants disclosed having attempted suicide at least once. The support participants received from family, friends, and systems actors in managing suicidal ideations varied. Another participant expressed frustration with how school systems handled mental health crises: *“I went to the school counselor—worst idea ever. She alerted the principal, the vice principal, the nurse, the police, the mental health center ... and then they had to call my mom. I was like, ‘Oh my God, girl, I was just trying to rant’”* (Participant 9248, age 18).

Other participants who had suicide attempts noted that the experience of trauma, depression, anxiety, and grief without professional support hindered their ability to cope in healthy ways. One participant shared: *“I had attempted suicide last year. Because, um, I had lost my grandma. I guess I thought I could deal with it by myself, but it just got the best of me. ... They sent me to a behavioral center in South Texas”* (Participant 9304, age 18).

In discussing accessing services and supports to address their mental health needs, participants described barriers such as cultural stigma, distrust, discomfort, and a lack of available resources. One participant shared how therapy helped her become more open, but only after significant hesitation: *“I had a counselor here in Brownsville. She really helped me out, trying to talk about everything. ... I guess I had a lot of feelings hidden inside me. I wouldn’t really talk to anybody, socialize with nobody. And now, I’m a little bit more open”* (Participant 9304, age 18).

Others, however, found therapy ineffective or felt discouraged from seeking help. One participant reflected on her hesitation to seek mental health support: *“It took me a while to tell people. ... I hadn’t told nobody. I guess it was like crying for help, but I acted out in a way I didn’t know how to explain”* (Participant 9232, age 17).

Mental health struggles were deeply intertwined with participants’ experiences of trauma, family instability, substance use, and social isolation. Many participants turned to substance use as self-medication while others internalized their struggles through depression, anxiety, and self-harm. Access to mental health care remained inconsistent, with some participants finding relief through therapy while others experienced barriers to treatment or were discouraged from seeking help.

iii. Subtheme 3: Substance Use and Dependency (n=87, 58%)

Substance use was a paramount issue among participants, with nearly one third reporting addiction or regular drug use. Of the 150 participants, 45 (30%) reported having a drug addiction while 42 (28%) reported using some form of substance. The most commonly used substances included benzodiazepines such as Xanax (n=44, 50.6%), cannabis (n=57, 65.5%), alcohol (n=23, 26.4%), cocaine (n=15, 17.2%), and methamphetamine or MDMA (n=12, 13.7%).

Additionally, participants described how substance use or abuse altered their behavior, relationships, and overall well-being. While some initially experimented out of curiosity or peer influence, their use often escalated into dependency and addiction, leading to negative personal changes such as aggression, social withdrawal, and self-destructive behaviors. One participant reflected on how drug use transformed her: *“I*

went from being an athletic person ... I would run around and laugh with my friends ... but ever since I did the drugs, I don't like to go out. I hate going out. ... I regret it, 'cause I really don't want to take pills. I don't think it's necessary. But I know because of my actions, now I have to" (Participant 9229, age 20).

Another participant's experience illustrates how gang-related substance use creates unique risks beyond individual drug effects, as rival gangs weaponize laced substances as tools for retaliation. For this participant, substance use, gang affiliation, and justice system involvement became inextricably linked, with each dimension amplifying risks in the others.

This participant's experience demonstrates how substance-related juvenile justice charges often mask more complex dynamics of gang conflict, trauma, and vulnerability that require targeted intervention beyond standard drug treatment approaches:

"Someone had like tried killing one of our gang members and I took the bar [instead of them]. It was a laced bar, and I didn't know about that shit. So, I almost died. ... They brought me over here [Juvenile Detention] 'cause my warrant was already ready and all that shit. My first boyfriend, that nigga died. Overdosed. ... They set him up like they laced, with um, that fentanyl shit on the bars and on the weed ... 'cause they didn't like our gang and shit. But we didn't know that that neighborhood that was selling to us was part of South Side. So South Side kind of got revenge with someone of our gang and shit. 'Cause you know how when they drive by someone died in their gang, pues [well] like our homeboy died and shit" (Participant 9320, age 16).

For some, substance use escalated into destructive behaviors toward others and strained relationships, sometimes leading to further juvenile system involvement. One participant described how an addiction to Xanax led to aggression and juvenile justice consequences: *"I had went to juvie because I had, um, put a knife to my mom. And I had four Xanax. They asked me how many times I smoked a day and how many times*

I took Xanax. ... Because of the amount, they said I had to take a drug test once a week” (Participant 9258, age 16).

Participants (N = 65) described multiple avenues for obtaining drugs, with the most frequently reported sources being classmates at school (n=31, 47.7%), friends outside of school (n=28, 43%), and neighborhood dealers (n=23, 35.4%). Additionally, 12 (18.5 %) participants reported obtaining drugs directly from their household, nine (13.8%) participants reported acquiring drugs via social media, and seven (10.8%) reported receiving drugs from an intimate partner.

Participants described how drug availability in their environment made experimentation more accessible: *“I started doing drugs when I was 13. ... I did marijuana for the first time, and then I would do it again and again. I would do it every day at school. Every single day” (Participant 9300, age 15).*

Some participants sought help through rehabilitation programs, but experiences varied, with some feeling that short-term rehab was ineffective, while others credited treatment programs with saving their lives. One participant expressed skepticism about rehab’s ability to create lasting change: *“I don’t really think a person is gonna rehabilitate in a week. ... They gave me medicine and stuff, but it didn’t really help” (Participant 9223, age 17).*

Conversely, others described rehab as a turning point in their recovery: *“Honestly, I’m not even gonna cap [lie], when I went to SCAN, that was a big help for me. ... At first, I was mad, but it helped me. And I don’t know where I’d be if I didn’t go there—probably dead” (Participant 9225, age 17).*

iv. Subtheme 4: Resilience and Adaptive Responses (n=127, 84.7%)

A vast majority of participants described some form of resilience, demonstrating their ability to persevere through adversity, set personal goals, and reflect on past challenges to foster personal growth. Participants exhibited determination to improve their circumstances, engage in future planning, and adopt healthier coping mechanisms despite difficult life experiences. Their resilience was shaped by goal setting, self-reflection, and the development of positive habits, which enabled them to envision a future beyond their immediate struggles.

Participants (n=81) described setting personal and professional goals as a way to stay motivated and work toward a better future. These goals ranged from obtaining a GED or college degree to pursuing careers in various fields, including health care, business, education, and law enforcement/armed forces. Education and career planning also emerged as a motivator for resilience, with participants expressing their determination to achieve financial stability and independence.

One participant reflected on the significance of higher education in providing financial security and supporting family members: *“I want to study to be a nurse. Because I’m gonna make money from there, and I’m gonna have a good house, and then I can have family and everything. But I’m thinking, like, if mom couldn’t make it, I can make it”* (Participant 9291, age 18). Others set more immediate goals, such as obtaining employment, gaining financial independence, or joining the military as a path to stability: *“Oh, when I get out of here, I want to get my ID and just get a temporary job. Try to get my license, and finish school, and then from there, I want to go to the Air Force”* (Participant 9288, age 16).

Participants (n=58) also demonstrated resilience through self-reflection, acknowledging past mistakes, difficult experiences, or personal growth that shaped their current outlook. They described learning from their struggles, expressing regret over past decisions, and using these experiences to redirect their lives in a positive direction.

One participant shared how motherhood became a pivotal moment in her life:

“Um, I love it. Um, I feel like if my baby, like, you know, if I never would have gotten pregnant, I feel like I would have been on the same shit. But my baby saved me, and I love the feeling I get off being a mom, having him around. I think my life is better now, that it should have always been like that. And I felt like I should have done to change by myself, but I just couldn’t. I guess I needed somebody. A baby, my baby” (Participant 9314, age 20).

Others described how self-awareness allowed them to take accountability for their past actions: *“I feel like I used my childhood as an excuse to do what I did. But getting off drugs isn’t that simple, and not messing up isn’t that simple either. I’m trying at the moment—I feel like I’m doing better—but, you know, it’s not simple to just fix life overnight”* (Participant 9225, age 17).

Developing healthy habits was demonstrated by 22% (n=28) of participants, who reported managing stress, increasing productivity, and preventing themselves from falling back into negative patterns. Many engaged in physical activity, work, religious involvement, or creative outlets as a means of maintaining progress.

One participant explained how structured daily routines supported her stability: *“A normal day for me? I go to work from 8 to 1 at the university. Then I go to lunch, study, do homework, or take some tests. On the weekends, I dedicate time to my church, where I volunteer and preach”* (Participant 9280, age 19). Physical

fitness was another way participants channeled their emotions and stayed disciplined: *“I usually work out to help me forget things. ... When I feel anger or sadness, I just lift weights or do push-ups. And I listen to music. I know how to rap a little bit”* (Participant 9288, age 16).

B. STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

To recruit system stakeholders, in April 2023 Evident Change hosted a town hall that aimed to share preliminary study findings and further establish recruitment partnerships. Attendees were invited to participate in stakeholder interviews, resulting in a total of 26 interviews. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai. The data was analyzed through systematic thematic analysis, which involved a comprehensive review of transcripts and notes, synthesis of responses, and identification of emerging patterns. The analytical process began by categorizing individual responses by stakeholder type, enabling the identification of distinct patterns within and across groups. Themes were then examined across all categories to identify overarching trends and key findings.

To represent the prevalence of perspectives while honoring the qualitative nature of this exploratory part of the study, findings are presented as thematic summaries rather than quantified results (Neale, 2014). The following semi-quantification terminology was developed to indicate an approximate distribution of perspectives.

- **Most:** Represents views expressed by over half (i.e., greater than 13) of participants.
- **Many:** Indicates perspectives shared by more than 10 but fewer than half of participants.
- **Several:** Reflects viewpoints expressed by six to 10 participants.
- **A few:** Denotes perspectives mentioned by three to five participants.

1. REASONS AND RISKS FOR GANG INVOLVEMENT

Parental absence and family instability emerged as primary risk factors for gang association across all stakeholder types. Stakeholders explained that when young women lack stable, supportive home environments, they are more likely to seek support and belonging within gangs. More specifically, those from single-parent households, foster care systems, or being raised by grandparents or extended family members were identified as particularly vulnerable. Stakeholders identified their belief that gang involvement among girls and young women stems from seeking familial bonds, protection, and acceptance they lack at home. For example, one juvenile probation officer shared:

Sometimes they don't feel attached to people at home or, you know, being raised by a single parent or grandmother, and they don't have that attachment to a family dynamic. So they're looking for a family dynamic sort of elsewhere. And so gangs tend to be their own little family unit. I'll protect your back. You protect my back. And so they have that sort of camaraderie, where they feel that maybe ... where they don't have love at home or protection or people there for them, that's what the gangs give them.

Economic factors may also play a crucial role, with most stakeholders (n=14) highlighting the region's high poverty rates as directly influencing gang association and recruitment. In the resource-limited Rio Grande Valley, financial incentives become powerful motivators, compelling young women to seek alternative ways to support their families and meet basic needs. For instance, a direct care staff stakeholder who works at a local mental health authority organization explained her knowledge on the environmental and familial factors associated with girls' gang involvement in the Rio Grande Valley:

There's a couple of different reasons. [...] There's only one of two ways to be somebody or to get what you want, right, which is like stealing, manipulation. It's very easy to do that versus saying no, going to school, getting away from that. And also when I was a caseworker, another reason is the families. It's not only environmental, but also families. I used to have, like, for example, I mean, she wasn't in a gang, the family

was in the gang, but this is just how much the families impact them. She was a really, really good client of mine. But the parent, you know, had a lot of, I don't want to say issues, but she had law issues, and she kind of put that on my client, and my client, again, I had her for years, for about the three, three going on four years. And my last year, I had to discharge her because the family didn't want services anymore.

Many stakeholders noted that limited legitimate employment opportunities may lead young women toward gang-affiliated activities including drug trafficking, sex trafficking, and cross-border smuggling operations (also known as “mule” work). Several stakeholders identified domestic abuse as a pathway to gang involvement, with young women seeking a means of regaining power, autonomy, and an escape from victimization. More specifically, they noted those with histories of sexual abuse, trauma, or untreated mental health needs face a heightened vulnerability. According to stakeholders, these traumatic experiences lead to substance use and risk-seeking behaviors as coping mechanisms, creating or strengthening pathways to gang association or affiliation.

Familial gang involvement emerged as a risk pathway identified by several stakeholders. When gang activity or affiliation permeates intergenerational family history, young women face strong predisposing factors, including the normalization of gang culture, established familial connections, and pressure to maintain family allegiance. The risk intensifies substantially when siblings are involved in or with gangs, as these relationships become direct recruitment channels.

Intimate relationships with gang-affiliated partners constitute another vulnerability pathway to gang association. A few stakeholders noted that older, gang-involved men strategically target younger women by fulfilling unmet basic needs—providing housing, food, and drugs—creating dependency relationships that serve as a pathway to gang involvement. This pattern of exploitation specifically targets girls and young

women experiencing resource insecurity, making gang association appear as a solution rather than a threat. A law enforcement stakeholder who had been working with adolescents in the juvenile justice system for many years explained how intimate relationships come to influence girls' involvement with gangs:

I think that these girls one either, maybe they come across a boyfriend. They have this new boyfriend, he's involved. And so, to fit in with that boyfriend, of course they want to do what is, what's interest[ing] for them, and so they get involved. Sometimes it's also a feeling of belonging, a feeling of belonging because they are not getting that attention from [a] parent. Or sometimes [there's] not even a parent in the home.

Most stakeholders highlighted challenges in accurately identifying gang-involved girls and young women compared with previous years (i.e., 2005–08, which is historically recognized for its high rates of gang violence and involvement). They reported that young women now are less likely to self-identify or disclose gang involvement, making it difficult for law enforcement and direct service staff to determine whether they are gang-involved or affiliated. Many participants observed a notable shift in the nature and number of girls directly involved in gangs and a corresponding increase in those identifying peripheral roles as affiliates, associates, or aspirants (also known as “wannabes”). This evolving pattern of engagement further complicates providers' efforts to appropriately identify and intervene with girls who could benefit from specific services.

2. ROLES OF GIRLS WITH GANGS

Many stakeholders reported that young women and girls involved with or associated with gangs often take on roles in supporting activities, such as theft, trafficking, and committing assaults. They described their roles as being tasked with the execution of activities such as vehicle theft, cross-border smuggling, or participating in targeted physical assaults. Beyond direct criminal activity, girls and young women may also

serve as strategic assets in conflicts with rival gangs, either by facilitating ambushes of male rivals or engaging directly in confrontations with female opposition members.

A few stakeholders indicated that young women have a role in supporting gang recruitment, particularly for sex trafficking. Their effectiveness stems from their ability to establish seemingly authentic relationships with vulnerable peers before gradually drawing them into exploitation. Stakeholders indicated further that this recruitment capacity extends to institutional settings, with identification and recruitment of potential associates within juvenile detention facilities. One stakeholder reported:

What I've come across as far as what the boys that do tell me about this kind of stuff, it literally involves in being raped by the gang. Whoever the leaders choose, that's how they initiate them in or they've got to date the leader for a certain amount of time. [...] A lot of times to be they get sucked in by being hooked on drugs. And so it's like, 'Hey, let's hang out. Here's a Xanax or here's [a] benzo.' They give them a drug, and they give it to him for free, until they get hooked, and then they'll do anything that they have to pay for that. ... So he uses drugs, or they do that trade-off. And so it's a lot of, that's where the sex trafficking and the selling drugs and all of that goes hand in hand, like it's, you never really see one way or the other.

3. GANG DESISTANCE OR EXIT BARRIERS AND PATHWAYS

Stakeholders indicated that girls and young women associated with gang ecosystems encounter gender-specific obstacles during disengagement that significantly exceed those faced by their male counterparts. All stakeholders emphasized that girls and young women face distinct and formidable challenges when attempting to exit gang life and culture—challenges that typically exceed those of their male counterparts. Girls and young women face fewer clear pathways out while also facing heightened risks of coercion, financial entrapment, and community isolation.

Many stakeholders identified geographic relocation as the most viable and effective disengagement strategy, often requiring young women to permanently leave their neighborhoods or cities to sever gang connections and ensure their safety. A few stakeholders reported that some undergo “jumping out” rituals as an exit condition, while others face exploitive demands to recruit replacement members as a trade-off before being released from gang obligations. A few stakeholders reported that time in a juvenile justice or criminal justice facility may also serve as a means of disengagement, as it limits girls’ ability to participate in gang activity.

Economic entanglement presents a significant barrier, with a few stakeholders describing debt bondage systems where girls must repay accumulated expenses for essentials like housing, food, substances, or personal items before being permitted to leave. Additional exit strategies mentioned included military enlistment and securing legitimate employment in professional environments—options that provide both physical distance and alternative support structures.

A direct care stakeholder shared that girls and young women disengage from gangs by temporarily leaving the area or by finding someone to take their place:

I have heard, because, I mean, most of the girls that we work with, they usually don't exit out or they exit out on the way of them leaving. So that's what, that's some of the ways that some of them have exited out. They completely relocate to a different city or a different state. So they could be able to get out, disappear for a while. [...] A lot of other ones, I've heard that they've mentioned that they exit out because they [...] did their deed, their duties kind of deal. They brought somebody else in so they could exit.

4. STRENGTHS OF GIRLS IN THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY

Stakeholders identified several distinctive strengths among girls and young women in the Rio Grande Valley. All emphasized the resilience demonstrated by these girls, noting their capacity to overcome significant adversity through determination, self-confidence, and strategic goal-setting. Several stakeholders shared that girls and young women possess a deep sense of loyalty and commitment to their families, using their responsibilities as motivation to pursue better futures for themselves and their loved ones through higher education or workforce development. Additionally, several stakeholders highlighted girls and young women's resilience, noting that their strength is accompanied by maturity and self-awareness. According to stakeholders, many demonstrate advanced reflective capabilities, effectively analyzing their past experiences and using these insights as motivation for positive life transformation.

5. PROMISING PRACTICES IN THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY

Several effective interventions for supporting gang-involved and at-risk young women were identified across the region, with stakeholders emphasizing three critical approaches: comprehensive cross-system collaboration, gender-responsive targeted programming, and integrated wraparound support services. A stakeholder explained their role in contracting with external providers for a variety of services to support girls:

One of the things, my role, is to oversee our contract specialist, which we have them go out and secure contracts with external services, whether it'd be like art therapy, music therapy, recreational therapy, [and] horse therapy. [...] We have our facilitators, we have our CLS is better known as Community Living support caseworkers which they work with our clients as far as taking them out into the community, helping them engage in the community. So they can better move forward in life, so they can become a little bit more independent, and learn how to speak to individuals [...] and they start meeting other individuals that they

have never maybe never met before, or how to interact in school with other kiddos. So we have a little bit of everything here.

6. CROSS-SYSTEM COLLABORATION

Several stakeholders identified cross-system collaboration as important to providing young women with comprehensive support. For example, UT Health Rio Grande Valley collaborates with the Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program to train probation officers and service staff on safe-sex practices for youth. BCFS Health and Human Services also partners with the Children's Advocacy Center to ensure coordinated care for girls and young women who are at risk of or experiencing abuse. Additionally, TTBH and the Cameron County Juvenile Justice Department use the Commercial Sexual Exploitation – Identification Tool (CSE-IT) to screen for trafficking and sexual abuse, referring high-risk cases to Common Thread, a CBO that can provide 24/7 support via an advocate who offers immediate help, resources, and emotional support.

7. TARGETED PROGRAMMING

TTBH's Community Living Support program was identified as an example, as it aims to develop youth independence and community integration. Modeled after Big Brothers Big Sisters, this initiative helps girls develop pro-social skills and learn to engage positively in their communities and schools. Additionally, TTBH offers programs focused on preparation for adult living, money management, parenting, mental health, and healthy relationships. Other therapeutic services include recreational therapy, substance abuse counseling, and animal-assisted therapy to help address the emotional and psychological needs of girls and support their overall development.

According to law enforcement stakeholders, various programs are also offered to youth in the juvenile justice system. The CCJJD re-entry program provides a holistic approach for girls transitioning out of juvenile placement, connecting them with services such as Southwest Keys' Bridge to Home counseling. Law enforcement stakeholders also highlighted the CCJJD LIFE program, which offers a six-month residential program that focuses on social and emotional development as well as job readiness skills. A stakeholder described how the LIFE program helps girls change their perspective on their skills:

Well, we have our in-house counseling, that's community based. Our department also has our LIFE program [...] and so it is a residential treatment center, and it's at least six months or until they successfully complete it. And they're like, it is intense counseling, whether it be individual, group, outpatient, whatever it is that they're needing. And, of course, I want to say they do, job readiness. They teach them different kinds of skills. I know they used to take them to the craft store, and they would teach them like, cake decorating [skills], I mean, even if they don't end up becoming a cake decorator it gives them confidence to say, 'okay, I can do something.' [It] just kind of changes their perspective.

In addition, the Build to Rebuild program was reported to offer construction skills training and OSHA certification. Substance abuse treatment was another key area of focus for law enforcement stakeholders. CCJJD has programs like Girls Circle, which provides group support for girls struggling with drug abuse. CCJJD also employs a licensed chemical dependency counselor for onsite support and refers girls to local treatment centers such as the Recovery Center of Cameron County, Serving Children and Adults in Need, and Mesquite Treatment Center. To maintain accountability and prevent substance abuse, CCJJD has also introduced a vape intervention program and conducts regular drug testing.

CCJJD has also implemented policies aimed at safely managing runaway youth, prioritizing rapid intervention and reunification with families when possible. Runaways are detained for no more than 24

hours, with the goal of returning them home quickly if it is safe to do so. If safety concerns exist at home, kinship placement is considered the first option to keep youth in familiar environments. Importantly, CCJJD does not adjudicate all youth who run away; a significant concern must be present before a youth is placed on probation. Additionally, shelter placement is requested if a runaway is detained for more than 24 hours.

Law enforcement stakeholders reported that these policies reflect a focus on swift, supportive interventions that minimize disruption while addressing underlying issues contributing to runaway behavior. By ensuring that youth are not unduly criminalized and are returned to safe environments, CCJJD's approach aims to prevent further harm and provide young women with the resources needed to stabilize and heal.

8. INTEGRATED WRAPAROUND SERVICES

Several stakeholders indicated that family involvement plays a significant role in the success of services. Several law enforcement and agency leadership stakeholders underscored the importance of engaging families in the rehabilitation process. Despite these strengths, gang prevention and intervention programming for girls remains a significant gap. Many stakeholders reported lack of gang-specific services tailored to young women, highlighting the need for targeted programs that address the unique risks and challenges that girls in gangs face.

9. STAKEHOLDER RECOMMENDATIONS

Stakeholders identified several key areas to improve services and support for girls and young women in the Rio Grande Valley. The following recommendations are organized by priority, based on the most frequently cited needs.

Expand gender-specific services: All stakeholders emphasized the critical need for gender-responsive services tailored to address the unique experiences of girls and young women affected by trauma, violence, and justice system involvement. Several participants recommended the establishment of all-female inpatient substance use and abuse treatment facilities to provide specialized recovery services, alongside an expansion of female-only residential placements and transitional housing options. Other recommendations included enhanced services for sexual abuse survivors. A few stakeholders also advocated for dedicated community spaces, such as girls' clubs or resource centers, where girls and young women could access mentorship, life skills training, and peer support in safe and structured environments.

Strengthen gang prevention and intervention efforts: In addition to emphasizing the need to expand foundational services, stakeholders identified critical gaps in violence prevention and intervention strategies. Several emphasized the need for increased street outreach and prevention programs, particularly highlighting the strategic deployment of credible messengers: individuals with lived experience in gang involvement, incarceration, or street life who can authentically connect with and mentor vulnerable girls and young women at risk of gang involvement. Programs such as Harris County's Leadership Academy were highlighted as successful models that have used credible messengers to de-escalate conflicts and guide young people toward pro-social alternatives. A few stakeholders also recommended the incorporation of school-based gang prevention curricula.

Increase housing support: Several stakeholders identified housing insecurity as a fundamental challenge, with extensive waitlists for affordable housing leaving many young women in precarious or dangerous living situations. Recommendations included the development of emergency shelters specifically

for runaway girls, while others called for broader investments in transitional and permanent affordable housing. Additionally, stakeholders emphasized the need for additional resources to help families meet essential basic needs including rental assistance, utility support, and grocery assistance.

Improve access to mental health services: A few stakeholders highlighted the need for expanded mental health services, particularly increasing the number of providers to address the typical six-month waitlist. They also recommended improving the quality and frequency of therapy sessions, incorporating group therapy options, and ensuring that young women have access to female counselors, as some may feel uncomfortable working with male providers. Expanding access to trauma-informed mental health services was identified as critical to addressing the underlying issues contributing to justice system and gang involvement.

Expand positive youth development programs: Several stakeholders underscored the importance of resilience-building and pro-social connection programs that provide young women with structured, positive activities. These programs could include outdoor experiential activities such as camping trips and retreats, group therapy models that foster peer support, and athletic and sports programs that promote teamwork. More educational and workforce development programs were also recommended to support the creation of pathways to economic stability.

Strengthen transportation access: Several stakeholders identified transportation limitations as a critical barrier preventing girls and young women from accessing court appointments, services, and intervention or support programs. The lack of cross-county public transit routes, combined with financial strain, renders reliable transportation inaccessible for many families. Stakeholders recommended expanding

transportation options through subsidized rides, shuttle services, and partnerships with local transit agencies to improve access to essential services and reduce obstacles to participation.

Enhance training for service providers: A few stakeholders emphasized the critical importance of specialized training for professionals who interact with high-risk and gang-involved or gang-associated girls and young women. Training on effective communication, conflict de-escalation techniques, and trauma-informed approaches was identified as essential for service providers, law enforcement, and educators to better support girls and young women navigating complex circumstances. Some stakeholders also called for training on recognizing gang-involved girls and young women as victims rather than offenders, ensuring that interventions focus on rehabilitation and support rather than punitive measures.

Strengthen collaboration between service providers: A few stakeholders emphasized the need to improve coordination between CBOs, educational institutions, law enforcement agencies, and other key agencies to create a more cohesive system of prevention, intervention, and aftercare services. According to participants, young women currently navigate a fragmented and inconsistent community support system, creating significant barriers to sustained assistance and support. Strengthening cross-sector partnerships could improve service coordination and ensure that young women receive the resources they need at multiple points of intervention.

Additional funding: While stakeholders all had recommendations for improving services and outcomes for young women, a few raised concerns about funding limitations in the region. It was reported that many counties and service providers often compete for the same limited funding sources, making it difficult to scale and sustain critical programs. Stakeholders emphasized the need for dedicated investment

in gender-responsive interventions to ensure that programs serving girls and young women receive adequate resources. Expanding long-term funding streams was also recommended to support the sustainability of service delivery and ensure that high-impact programs can grow to meet the needs of the community.

C. OUTCOMES STUDY

To address research question 7 (Do girls and young women who are gang-affiliated or gang-involved experience worse outcomes than their non-gang-involved counterparts within the juvenile justice system?), administrative data were collected from juvenile justice system partners across the region. The dataset encompassed the full spectrum of juvenile justice metrics, including detailed offense histories, disposition outcomes, risk assessment scores, and recidivism rates. All data were collected as part of the standard operational procedures of the regional juvenile justice system, ensuring complete and representative sampling. This methodological approach allowed for robust comparative analysis between gang-affiliated and non-gang-affiliated youth populations while controlling for relevant demographic and case-specific variables.

1. PARTICIPANTS

The sample was extracted from all youth who were referred to the local juvenile probation department (JPD, N = 5,759) from January 1, 2015, through June 30, 2024. Of those youth, the average age was 15, and 32% (n=1,847) were female. The data's race classification variables were presented with limited options: White, Black, American Indian/Alaskan Native, or Asian/Pacific Islander, without a distinct Hispanic category.

This methodological limitation reflects a common issue in demographic research where Hispanic/Latino identity is treated as an ethnicity rather than a racial category. Consequently, Hispanic

respondents typically select “White” when no specific Hispanic racial option exists. This explains the seemingly contradictory demographics in the sample, where 95 percent of respondents identified as Hispanic ethnically, while 97 percent simultaneously selected White as their racial category. This overlap illustrates the conceptual distinction between race and ethnicity in demographic data collection, and the challenges in accurately capturing Hispanic/Latino racial self-identification. With that said, a vast majority of the youth were identified as Hispanic (n=5,452; 94.7%) and White (n=5,588; 97.0%).

2. GANG LABEL

In addition to gathering traditional demographic elements as a part of their daily duties, juvenile probation officers gather social history information that includes elements of a youth’s association or involvement in gangs or gang-related activity. Some of those elements included a range of variable measures for gangs, including gang affiliation (a variable included in the original dataset), if they were a gang member, whether they had ever been part of a gang (former gang), whether they were a hardcore (or professional) gang member, or whether they wanted to be part of a gang. Table 5 shows the variable descriptives by population and percentage.

TABLE 5						
GANG-LABELED VARIABLES DESCRIPTIVES						
TJJD DATA ELEMENT	FEMALE		MALE		TOTAL POPULATION	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Juvenile Gang Affiliation*	67	3.53	392	10.16	459	7.97
Juvenile Gang Involvement†						
Gang Member	34	52.31	253	67.65	287	65.38
Former Gang Member	21	32.31	86	22.99	107	24.37

TABLE 5						
GANG-LABELED VARIABLES DESCRIPTIVES						
TJJD DATA ELEMENT	FEMALE		MALE		TOTAL POPULATION	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Hard Core/ Professional	1	1.54	5	1.34	6	1.37
Wants to Be a Gang Member	9	13.85	30	8.02	39	8.88

*Reflects percentage of juvenile gang affiliated versus overall sample.

†Reflects percentage that each category comprises of overall gang involvement.

Those variables were then recoded into a new dichotomous static variable “gang label.” Table 6 provides an overview of the demographics of the sample by gang label.

TABLE 6			
DEMOGRAPHICS BY GANG LABEL			
	JUVENILE GANG LABEL		TOTAL
	NO	YES	
N	5,300 (92.0%)	459 (8.0%)	5,759 (100.0%)
Sex/Gender			
Male	3,467 (65.4%)	392 (85.4%)	3,859 (67.0%)
Female	1,833 (34.6%)	67 (14.6%)	1,900 (33.0%)
Ethnicity			
Hispanic	5,002 (94.4%)	450 (98.0%)	5,452 (94.7%)
Non-Hispanic	157 (3.0%)	6 (1.3%)	163 (2.8%)
Unknown	141 (2.7%)	3 (0.7%)	144 (2.5%)
Race			
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.0%)
Asian or Pacific Islander	4 (0.1%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (0.1%)
Black	58 (1.1%)	2 (0.4%)	60 (1.0%)
Unknown	102 (1.9%)	4 (0.9%)	106 (1.8%)
White	5,135 (96.9%)	453 (98.7%)	5,588 (97.0%)
Age	14.79 (1.536)	15.63 (1.044)	14.86 (1.520)

There are many more males than females, the majority of the sample is Hispanic, fewer individuals in the sample come from other races, and most of the sample lists White for race. It also shows that gang-labeled individuals are slightly older and that gang-labeled people are 98% Hispanic compared with 95% non-labeled gang members.

3. OUTCOME MEASURES

This portion of the study examined whether having a gang label affects disposition severity in juvenile cases. To operationalize disposition, an ordinal scale (1–6) was constructed, representing increasing levels of restrictiveness. Each youth was coded according to their most severe disposition. The following provides an operational overview of that scale.

- Diversion (including diversionary dispositions such as counsel and release, non-suit by the court, and dismissals) = 1
- Probation (includes traditional community supervision and intensive in-home supervision) = 2
- Non-secure placement (includes residential treatment or foster care settings) = 3
- Secure placement (includes county and privately operated secure correctional placements) = 4
- Commitment (commitment to the state-run correctional system) = 5
- Certification as adult (transfers the youth's case to the adult system) = 6

This recoding process involved consolidating various diversionary programs and dismissals (all cases involving neither probation nor placement) into a single category (1), while preserving the hierarchical structure of increasingly restrictive sanctions (2–6). The ordinal scale served as the dependent variable in ordinal logistic regression models.

To supplement this analysis and identify effects on specific disposition types, six binary dependent variables corresponding to each disposition level were developed. Each youth was coded 1 for their maximum

disposition and 0 for all other categories. For instance, if a youth received “Probation with secure placement” as their most severe sanction, the youth is coded as 1 for this disposition type and 0 for all others. These binary outcome variables were then used in separate logistic regression models to determine whether gang affiliation significantly predicted specific disposition outcomes while controlling for legal and extralegal factors.

4. CONTROL VARIABLES

To account for potential confounding factors, several key covariates were incorporated into the analytical models.

Offense Severity (Max Offense Rank): Offenses were classified into three categories of increasing severity: Misdemeanor C (1), Misdemeanor A/B (2), and Felony (3). Each youth was coded according to their most serious offense across all referrals. The sample distribution was predominantly composed of Misdemeanor A/B (44.19%) and Felony (45.89%) offenses.

Offense Complexity (Max Offense Count Per Referral): This variable captures the maximum number of distinct offenses contained within a single referral. While most referrals involved a single offense, approximately 32% contained multiple charges, with 26% involving two or three offenses. In the most extreme case, one referral encompassed 12 distinct offenses. This measure is particularly salient, as multiple charges within a single referral may substantively influence dispositional severity.

Criminal History (Total Number of Offenses): Ranging from 1–37, this variable represents the cumulative number of offenses across all referrals per youth in the dataset, serving as a proxy for prior

criminal history. The distribution was positively skewed, with 58.10% of youth having only one offense, 15.92% with two offenses, and 7.73% with three offenses.

Age: Measured at the time of the most recent referral, this variable showed a concentration in middle-to-late adolescence. Youth ages 14–16 made up about 76% of the sample, with the largest proportions at age 16 (36%), 15 (25%), and 14 (16%).

Figures 8 and 9 provide visual histograms for age and total number of offenses stratified by gang affiliation.

Figure 8: Number of Offenses

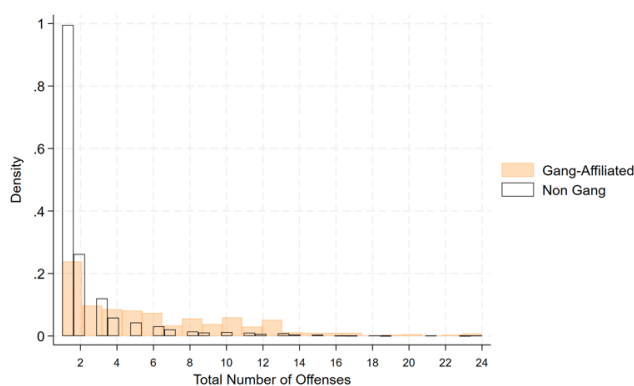
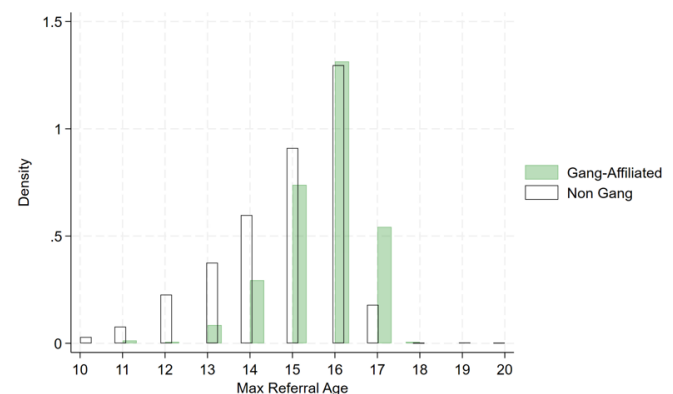


Figure 9: Age of Offense



Gang-labeled youth demonstrated a significantly different age distribution compared with their non-gang-affiliated counterparts. While non-gang-labeled youth were concentrated in early adolescence (ages 14–15), gang-labeled youth showed higher representation in late adolescence, particularly at age 17. Sixteen-year-olds constituted the largest proportion across both groups, representing over one third of the total sample. Additionally, gang-labeled youth exhibited a distinct pattern in offense frequency, with

progressively higher representation as the total offense count increased, suggesting a potential relationship between gang affiliation and repeated system involvement.

Demographics: Gender was dummy-coded with females as the reference category (1), while males (0) comprised the majority of the sample. Similarly, ethnicity was dichotomized with Hispanic youth—who represented the predominant group in the dataset—serving as the reference category (0). This coding strategy highlights the unique contribution of the dataset, which contains an unusually robust representation of Hispanic female gang-labeled youth, a historically understudied population in juvenile justice research. Race variables were excluded from the final analytical models since they demonstrated no significant relationships with outcomes across preliminary analyses, and non-Hispanic racial categories had insufficient representation (n was less than 100 for each non-Hispanic racial group) to support meaningful statistical inference.

The **Massachusetts Youth Screening Inventory-Version 2** (MAYSI-2; Grisso, 2004) was used to assess the impact of trauma and substance use as correlates to disposition severity. As the most widely implemented mental health screening instrument in U.S. juvenile justice systems (Wachter, 2015), this 52-item self-report measure is administered to justice-involved youth aged 12–17 during intake processing.

The MAYSI-2 is made up of seven empirically derived subscales: Alcohol/Drug Use, Angry-Irritable, Depressed-Anxious, Somatic Complaints, Suicidal Ideation, Thought Disturbance, and Traumatic Experiences. Extensive validation studies have established the MAYSI-2's psychometric properties across diverse juvenile justice populations. The instrument demonstrates good concurrent validity with established mental health measures and acceptable to strong reliability across settings (Cauffman, 2004; Goldstein et

al., 2003; Grisso & Barnum, 2006; Wasserman et al., 2005). Multiple studies using different self-administered diagnostic interviews and questionnaires have confirmed moderate diagnostic utility across MAYSI-2 subscales (Kerig, Moeddel, & Becker, 2011; Kuo, Stoep, & Stewart, 2005; Wasserman et al., 2005). Test-retest reliability over intervals ranges from moderate to good ($r = 0.53-0.89$; Grisso & Barnum, 2006).

Two MAYSI-2 subscales were included in the final models of the analysis.

1. *Traumatic Experiences*: Measured on a 0–5 scale, with higher scores indicating greater trauma exposure. The sample distribution revealed that approximately 40% of youth reported minimal trauma (score of 0), while 21% reported mild trauma exposure (score of 1).
2. *Alcohol/Drug Use*: Assessed on a 0–8 scale, with higher scores indicating more severe substance use problems. The majority (52%) scored 0, indicating no reported substance use issues, while 12% scored 1. Notably, approximately 35% of the sample ($n=2,000$) scored 2 or higher, suggesting significant substance use concerns in a substantial minority of youth.

All variables from the MAYSI-2 were included as initial covariates in all logistic regression models and propensity score matching (PSM) analyses to examine whether gang affiliation predicted disposition outcomes when controlling for mental health needs. Although there are other measures from the MAYSI-2 besides these two variables included in this study, they were not significantly related to disposition outcomes in any of the logistic and ordinal models and were therefore excluded from the results.

Violation of Court Order (VOCO) is a measure of the number of violations of court order a juvenile had been charged or referred for by the local juvenile court at the time of their last referral. Table 7 provides an overview of the descriptive summary of the sample by each key variable.

TABLE 7				
DESCRIPTIVE SUMMARY OF SAMPLE BY KEY VARIABLES				
KEY VARIABLE	JUVENILE GENDER (% OR SD)			
	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL	P-VALUE
N	3,859 (67.0%)	1,900 (33.0%)	5,759 (100.0%)	
<i>Ethnicity</i>				
Hispanic	3,634 (94.2%)	1,818 (95.7%)	5,452 (94.7%)	0.030
Non-Hispanic	124 (3.2%)	39 (2.1%)	163 (2.8%)	
Unknown	101 (2.6%)	43 (2.3%)	144 (2.5%)	
<i>Race</i>				
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.1%)	1 (0.0%)	0.041
Asian or Pacific Islander	4 (0.1%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (0.1%)	
Black	49 (1.3%)	11 (0.6%)	60 (1.0%)	
Unknown	72 (1.9%)	34 (1.8%)	106 (1.8%)	
White	3,734 (96.8%)	1,854 (97.6%)	5,588 (97.0%)	
Referral Age	14.92 (1.565)	14.73 (1.415)	14.86 (1.520)	<0.001
VOCO	0.44 (1.108)	0.28 (0.937)	0.39 (1.057)	<0.001
Gang Label	1.10 (0.302)	1.04 (0.184)	1.08 (0.271)	<0.001
Total Offenses	2.66 (3.088)	2.23 (2.706)	2.52 (2.974)	<0.001
Max Offense Rank	2.48 (0.589)	2.12 (0.716)	2.36 (0.655)	<0.001
Disposition Severity	1.85 (1.222)	1.44 (0.804)	1.71 (1.118)	<0.001
Trauma	1.45 (1.40)	1.05 (1.383)	1.15 (1.402)	0.013
Alcohol and Drug	1.59 (2.203)	1.55 (2.147)	1.57 (2.185)	0.555
Diversion	0.52 (0.500)	0.69 (0.464)	0.57 (0.495)	<0.001
Probation No Placement	0.32 (0.468)	0.24 (0.429)	0.30 (0.457)	<0.001
Probation Placement	0.04 (0.192)	0.02 (0.155)	0.03 (0.181)	0.007
Probation Secure	0.06 (0.240)	0.03 (0.182)	0.05 (0.223)	<0.001
Committed	0.03 (0.180)	0.01 (0.097)	0.03 (0.158)	<0.001
Certified Adult	0.03 (0.159)	0.00 (0.040)	0.02 (0.133)	<0.001

Note: Pearson tests were used for juvenile ethnicity and juvenile race.

Regression tests were used for non-dichotomous and non-categorical variables.

Table 8 shows within-group differences for many of these variables, comparing gang-labeled girls with non-gang-labeled girls.

TABLE 8				
FEMALE WITHIN-GROUP ANALYSIS FOR GANG LABELED VERSUS NON-GANG LABELED				
	GANG LABELED	NON-GANG LABELED	TOTAL	P-VALUE
N	67 (3.5%)	1833 (96.5%)	1,900 (100.0%)	
Ethnicity	1.06 (0.29)	1.07 (0.33)	1.06 (0.33)	0.877
Age	15.1 (1.27)	14.7 (1.42)	14.7 (1.41)	0.051
Offense Count Per Referral	2.1 (1.08)	1.3 (0.78)	1.4 (0.80)	<0.001
Offense Severity	2.3 (0.70)	2.1 (0.72)	2.1 (0.71)	0.018
Total Number of Offenses	5.6 (4.83)	2.1 (2.51)	2.2 (2.70)	<0.001
Number of VOCO	1.6 (2.08)	0.2 (0.82)	0.28 (0.94)	<0.001
Trauma	2.2 (1.54)	1.0 (1.36)	1.0 (1.38)	<0.001
Alcohol and Drug Abuse	4.6 (2.49)	1.4 (2.04)	1.55 (2.15)	<0.001
Disposition Severity	2.5 (1.32)	1.4 (0.75)	1.4 (0.75)	<0.001

Note: Mean (SD) are reported. Chi-squared test was used for ethnicity. Regression was used for all other variables.

There are notable differences in the gang labeled versus non-gang labeled sample in almost every category. Gang-labeled girls have 2.7 times the mean for total number of offenses (5.6 compared with 2.1) and three times the mean for alcohol and drug abuse (4.6 compared with 1.4). In addition, the mean for girls in gangs for VOCO is an impressive eight times higher than non-gang girls (1.6 compared with 0.2). Gang-labeled girls also had a much higher offense count per referral (mean 2.1, 1.3), disposition severity (mean 2.5, 1.4), and trauma (mean 2.2, 1.0) compared with girls who were not gang labeled. All of these differences were significant at the 0.01 level of significance.

5. ANALYTICAL APPROACH

Three complementary analytical strategies to examine the relationship between gang-labeled affiliation and juvenile justice dispositions were conducted.

6. ORDINAL LOGISTIC REGRESSION

Ordinal logistic regression was used to model the hierarchical nature of disposition severity (coded 1–6 from least to most restrictive as operationalized above in the variable section of this report). A rank order scale was used from 1–6 for the ordinal logit analyses. This approach accounted for the inherent order of disposition outcomes while examining whether gang affiliation predicts more severe sanctions when controlling for legal and extralegal factors.

7. BINARY LOGISTIC REGRESSION

Next, a series of binary logistic regression models were conducted for each specific disposition outcome (e.g., diversion, probation with placement, secure confinement). Each of these dichotomous disposition outcomes was coded 1 if that was the youth's highest disposition rank and 0 if not. Gender was coded similarly because there are far more boys in the sample (boys = 0, girls = 1). These models allowed us to identify whether gang affiliation differentially affected the likelihood of receiving particular dispositions rather than simply increasing overall severity. These analyses were conducted for the full sample and separately by gender to detect potential gender differences in the effect of gang labeling.

8. PROPENSITY SCORE MATCHING: METHODOLOGICAL VALIDATION

To strengthen causal inference regarding the impact of gang-labeled affiliation on juvenile justice outcomes, PSM as a complementary analytical strategy was integrated into the study's methodological design. This quasi-experimental approach was used to address potential selection bias by creating statistically matched comparison groups of gang-labeled-affiliated and non-gang-affiliated youth based on observed covariates, thus isolating the specific effect of gang labeling on dispositional outcomes.

This approach involved testing multiple matching specifications—including Coarsened Exact Matching, Inverse Probability Weighting, Kernel Matching, and Exact Matching—to ensure finding robustness. While PSM typically requires substantial sample sizes, previous Monte Carlo simulations have demonstrated that even with samples as small as 40 subjects, Type I error rates remain stable and increases in bias are smaller than anticipated (Pirracchio, Resche-Rigon, & Chevret, 2012). The PSM analyses exceeded this minimum threshold across all subgroups, including when examining relatively smaller populations such as gang-affiliated females.

In addition, the PSM results consistently confirmed the findings obtained through our regression models, providing important methodological triangulation that strengthens confidence in our conclusions. This convergence of evidence across different analytical approaches—from ordinal models examining overall disposition severity to binary models assessing specific disposition types and finally to gender-specific matched comparisons—establishes a robust empirical foundation for our findings.

Of note, for clarity and accessibility, this report focuses on the results of the regression models that were further confirmed with PSM, as they allow for more straightforward interpretation of the magnitude and direction of effects. The complete PSM analyses, which substantiate these findings, are available upon request from the authors.

9. GENDER DIFFERENTIAL OF GANG AFFILIATION ON DISPOSITION OUTCOMES

The ordinal logistic regression analysis revealed that gang-labeled affiliation significantly predicted more severe dispositional outcomes, with gang-label-affiliated youth experiencing 1.65 times higher odds of

receiving a more severe disposition category compared with non-gang youth ($p < .05$). However, subsequent gender-stratified analyses demonstrated this effect is predominantly driven by being male.

When examining boys separately, gang-labeled affiliation increased the odds of receiving a higher disposition rank by a factor of 1.77 ($p < .01$). In contrast, no statistically significant relationship was observed between gang affiliation and disposition severity for females across any tested models after controlling for court order violations, trauma history, and substance use variables. Table 9 shows the ordinal logistic regression results for both males and females.

TABLE 9				
ORDINAL LOGIT WITH BOTH GENDERS				
DISPOSITION RANK OUTCOME	ODDS RATIO	z	P> z	[95% CI]
Gang Labeled	1.65	4.76	0.000	(1.3438, 2.0318)
Gender	0.67	-5.87	0.000	(0.5904, 0.7685)
Age	1.14	5.81	0.000	(1.0882, 1.1860)
<i>Ethnicity</i>				
Non-Hispanic	0.62	-2.48	0.013	(0.4240, 0.9037)
Unknown	0.58	-2.52	0.012	(0.3814, 0.8858)
Count per referral	1.53	9.16	0.000	(1.4001, 1.6818)
Offense Severity	3.82	23.4	0.000	(3.4119, 4.2701)
Total Number of Offenses	0.98	-0.86	0.390	(0.9350, 1.0266)
Number of VOCO	1.98	12.93	0.000	(1.7831, 2.1923)
Trauma	1.09	3.54	0.000	(1.0378, 1.1381)
Alcohol/Drug abuse	1.15	8.6	0.000	(1.1166, 1.1917)

N = 5,594 | Pseudo R^2 = 0.2688

10. PREDICTORS OF DISPOSITION SEVERITY

The ordinal regression model examining combined gender data demonstrated that gang-labeled affiliation serves as a statistically significant positive predictor of disposition severity. Youth labeled as

gang-affiliated faced significantly increased odds of receiving higher disposition rankings compared with their non-gang counterparts. Gender emerges as a predictor in this model, with females (coded as 1) having about 1.5 times lower odds of receiving higher disposition rankings compared with males (coded as 0). This gender effect remains statistically significant after controlling for other relevant factors.

The dependent variable in the analysis—disposition rank (disprank1)—is measured on a six-point ordinal scale, with each successive value representing increasingly severe judicial outcomes. This measurement approach is particularly well-suited for ordinal regression as it preserves the inherent hierarchy of severity while not assuming equal intervals between ranks. For interpretive clarity, coefficients exceeding 1.0 that are statistically significant indicate increased odds of more severe dispositional outcomes, while coefficients below 1.0 signify reduced odds.

Findings reveal several significant risk factors that predict harsher dispositional outcomes: male gender, gang affiliation, Hispanic ethnicity, higher maximum offense counts, higher offense rankings, greater numbers of VOCOs, trauma history, and elevated alcohol/drug use scores. Each of these factors independently contributes to the likelihood of youth receiving more punitive dispositions within the juvenile justice system.

Binary logistic regression revealed that the association between gang labeling and the “diversion” outcome differed by gender. For boys, gang labeling exhibited a marginally significant negative effect ($p = 0.067$) when they are examined separately from the girls, suggesting boys with gang labels may be less likely to receive this outcome. For girls, gang labeling showed no discernible effect on this outcome. In fact, girls were significantly more likely than boys to receive a diversion disposition with 1.51 times the odds

increase compared with boys. For girls, the results for gang affiliation were not significant ($p = 0.135$).

Table 10 shows the combined logistic model for a diversion outcome.

TABLE 10				
DIVERSION LOGISTIC MODEL				
NO PROBATION NO PLACEMENT	ODDS RATIO	z	P> z	[95% CI]
Gang Labeled	0.74	-1.5	0.135	(0.4922428, 1.099789)
Gender	1.51	4.96	0.000	(1.280567, 1.769049)
<i>Ethnicity</i>				
Non-Hispanic	1.83	2.61	0.009	(1.160831, 2.871554)
Unknown	1.46	1.54	0.123	(0.9027308, 2.359187)
Age	0.97	-1.4	0.162	(0.9220591, 1.01368)
Count Per Referral	0.94	-0.67	0.502	(0.7877573, 1.123892)
Offense Severity	0.23	-21.85	0.000	(0.1999589, 0.260646)
Total Number of Offenses	0.59	-8.79	0.000	(0.528074, 0.666555)
Trauma	0.95	-1.52	0.128	(0.8966927, 1.013853)
Alcohol/Drug abuse	0.89	-5.37	0.000	(0.8488362, 0.926588)
Number of VOCO	0.05	-10.51	0.000	(0.0277293, 0.085553)
Constant	334.63	14.67	0.000	(153.9074, 727.541)

N = 5,594 | Pseudo R^2 = 0.0434

There are very strong predictors of diversion dispositions in this model. For example, if the severity of the offense increases by one, the model shows a 77 percent decrease in the odds of diversion. If there are increases in the number of total offenses, the odds of diversion increase 41 percent for each increase. For each increase in drugs and alcohol, the odds of diversion decrease by 11 percent. However, the strongest predictor by far is VOCO, in which each violation decreases the diversion odds by 95 percent.

For probation dispositions, after controlling for relevant covariates including offense severity, prior record, and demographic characteristics, gang label affiliation failed to demonstrate statistical significance as

a predictor for either male or female juveniles (all $p > .05$). Similarly, when analyzing both non-secure and secure out-of-home placements separately, the data revealed no significant predictive relationship between gang affiliation status and these more restrictive disposition outcomes (all $p > .05$). This non-significant pattern persisted across gender categories, suggesting that while gang affiliation may influence overall disposition severity in certain contexts, it does not appear to specifically channel youth toward either probation or out-of-home placement dispositions when accounting for other relevant legal and social factors. These results can be found in Table 8 in the logistic model summary table.

The analysis of state juvenile justice commitment dispositions revealed a gender-specific relationship with gang-labeled affiliation. For male juveniles, gang labeling emerged as a significant predictor of commitment to state-run institutions, maintaining statistical significance even after controlling for an extensive array of covariates. This comprehensive control set included offense history metrics (total offense count, maximum offense severity ranking, offenses across all referrals, offense density per referral), personal risk factors (trauma history, substance use patterns), demographic variables (ethnicity, age), and behavioral compliance indicators (violations of court orders).

This finding represents the most compelling and consistent result across an analytical framework. According to the binary logistic regression models, males identified as gang-labeled faced substantially elevated odds—2.9 times higher—of receiving commitment dispositions compared with their non-gang-labeled counterparts ($p < 0.000$) when the male-specific logistic model is run. The strength and consistency of this association persisted across multiple analytical approaches, underscoring its reliability.

Particularly noteworthy is the gender-specific nature of this effect. Female juveniles showed no parallel association between gang affiliation and commitment dispositions in any of the logistic regression models. Table 11 shows the combined boys and girls logistic model.

TABLE 11				
COMMITTED DISPOSITION OUTCOMES				
COMMITTED	ODDS RATIO	z	P> z	[95% CI]
Gang Labeled	2.79	4.82	0.000	(1.839178, 4.243943)
Gender	0.45	-2.69	0.007	(0.2546889, 0.807268)
<i>Ethnicity</i>				
Non-Hispanic	1.33	0.48	0.630	(0.4173954, 4.237399)
Age	0.96	-0.44	0.662	(0.8020181, 1.150466)
Count Per Referral	1.26	2.23	0.025	(1.029242, 1.552181)
Offense Severity	3.38	4.31	0.000	(1.940613, 5.871849)
Total Number of Offenses	0.93	-1.53	0.127	(0.8516884, 1.020199)
Number of VOCO	1.96	6.81	0.000	(1.614145, 2.376668)
Trauma	1.08	1.09	0.276	(0.9410701, 1.236749)
Alcohol/Drug Abuse	1.19	3.41	0.001	(1.075761, 1.3107)
Constant	0.00	-5.19	0.000	(0.0000145, 0.006523)

N = 5,455 | Psuedo R² = 0.3911

For the last disposition examined (certified as adult), there were not enough girls to perform analysis on (n=3). There were 100 boys certified as adults, and evidence suggests a significant link to gang affiliation and dispositional outcomes. For example, boys showed twice the increase in odds of being certified as an adult if gang-affiliated (p = 0.024).

Table 12 shows a summary of the binary logistic models.

TABLE 12						
SUMMARY OF LOGISTIC MODELS FOR THE SIX DISPOSITION OUTCOMES						
DISPOSITION SEVERITY	MODEL 1	MODEL 2	MODEL 3	MODEL 4	MODEL 5	MODEL 6
Gang Label	-0.307	-0.049	-0.218	-0.019	1.027***	0.750**
Standard Error	(0.205)	(0.124)	(0.210)	(0.181)	(0.213)	(0.340)
Gender	0.409***	-0.102	-0.118	-0.153	-0.791***	-2.245***
Standard Error	(0.082)	(0.070)	(0.185)	(0.179)	(0.294)	(0.592)
Non-Hispanic	0.602***	-0.637***	0.656*	-0.264	0.285	
Standard Error	(0.231)	(0.216)	(0.381)	(0.511)	(0.591)	
Unknown	0.378	-0.260	-0.216	-1.009		
Standard Error	(0.245)	(0.213)	(0.725)	(1.017)		
Age	-0.034	0.035*	0.146***	0.193***	-0.040	0.815***
Standard Error	(0.024)	(0.021)	(0.052)	(0.049)	(0.092)	(0.118)
Count Per Referral	-0.061	0.249***	0.324***	0.379***	0.234**	-0.040
Standard Error	(0.091)	(0.054)	(0.090)	(0.081)	(0.105)	(0.191)
Offense Severity	-1.477***	1.083***	0.321**	0.923***	1.217***	
Standard Error	(0.068)	(0.058)	(0.157)	(0.175)	(0.282)	
Number of Total Offenses	-0.522***	0.035	-0.069	-0.072*	-0.070	-0.085
Standard Error	(0.059)	(0.029)	(0.043)	(0.038)	(0.046)	(0.127)
Trauma	-0.048	-0.007	0.158***	0.007	0.076	0.130
Standard Error	(0.031)	(0.026)	(0.055)	(0.053)	(0.070)	(0.081)
Alcohol/Drug Abuse	-0.120***	0.049***	0.210***	0.181***	0.172***	-0.102
Standard Error	(0.022)	(0.018)	(0.038)	(0.036)	(0.050)	(0.063)
Number of VOCO	-3.022***	-0.500***	0.307***	0.712***	0.672***	-0.900***
Standard Error	(0.287)	(0.067)	(0.091)	(0.082)	(0.099)	(0.305)
Constant	5.813***	-4.354***	-7.752***	-9.979***	-8.088***	-15.020***
Standard Error	(0.396)	(0.347)	(0.895)	(0.912)	(1.559)	(1.862)
Observations	5,594	5,594	5,594	5,594	5,455	2,453

Standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Model 1: No Placement No Probation; Model 2: Probation No Placement; Model 3: Probation with Placement;
Model 4: Probation with Secure Placement; Model 5: Commitment; Model 6: Certified Adult.

11. GENDER DIFFERENCES IN PREDICTORS OF JUVENILE JUSTICE DISPOSITION OUTCOMES

The analysis consistently demonstrated that gang labeling is not a significant factor in disposition outcomes for female juveniles. This finding remained robust across all analytical approaches employed. As shown in Table 13, gang labeling was non-significant ($p = 0.203$) in the ordinal model. No model demonstrated even marginal statistical significance for the impact of gang labeling on dispositional sentencing for girls, with the sole exception of the “committed” disposition category—a finding compromised by insufficient sample size ($N = 18$) that precludes reliable inference.

TABLE 13				
ORDINAL LOGIT FOR FEMALE DISPOSITION SEVERITY				
DISPOSITION SEVERITY	ODDS RATIO	z	P> z	[95% CI]
Gang Labeled	1.440522	1.27	0.203	(.8209493,2.527689)
Age	1.028964	0.66	0.510	(.9451994,1.120153)
<i>Juvenile Ethnicity</i>				
Non-Hispanic	.8325715	-0.42	0.677	(.3512119,1.973667)
Unknown	.5180662	-1.38	0.168	(.2033695,1.319729)
Max Offense Count Per Referral	1.64723	5.01	0.000	(1.355203,2.002183)
Max Offense Rank	2.95403	11.23	0.000	(2.445177,3.568777)
Number of Total Offenses	1.02532	0.51	0.613	(.9306021,1.129679)
VOCO	2.673208	8.52	0.000	(2.132325,3.351289)
Trauma Score	1.20273	4.14	0.000	(1.102083,1.312569)
Drug and Alcohol Abuse	1.217451	6.51	0.000	(1.147397,1.291783)

$N = 1,847$ || $R^2 = 0.329$

Several key variables, however, consistently emerge as powerful predictors of disposition severity for female juveniles across all models. The number of offenses per referral (Max Offense Count Per Referral; $OR = 1.65$, $p < 0.001$), offense severity (Max Offense Rank; $OR = 2.95$, $p < 0.001$), VOCO (VOCO;

OR = 2.67, $p < 0.001$), trauma history (OR = 1.20, $p < 0.001$), and substance use (OR = 1.22, $p < 0.001$) all demonstrate statistically significant relationships with disposition outcomes. These findings indicate that girls face substantially increased odds of more severe dispositions (by factors of two to three) when they commit more serious offenses or violate court orders. Additionally, the density of offenses per referral, trauma exposure, and substance use significantly influence disposition severity.

Notably, neither age nor gang labeling demonstrates significant associations with disposition outcomes for girls. Interestingly, the cumulative number of offenses ($p = 0.613$) also fails to predict disposition severity when examining females separately. Instead, gender-stratified analyses consistently reveal that the severity of current offenses, receiving a VOCO, and offense density per referral carry substantially more weight in determining girls' dispositional outcomes. Across more than 30 logistic models, VOCOs, maximum offense rank, and offenses per referral consistently emerge as the most significant predictors with the highest effect sizes (Odds Ratios of 2-3×) for both genders regarding disposition severity.

In summary, the ordinal models reveal a significant increase in disposition severity for gang-labeled boys while showing no comparable effect for gang-labeled girls. This gender disparity is primarily driven by two key findings: (1) gang-labeled boys were significantly less likely to receive diversionary dispositions; and (2) they faced substantially higher odds of commitment to state incarceration facilities. Some evidence suggests gang-labeled boys may also face increased likelihood of adult certification, though models supporting this finding demonstrate limited statistical reliability.

For girls, disposition severity appears predominantly determined by offense severity, court order compliance, trauma history, and substance use patterns. This striking gender disparity across disposition types suggests fundamentally different decision-making processes may be operating when authorities determine outcomes for gang-affiliated youth based on gender, a finding corroborated across multiple analytical approaches in the data.

Logistic regression models can also be run on gang affiliation to determine predictors for female gang involvement. Table 14 shows the predictors of female gang affiliation conducted with logistic regression, where gang affiliation is the dependent variable.

TABLE 14				
PREDICTORS OF FEMALE GANG AFFILIATION WITH LOGISTIC REGRESSION				
GANG AFFILIATION	ODDS RATIO	z	P> z	[95% CI]
Non-Hispanic	2.00	0.83	0.408	(0.3881283, 10.287)
Age	0.83	-1.65	0.099	(0.6600247, 1.036484)
Count Per Referral	1.47	2.11	0.035	(1.028645, 2.109315)
Offense Severity	0.81	-0.97	0.334	(0.5212127, 1.247802)
Total Number of Offenses	0.86	-1.85	0.065	(0.7243891, 1.009536)
Trauma	1.12	1.18	0.24	(0.9276011, 1.350632)
Alcohol/Drug abuse	1.57	6.96	0.000	(1.380405, 1.777122)
Number of VOCO	1.73	3.19	0.001	(1.235715, 2.423519)
Constant	0.13	-1.18	0.237	(0.004504, 3.816313)

N = 1,847 | Pseudo R² = 0.238

The analysis revealed few significant associations when it came to girls, with only three variables achieving statistical significance. Alcohol and drug involvement significantly predicted girl gang-labeled affiliation, with each one-point increase in alcohol/drug scores on the MAYSI -2 associated with a 57% increase in gang affiliation odds ($p < 0.00$). VOCOs emerged as another significant predictor, with each

additional violation associated with a 73% increase in gang affiliation odds ($p < 0.001$). The Count Per Referral variable was also significant ($p < 0.035$) and showed a 47% increase in the odds of female gang affiliation per referral count offense increase. Notably, trauma history and other examined variables showed no statistically significant relationship with gang affiliation.

However, gender-stratified analyses revealed both similarities and distinctions between males and females. For boys, ethnicity emerged as a significant factor, with non-Hispanic males having 3.6 times lower odds of gang affiliation compared with their Hispanic counterparts. Consistent predictors across both genders included age (older youth showing greater likelihood), offense patterns (more offenses per referral increasing probability), alcohol/drug abuse severity, and frequency of court order violations—all positively associated with gang affiliation.

Even though the MAYSI-2 trauma measure was not significantly correlated with either boys or girls when answering the question of gang affiliation, the trauma measure was predictive for some types of dispositional outcomes. Examining only girls for secure placement, the trauma variable was significant ($p < 0.004$) and predicted a 37% increase in the odds of secure placement per unit increase in the trauma score. Trauma was also significantly positively correlated to probation placement outcomes for boys when gender stratified, showing a 16% increase in the odds ($p < 0.019$).

12. NOTE ABOUT ANALYTICAL APPROACH ACROSS FINDINGS

To ensure study findings were accurate, many models were conducted, including three ordinal models, 18 logit models, and six PSM models reported in this study. Many other models were excluded due to the non-significance of potentially important variables. Detailed models will be shown for the significant

results showing gang affiliation (gang labeled) and placement outcomes. Table 15 shows a basic summary of the findings relating to whether gang affiliation (or gang labeled) determines disposition outcomes.

TABLE 15			
SUMMARY OF ALL FINDINGS FOR DISPOSITION OUTCOMES			
GANG LABELED RESULTS	BOYS	GIRLS	OVERALL
Ordinal Model Results	Significant (+)	Non-significant	Significant (+)
Disposition Severity (PSM)	Significant (+)	Non-significant	Significant (+)
No Probation No Placement (Logit)	Non-significant (0.067)	Non-significant	Non-significant
No Probation No Placement (PSM)	Non-significant (0.57)	Non-significant	Significant (-)
Probation No Placement (Logit)	Non-significant	Non-significant	Non-significant
Probation No Placement (PSM)	Non-significant	Non-significant	Non-significant
Probation Placement (Logit)	Non-significant	Non-significant	Non-significant
Probation Placement (PSM)	Non-significant	Non-significant	Non-significant
Probation Secure (Logit)	Non-significant	Non-significant	Non-significant
Probation Secure (PSM)	Non-significant	Non-significant	Non-significant
Commitment (Logit)	Significant (+)	Non-significant	Significant (+)
Commitment (PSM)	Significant (+)	Non-significant	Significant (+)
Adult (Logit)	Significant (+)	N = Too small	Significant (+)
Adult (PSM)	Non-significant	N = Too small	Non-significant

The (+) or (-) represents a positive or negative correlation.

Significance testing is at the 0.05 level. The parentheses with numbers are (p <).

D. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The findings of the administrative outcomes portion of the study reveal a complex interplay between gang labeling, gender, and juvenile justice outcomes. When examining the full sample, gang labeling was associated with significantly more severe dispositional outcomes, with gang-labeled youth experiencing higher odds of receiving a more restrictive disposition compared with their non-gang-labeled counterparts.

However, gender-stratified analyses revealed this effect was predominantly driven by male juveniles. For boys, gang labeling increased the odds of receiving a higher disposition rank by a factor of 1.77 and was specifically associated with higher odds of commitment to state facilities (2.9 times higher odds) and certification as an adult (2.0 times higher odds). In contrast, for girls, gang labeling showed no statistically significant relationship with disposition severity across any of the models after controlling for relevant factors such as offense characteristics, VOCOs, trauma history, and substance use.

The analysis identified several key variables that consistently predict disposition severity for female juveniles: offense complexity (number of offenses per referral), offense severity, VOCOs, trauma history, and substance use patterns. Girls with higher scores on these variables faced substantially increased odds of receiving more severe dispositions. Notably, neither age nor gang labeling demonstrated significant associations with disposition outcomes for girls, highlighting a gendered pattern in juvenile justice decision making.

Additionally, when examining predictors of gang labeling itself, substance use and VOCOs emerged as significant factors for girls, with each one-point increase in alcohol/drug scores associated with a 57% increase in gang-labeling odds, and each additional court order violation associated with a 73% increase in

gang-labeling odds. For boys, ethnicity played a significant role, with Hispanic males showing substantially higher odds of gang labeling compared with non-Hispanic males.

1. GENDER DIFFERENCES IN GANG LABELING EFFECTS

One of the most significant findings of this study is that despite controlling for a comprehensive set of legal and extralegal factors, gang labeling appears to function as an independent risk factor for more severe dispositions only for boys, not for girls. This gender disparity was most pronounced at the extremes of the disposition continuum, with gang-labeled boys less likely to receive diversionary dispositions and more likely to receive state commitments or adult certification.

This pattern suggests that juvenile justice decision-makers may conceptualize and respond to female gang involvement differently than male gang involvement. While boys with gang labels face heightened punitive responses, girls' dispositions appear to be determined primarily by their offense characteristics, compliance with court orders, and behavioral health needs rather than gang affiliation status.

A Note About the Role of Ethnicity and Demographics

The study's findings regarding ethnicity deserve particular attention. For boys, non-Hispanic status was associated with significantly lower odds of gang labeling compared with Hispanic counterparts. Given that the sample was predominantly Hispanic (94.7%), this finding highlights potential ethnic disparities in gang-labeling practices that may have downstream effects on disposition severity.

The demographic composition of the sample—heavily Hispanic and predominantly White-identified—reflects the unique characteristics of the Rio Grande Valley region. This demographic profile differs substantially from many prior studies on gang involvement in juvenile justice, which have often

focused on African American and non-Hispanic White populations in urban settings. As such, this study contributes valuable insights into Hispanic/Latino youth experiences within the juvenile justice system, particularly in border regions with distinct sociocultural contexts.

V. APPLICABILITY AND DISCUSSION

This study provides significant insights into the experiences of girls and young women in gang ecologies within the distinctive transnational context of the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. The findings have important implications for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers seeking to develop more effective, gender-responsive approaches to prevention, intervention, and juvenile justice processing. The following section covers some of those implications and recommendations for future research.

A. RECONCEPTUALIZING FEMALE GANG INVOLVEMENT

The findings from this study fundamentally challenge traditional binary conceptualizations of gang membership, affiliation, and association. The identification of the “hang around” status—an intermediate position where girls are recognized as gang-connected despite not self-identifying as gang members—suggests the need for a more nuanced understanding of female gang involvement. This liminal position creates unique vulnerabilities as these young women participate in illegal activities without the formal protections of membership, yet they face many of the same risks and legal consequences.

This reconceptualization has significant implications for how policymakers, practitioners, and researchers identify, measure, and respond to female gang involvement. Interventions must recognize this continuum of involvement rather than focus exclusively on formal gang membership. One approach to

address the needs of this population could involve the development of assessment tools or structured decision-making metrics that capture the full spectrum of gang association, including peripheral involvement through family, romantic, and friendship networks.

B. GENDER-RESPONSIVE AND DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE APPROACHES

The study reveals distinct gender patterns in both pathways to gang affiliation and juvenile justice outcomes. While relationship-based pathways were common, girls demonstrated significant variability in their levels of participation and autonomy within gang ecologies. Notably, the administrative data analysis found that gang labeling significantly predicted more severe judicial outcomes for boys but not for girls, whose dispositions were primarily determined by offense characteristics, receiving VOCOs, and behavioral health needs.

These findings underscore the need for gender-responsive and developmentally appropriate approaches that address the following. **(1) Relationship-focused interventions:** Programs should address the relational contexts through which girls become involved with gangs, including family connections, intimate partner relationships, and friendship networks. **(2) Trauma-informed care:** Given the prevalence of trauma histories among participants and their statistical significance in predicting secure placement for girls, juvenile justice systems should implement comprehensive trauma screening and trauma-specific interventions.

(3) Substance use treatment: The strong correlation between substance use and both gang affiliation and more severe dispositions highlights the need for integrated approaches that address substance use as both a risk factor for gang involvement and a consequence of gang-associated trauma.

C. TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXT: BORDER-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

The transnational character of the Rio Grande Valley creates unique dynamics that influence gang involvement in ways not observed in interior urban settings. Cross-border connections, experiences with cartel violence, and border crossing histories emerged as significant contextual factors shaping participants' experiences. These findings have important implications for border regions. **(1) Culturally responsive and reflexive services and supports:** Interventions must acknowledge the bicultural, transnational identities of girls and young women in the region, recognizing how cross-border family connections and cultural ties influence their social worlds. **(2) Specialized trafficking interventions:** The presence of border-related activities like human trafficking and smuggling necessitates specialized prevention and intervention approaches that address these unique border region risks. **(3) Cross-system coordination and collaboration:** The complex interplay of gang structures, transnational criminal organizations, and local communities requires coordinated responses across juvenile justice, immigration, education, mental health, and child welfare systems.

D. FAMILY-BASED APPROACHES

The central role of family emerged across multiple themes, both as a pathway to gang involvement through family connections and as a source of resilience and desistance. Family criminal justice involvement, particularly paternal incarceration, was identified as a significant contextual factor shaping girls' vulnerability to gang involvement.

These findings, coupled with the prevalence of substance use and intimate partner violence, suggest several comprehensive family-focused strategies. **(1) Family systems interventions:** Programs should engage

the entire family system, recognizing that gang disassociation or disengagement may require addressing family dynamics that initially facilitated gang exposure. These interventions should target substance use within the family context because the findings revealed how familial substance use often created environments where gang association became normalized or provided an escape mechanism for girls and young women. **(2) Intergenerational approaches:** Given the prevalence of family criminal justice involvement, interventions should address intergenerational cycles of system involvement through targeted support for children of incarcerated parents. These approaches should include substance use prevention components because data revealed significant associations between parental substance use, criminal justice involvement, and young women's own substance use patterns. **(3) Intimate partner violence prevention and intervention:** The findings highlighted how intimate partner relationships functioned as both pathways to gang association with gang ecologies and opportunities for victimization. Family-based interventions should incorporate education on healthy relationships, dating violence prevention, and specific supports for girls and young women experiencing intimate partner violence within gang-connected relationships. This is particularly important given the finding that 28% of participants reported experiencing unsupportive or unhealthy relationships with intimate partners, often involving controlling behaviors and violence that limited their autonomy and increased vulnerability. **(4) Substance use treatment with family components:** The strong correlation between substance use and association with gang ecologies (with 31% of participants reporting addiction and 57% higher odds of gang-label affiliation per unit increase in substance use scores demonstrated in the administrative outcomes study) suggests the need for family-based substance use interventions. These should address both personal substance use and the impact of family members'

substance use on household dynamics, focusing on how substance use intersects with gang involvement through shared social contexts and coping mechanisms. **(5) Family reunification and strengthening:** For girls in out-of-home placements, supporting healthy family reunification may be crucial for successful community reintegration and gang desistance. This process must include addressing any substance use or intimate partner violence concerns that might undermine successful reunification, with targeted supports that build healthy family communication and reduce risk factors for both substance use and unhealthy relationships.

These multifaceted approaches recognize the complex interplay between family dynamics, substance use, intimate partner violence, and gang involvement revealed in our study. By addressing these interconnected issues simultaneously, interventions can more effectively support young women in developing healthier relationships and reducing their vulnerability to gang association.

E. IMPLICATIONS FOR JUVENILE JUSTICE POLICY AND PRACTICE

The distinct findings regarding gender differences in the impact of gang labeling on juvenile dispositions—coupled with findings on family dynamics, substance use, and trauma—suggest several important implications for juvenile justice policy and practice.

1. **Trauma-informed juvenile justice approaches:** The analysis revealed significant associations between trauma history and disposition severity for girls, with trauma scores predicting a 37% increase in the odds of secure placement per unit increase. This underscores the need for comprehensive trauma screening, assessment, and trauma-specific interventions within juvenile justice systems. Rather than responding to trauma-related behaviors with increasingly restrictive placements, systems should implement developmentally appropriate trauma-responsive practices that adequately identify and address underlying needs while avoiding re-traumatization.
2. **Family-centered care coordination and case management:** Given that family connections emerged as a primary pathway to gang involvement (49.3% of relationship-based cases), juvenile justice systems

should develop family-centered approaches to both care coordination and case management as both diversions and interventions. This includes engaging family members in the development of supervision plans, providing support to strengthen family functioning, and addressing criminogenic family factors such as intergenerational gang involvement and parental incarceration. The finding that paternal criminal justice involvement was prevalent among 16.7% of participants highlights the need for specialized support for youth with system-involved parents.

3. **Integrated substance use treatment:** The strong relationship between substance use and both gang-labeled affiliation and disposition severity demands comprehensive substance use interventions within juvenile justice settings. With 31.3% of participants reporting addiction and each one-point increase in alcohol/drug scores associated with a 57% increase in gang-label affiliation odds, substance use treatment should be a core component of any juvenile justice system response, not merely an adjunct service. This is particularly important given the finding that substance use often served as both a pathway into gang-associated activities and a consequence of gang involvement.
4. **Review of gang designation processes:** Juvenile justice systems should examine potential biases in how gang affiliation is identified, documented, and considered in case processing decisions. The finding that gang labeling significantly predicted more severe dispositions for boys but not for girls suggests the need for gender-responsive approaches to gang assessment and intervention planning that account for the different ways girls participate in gang ecologies.
5. **Addressing court order compliance barriers:** The finding that VOCOs significantly predicted both gang labeling (with each violation associated with a 73% increase in gang-labeling odds for girls) and more restrictive dispositions suggests the need to examine the appropriateness of standard probation conditions for youth with trauma histories, substance use issues, and complex family dynamics. Developing individualized, achievable supervision plans that address underlying needs may be more effective than imposing standardized conditions that many vulnerable youth struggle to meet.
6. **Cross-system collaboration:** The complex interplay between family dynamics, substance use, trauma, and gang involvement revealed in our study necessitates coordinated responses across juvenile justice, child welfare, mental health, substance use treatment, and education systems. This is particularly important for addressing the needs of girls and young women who experience multiple risk factors simultaneously, such as those with trauma histories who are also using substances and experiencing family disruption.
7. **Gender-responsive programming:** The findings that female participation in gang activities often differs from traditional male patterns and that their disposition outcomes are influenced by different factors than boys' highlight the need for developmentally appropriate gender-responsive programming within juvenile justice systems. This includes developing interventions that address relational pathways to association with gang ecologies, offending, trauma recovery, substance use, and healthy intimate partner relationships.
8. **Diversion for “hang-around” status:** The identification of the “hang around” status—where many girls are recognized as gang-connected despite not identifying as gang members—suggests the value of

developing specific diversion pathways for youth with peripheral gang involvement. Rather than processing these youth through traditional juvenile justice channels, which may strengthen gang connections, systems should develop community-based alternatives that address underlying risk factors while maintaining positive family and community ties.

These policy and practice implications recognize that effective juvenile justice responses must address the complex constellation of risk factors (including family dynamics, substance use, and trauma) that shape girls' pathways into gang ecosystems. By developing more nuanced, developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed, and family-centered approaches, juvenile justice systems can better support positive outcomes for gang-involved girls while enhancing public safety.

F. FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

This study points to several critical areas for future research that build upon findings related to family dynamics, substance use, intimate partner violence, trauma, and system responses.

1. **Family interventions for gang-involved girls:** Given that family connections emerged as a significant pathway to gang involvement (49.3% of relationship-based cases), research should examine which family-based interventions are most effective in disrupting intergenerational patterns of gang involvement. Studies should evaluate interventions that simultaneously address parental criminal justice involvement, family substance use, and family communication patterns that either facilitate or protect against gang involvement.
2. **Trauma and substance use intersections:** The finding that both trauma and substance use were significantly associated with disposition severity and gang labeling suggests the need for research on the specific mechanisms through which these factors interact and influence girls' gang involvement. Studies should investigate how trauma-informed substance use interventions might address this intersection, particularly examining whether addressing underlying trauma can reduce substance use and, subsequently, gang involvement.
3. **Court order violations as a systemic issue:** The strong relationship between VOCOs and both gang labeling and increasingly restrictive dispositions points to the need for research examining the appropriateness of standard probation conditions for traumatized, substance-using youth from complex family environments. Studies should evaluate alternative approaches to supervision that better account for these youths' challenges with compliance while still ensuring public safety.

4. **Intimate partner violence within gang contexts:** With 28% of participants reporting unhealthy intimate partner relationships, research should examine the unique dynamics of intimate partner violence within gang-associated relationships. This includes investigating how power dynamics, control, and violence in these relationships differ from non-gang contexts and evaluating interventions specifically designed for young women experiencing overlapping intimate partner violence and gang involvement.
5. **Longitudinal studies of trauma recovery and gang desistance:** Research should track how trauma recovery processes intersect with pathways out of gang involvement over time. Such studies could illuminate whether addressing trauma symptoms facilitates gang desistance and whether different types of traumatic experiences (family-based, intimate partner violence, community violence) require different intervention approaches.
6. **Gender differences in system responses:** Our administrative findings that gang labeling predicts more severe outcomes for boys but not girls, while substance use and trauma are stronger predictors for girls, suggests the need for research into how juvenile justice professionals conceptualize and respond to male versus female gang involvement. This includes examining potential gender biases in assessment, disposition, and intervention planning processes.
7. **Effectiveness of integrated services:** Research should evaluate the effectiveness of integrated service models that simultaneously address family dynamics, substance use, trauma recovery, and intimate partner violence for gang-involved girls and young women. This includes examining whether such comprehensive approaches produce better outcomes than more narrowly focused interventions.
8. **“Hang-around” status interventions:** The identification of the “hang around” status warrants research on specialized early interventions for girls and young women who associate with gangs but have not yet developed formal membership. Such research could identify critical intervention points and approaches that prevent deeper gang involvement while addressing family, substance use, and trauma factors that create vulnerability.
9. **Cultural adaptations in border regions:** Given the transnational context of the study, research should examine how culturally adapted interventions addressing family dynamics, substance use, and trauma might be more effective for Hispanic/Latina girls in border regions than standardized approaches developed in other contexts.
10. **Technology and social media in gang dynamics:** Future research should investigate how technology and social media influence the intersection of gang involvement, intimate partner relationships, and substance use among girls and young women, particularly examining whether these digital contexts create new risk pathways or potential intervention opportunities.

By pursuing these research directions, researchers can build upon this study’s findings to develop more nuanced understandings of how family dynamics, substance use, intimate partner violence, trauma, and

system responses shape girls' experiences within gang ecologies. Such research would provide the foundation for more effective, gender-responsive intervention approaches that address the complex realities of girls' lives in gang-impacted communities.

G. CONCLUSION

The girls and young women in this study navigate complex social worlds where gang involvement is often embedded within familial, romantic, and friendship networks rather than existing as a discrete criminal affiliation. Their experiences highlight the need for more nuanced, gender-responsive, and contextually sensitive approaches that recognize both their vulnerabilities and their agency.

By moving beyond simplified narratives of female gang involvement as either primarily victimization or delinquency, practitioners and policymakers can develop more effective strategies that address the complex realities of girls' lives in gang-impacted communities. The distinctive transnational context of the Rio Grande Valley further emphasizes the importance of regionally specific approaches that account for the unique sociocultural dynamics of border communities. Ultimately, addressing female gang involvement requires integrated strategies that span multiple systems and domains, recognizing the interconnected nature of family, community, and individual factors that shape girls' pathways into and out of gang ecologies.

VI. COLLABORATING ORGANIZATIONS

- Cameron County Juvenile Justice Department
- Hidalgo County Juvenile Probation Department
- Tropical Texas Behavioral Health
- BCFS Health and Human Services

VII. CHANGES FROM ORIGINAL DESIGN

The study underwent several modifications from its original design, driven primarily by the COVID-19 pandemic, recruitment challenges specific to the target population, and methodological innovations that emerged during implementation. These changes, while substantial, ultimately enhanced the study's rigor and community relevance while maintaining fidelity to the core research objectives.

A. COVID-19 PANDEMIC IMPACTS AND EARLY ADAPTATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered the study's trajectory from its inception. Shelter-in-place orders implemented in March 2020 immediately disrupted planned activities, including the convening of the Girls and Gangs II Advisory Board (GGAB-II). The pandemic's impact on the Rio Grande Valley was particularly severe, with heightened community exposure and rising case counts creating additional barriers to research activities. Community-based organizations became unable to assist with study activities while addressing clients' basic pandemic-related needs, and executive leadership of probation departments and GGAB-II members were diverted to pandemic response duties.

The pandemic necessitated a fundamental shift from the originally planned in-person data collection methods to virtual and hybrid approaches. The first GGAB-II meeting was conducted via Zoom in September 2020 rather than in-person as originally envisioned. Virtual interviews became a primary data collection method, ultimately expanding the geographic reach and accessibility for participants in

community settings. While initially viewed as a constraint, these virtual methods proved beneficial in reaching participants who might have been difficult to access through traditional in-person approaches.

B. RECRUITMENT CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

Beyond the pandemic-related disruptions that paused the project for 13 months, recruiting participants in communities with gang activity presented greater challenges than originally anticipated. Trust and safety concerns were paramount in these environments, where community members were often hesitant to engage with formal organizations or research institutions. Our initial recruitment strategy relied on partnerships with local community-based organizations to identify eligible girls and young women and refer them to the research team for screening and enrollment. While our criminal justice partners maintained effective referral processes, most other community-based organizations were unable to establish reliable systems for identifying and engaging potential study participants. This gap in organizational capacity, combined with the inherent trust barriers in high-risk communities, necessitated a fundamental shift in our recruitment approach.

Under the guidance of our Young Women's Advisory Board (YWAB; see more about this adjustment below), we transitioned from organization-based referrals to snowball sampling as our primary recruitment method. This peer-to-peer approach leveraged existing relationships and trust networks within the community, with current participants referring individuals they knew to the study. The YWAB initiated and facilitated this snowball recruitment process, ultimately proving far more effective than relying on institutional partnerships. This modification addressed both practical limitations of our partner organizations and the cultural realities of recruitment in communities where personal relationships and peer endorsement

carry significantly more weight than institutional credibility. This shift was formalized through IRB amendments in September 2021, which also increased participant incentives from \$25 to \$50 to improve engagement.

The snowball sampling approach proved strategically superior in several key ways. First, it generated geographic diversity that enhanced the representativeness of study findings across varied community contexts within the region. Second, it accessed participants who were genuinely embedded in the social networks and environments central to our research questions, rather than those primarily connected to formal service systems. Third, the peer-referral process likely reduced selection bias by reaching individuals who might never engage with traditional organizations.

C. METHODOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS

Several methodological innovations emerged during the study that were not anticipated in the original design. The establishment of the University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) Transcription and Translation Lab represented a significant advancement developed in response to the unique linguistic challenges of analyzing interviews conducted in "Spanglish," the blended English-Spanish dialect prevalent among participants. This lab employed local bilingual students to provide culturally sensitive transcription and translation services, addressing a gap in existing qualitative research software capabilities.

Based on recommendations from early study participants and the project's original advisory board, the YWAB was integrated into the study design and represented a significant methodological enhancement not included in the original design. YWAB members provided authentic community connections that proved essential for successful recruitment, including conducting "ride-alongs" with researchers to access hard-to-

reach populations and introducing research staff to contacts in areas they likely could not have accessed independently. The integration of the YWAB thus represented both a practical solution to recruitment challenges and a methodological advancement that strengthened the study's community-centered approach while maintaining scientific rigor.

The study also significantly broadened beyond its original partnership framework to address recruitment challenges. New collaborations were established with the Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program (JJAEP), Cameron and Hidalgo County Department of Adult Probation, Human Trafficking Task Force, Center to Counter Human Trafficking at Texas A&M International University, and Valley Baptist Foundation. These partnerships became necessary to achieve adequate sample sizes and ensure representation of diverse experiences within the target population.

D. EVOLUTION OF STAKEHOLDER DATA COLLECTION

The stakeholder data collection component underwent substantial evolution from its original design, driven by both cultural considerations and the need for community relationship-building. Rather than conducting traditional focus groups with stakeholders as initially planned, the study implemented a strategic two-phase approach beginning with a Town Hall format in April 2024 that accommodated over 55 participants. The Town Hall served multiple strategic purposes beyond simple data collection. The research team presented preliminary findings from their ongoing analysis to stakeholders, encouraging continued referrals to the study while gathering feedback on whether these preliminary findings aligned with what stakeholders had been observing in their own work. This approach recognized the unique cultural context of the Rio Grande Valley community, where in-person relationship-building is essential and stakeholders

needed to meet the research team face-to-face to establish the trust necessary for meaningful collaboration.

Following the Town Hall, the research team used the attendee invitation list as their foundation and contacted participants to invite them into the next phase of stakeholder data collection. This follow-up approach proved essential for building on the relationships established during the initial in-person gathering. Due to pandemic-related constraints and scheduling challenges, the team implemented a flexible format that accommodated stakeholder needs and availability. Some data collection occurred in focus group settings, particularly when multiple representatives from the same agency could participate together, while others were conducted as individual interviews to accommodate scheduling limitations and provide more confidential discussion opportunities.

This hybrid approach proved more effective than the originally proposed focus group format alone, as it allowed for both community-wide dialogue and relationship-building through the Town Hall, followed by more targeted data collection that captured both group dynamics and individual perspectives. The cultural responsiveness of this approach was essential for meaningful stakeholder engagement in this transnational border community.

E. STAFFING AND TIMELINE ADAPTATIONS

The study encountered significant staffing challenges that extended data collection timelines and required adaptive management strategies. The recruitment of local research associates (LRAs) was deliberately designed to include individuals with lived expertise in the communities and experiences being

studied. While this approach was essential for building authentic community connections and ensuring culturally responsive data collection, it also created unique employment retention challenges.

Local researchers with lived expertise brought invaluable perspectives, community credibility, and access to hard-to-reach populations that would have been difficult to achieve through traditional academic recruitment. However, the same life circumstances and ongoing vulnerabilities that provided this expertise also impacted employment stability. Two of three local research associates resigned in 2023, requiring new recruitment and training efforts that temporarily disrupted data collection momentum.

These staffing transitions, while challenging, ultimately demonstrated the importance of maintaining flexible approaches when working with communities that have experienced systemic marginalization. Each new researcher brought fresh perspectives and different community connections, which enhanced the study's reach and authenticity. The process of recruiting, training, and supporting researchers with lived expertise required additional resources and ongoing mentorship but proved essential for accessing the target population.

Data collection timelines were extended beyond original projections due to staffing challenges and recruitment complexities, with interviews continuing through late 2024 to achieve the target sample size of 150 participants. This extension was necessary not only due to staffing transitions but also to ensure adequate representation across age groups, levels of gang involvement, and geographic areas within the Rio Grande Valley. The recruitment challenges were compounded by the sensitive nature of the research topic and the need to build trust within communities where gang involvement creates safety concerns and mistrust of external researchers.

The extended timeline, while initially viewed as a project challenge, ultimately allowed for more thorough community engagement and relationship building, which proved essential for accessing this hard-to-reach population. The slower pace of recruitment enabled deeper trust-building processes and allowed researchers to establish the credibility necessary for participants to share sensitive experiences. Additionally, the longer timeframe accommodated the complex life circumstances of potential participants, many of whom faced housing instability, juvenile justice involvement, or other life disruptions that affected their availability for participation.

F. VALIDITY AND GENERALIZABILITY

While our original target was 250 girls and young women for the qualitative portion of the study, our achieved sample of 150 participants remains methodologically sound and sufficient for robust qualitative analysis. Current research on qualitative sampling methodology supports the adequacy of this sample size, as research on data saturation indicates that meaningful patterns and themes typically emerge within the first 12-15 interviews, with theoretical saturation often achieved between 20-30 participants in homogeneous populations (Ahmed, 2025; Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020; Wutich et.al, 2024; Vasileiou et. al, 2018). Our sample of 150 participants across diverse geographic areas substantially exceeds these established thresholds (Naderifar, 2017; Shaghagi et. al, 2011), providing robust evidence for both thematic saturation and pattern stability.

Furthermore, the geographic span and network-based recruitment enhance external validity by capturing variation across different community contexts while maintaining focus on our target population. This approach increases confidence that our findings reflect authentic community experiences rather than

artifacts of specific organizational affiliations or service engagement patterns, thereby strengthening the transferability of results to similar populations and settings. The 150 participants represent not a compromise in quality, but rather a strategically recruited sample that prioritizes depth, authenticity, and geographic representativeness over numerical targets alone.

VIII. LIMITATIONS

A. INTERVIEWS WITH GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. The exclusive focus on girls and young women in the Rio Grande Valley limits generalizability to other geographic contexts. The unique border region characteristics of the Rio Grande Valley—including its predominantly Hispanic/Latinx population, proximity to Mexico, and specific socioeconomic conditions—create a distinctive context that may not reflect experiences of female gang involvement in other regions of Texas or the United States.

A substantial non-response rate observed for certain variables may be attributed either to participants having not experienced these specific circumstances or to their unwillingness to disclose such information during interviews. Self-selection bias may influence sample composition, as participation required willingness to discuss potentially sensitive experiences. Those with more extreme gang involvement, particularly active participation in serious criminal activities, may be underrepresented due to concerns about disclosure or legal consequences. In addition, the age distribution of participants was weighted toward

adolescence, with 44.7% between ages 14 and 16 years and limited representation in young adulthood. This concentration provides rich data on adolescent experiences but may constrain understanding of young adult trajectories and outcomes associated with gang involvement.

Although this study builds upon extensive existing research on male gang involvement, the absence of direct male comparison groups within this specific study and regional context limits our ability to definitively determine which aspects of participants' experiences are gender-specific to the Rio Grande Valley versus common across genders in this region. While our analysis identifies patterns that appear to be shaped by gender, and we contextualize these within the broader literature on male gang involvement, direct comparative analysis with male experiences in the same geographic and cultural context would strengthen these interpretations. This limitation is particularly relevant when considering how border region dynamics might differently influence pathways to gang involvement for young men versus young women in the Rio Grande Valley.

B. LIMITATIONS TO ADMINISTRATIVE OUTCOMES STUDY

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings from the administrative outcomes portion of the study. First, while the study documents the relationship between gang labeling and disposition outcomes, it cannot definitively establish causality. Although propensity score matching helps approximate causal inference, unmeasured confounding factors may still influence the observed relationships. Second, concerning missing data, only variables with complete data were included in the analysis. This approach, while ensuring data integrity for the variables examined, may limit the

comprehensiveness of the analysis and potentially introduce selection bias if missingness was not random across the population studied.

Third, the 'gang-involved' label designation requires clarification given its central importance to this study. This variable represents a static label assigned by juvenile probation officers during the initial intake and social history assessment process. Officers make this determination based on multiple sources of information, including direct observations, conversations with the youth, and other interpretive assessments conducted during supervision. Importantly, this designation reflects the probation officer's judgment rather than youth self-identification, which is why we refer to it as a 'label' throughout this report. Once assigned, this designation remains static in the administrative record and does not change based on subsequent behavior or reassessment.

This approach to categorizing gang involvement introduces several potential limitations: the designation relies on individual officer interpretation and may vary based on officer training, experience, and bias; it captures involvement at a single point in time; and it may not reflect the complex, often fluid nature of youth relationships with gangs. Additionally, the decision to include only complete-data variables may have excluded relevant factors that could have provided additional context for understanding gang involvement patterns.

Fourth, the limited representation of non-Hispanic racial groups in the sample restricted the ability to examine intersectional effects of race, ethnicity, and gender. Studies in more demographically diverse contexts are needed to explore these intersections more fully. The last limitations address the small sample size of female gang members and the methods in which those individuals were gang labeled. The

administrative data came with a gang-affiliation variable, meaning at some point a juvenile was either given a “yes” or “no” determination on whether that person was affiliated with a gang. Admittedly gang affiliating, or gang labeling, is a somewhat subjective process conducted while constructing the administrative data, meaning one limitation of this study involves the uncertainty of the labeling process itself. Juvenile Probation officers and law enforcement often use personal judgments when determining gang-affiliation. Another limitation involves the small sample size of female gang members. Although pairwise deletion was used in the models to maximize sample size, having only 67 female gang members out of 5,759 juvenile youth in the sample must be considered a statistical limitation.

Future research should explore the specific mechanisms through which gang labeling influences disposition decisions for boys but not girls. Qualitative studies examining judicial and probation officer decision-making regarding gang-affiliated youth could provide valuable insights into the gender-specific processes observed in the quantitative data. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking gang-labeled youth over time could help determine whether these initial disposition differences translate into divergent trajectories within and beyond the juvenile justice system.

IX. ARTIFACTS

A. DATASETS GENERATED

The **qualitative dataset** consists of 150 semi-structured interviews with girls and young women (ages 14–25) from the Rio Grande Valley. (Population is described in methods section.) Primary interview data collection occurred during 2022–24. Interviews were conducted through in-person, telephone, and

videoconferencing methods. In addition to interviews with girls and young women, this dataset incorporates focus group data from 26 stakeholders collected in 2024, representing various institutional sectors including law enforcement, education, social services, and community organizations.

Data was processed using Otter.ai transcription followed by review through UTRGV or through Rev transcription services with internal review. All reviewing processes included bilingual review from external partners or internal personnel ensuring fidelity for Spanish/Spanglish-language and dialect content. All transcripts were anonymized with personal identifiers removed and saved as searchable PDF files. Analytical procedures used NVivo 12 qualitative analysis software, with data coding across thematic domains: Behavioral Issues, Community (RGV), Contextual Aspects of the RGV, Demographics, Gangs, Harm or Violence Against Girls and Young Women, Resilience, System Involvement, and Transnationalism.

All qualitative data from this project has been deposited in the National Archive of Criminal Justice Data (NACJD), where it will be preserved and made available to qualified researchers for secondary analysis. The archive includes anonymized transcripts, coding structures, and methodological documentation to support future research while maintaining participant confidentiality.

The **quantitative part** of this study used publicly available administrative data from the Cameron County Juvenile Justice System. The dataset was composed of multiple structured files, including six-month, one-year, and two-year profiles of juveniles (both male and female) across several variables such as gang affiliation, criminal history, disposition outcomes, and demographic information. Additional administrative datasets were incorporated, including a risk assessment dataset, Massachusetts Youth Screening Inventory-Version 2 (MAYSI-2) records, and placement data spanning from January 2015 through June 2024.

To create a comprehensive analytical dataset, we merged these separate administrative files using unique person identification numbers, prioritizing placement data over referral data when necessary to accurately determine disposition outcomes. The original referral data contained multiple entries for some individuals due to repeat system involvement. To address this, we collapsed multiple referrals into a single record per individual while preserving the historical sequence and severity of offenses, resulting in a final analytical sample of 5,759 unique juveniles.

All variable coding schemes, data processing procedures, and statistical syntax used for analyses will be archived and made available with the submission of this report to ensure transparency and reproducibility of findings. This approach allows other researchers to validate our findings and potentially conduct secondary analyses using the same methodological framework. As the quantitative portion used secondary analysis of existing public data, the programming syntax that produced the analyses and all derived variables have been deposited in the NACJD in accordance with NIJ archiving requirements for secondary data analysis. This ensures reproducibility of findings and supports future research building on these analytical methods.

B. DISSEMINATION ACTIVITIES

To date, no dissemination activities related to the final findings of this study have been conducted.

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