

# Leaving the Gang: Problems and Prospects

Scott H. Decker  
Arizona State University  
[Scott.Decker@asu.edu](mailto:Scott.Decker@asu.edu)



SCHOOL OF CRIMINOLOGY AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE

# Ready, Fire, Aim...An American Solution to Problems

---



# Focus



- Attempt to address the void in the literature about leaving the gang
- Frame leaving the gang as part of a life course process
- Provide a better understanding as to what constitutes “former” gang membership
- Highlight the roles of offending and victimization

# Characteristics of Gang Definitions



Group characteristics.

Symbols of membership.

Persistence of membership.

Self-identification.

Criminal involvement.

What do we need to know to create successful gang Prevention, Intervention, Suppression and Re-entry strategies?

**Community** characteristics, assets, and deficits.

Individual gang **member** characteristics – race/ethnicity, age, gender, siblings, family structure, neighborhood, education.

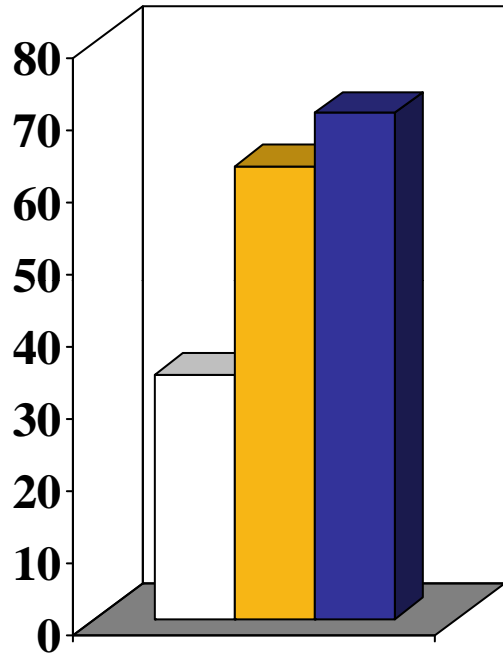
**Gang** Characteristics – turf, age of the gang, initiation rites, exit rites, link to prison gangs, hanging out.

Gang **Organizational** Characteristics – rules, roles, leaders, meetings, handling of money.

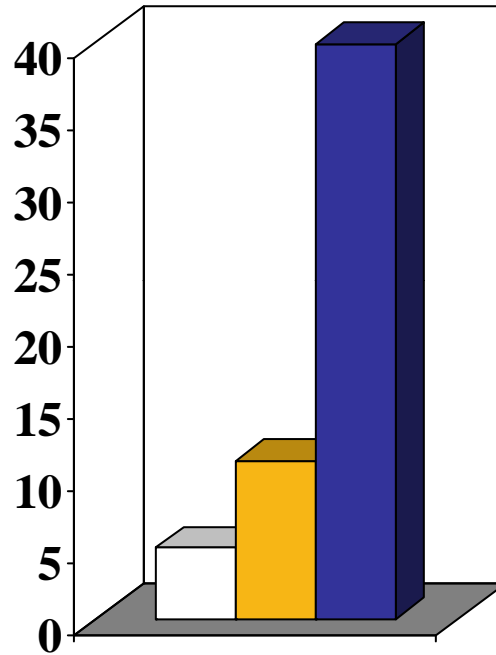
Gang **Activities** – crime and non-crime.

Gang **Crime** – involvement in gang versus non-gang crime, drugs, guns, violent crime, property crime, rivalries.

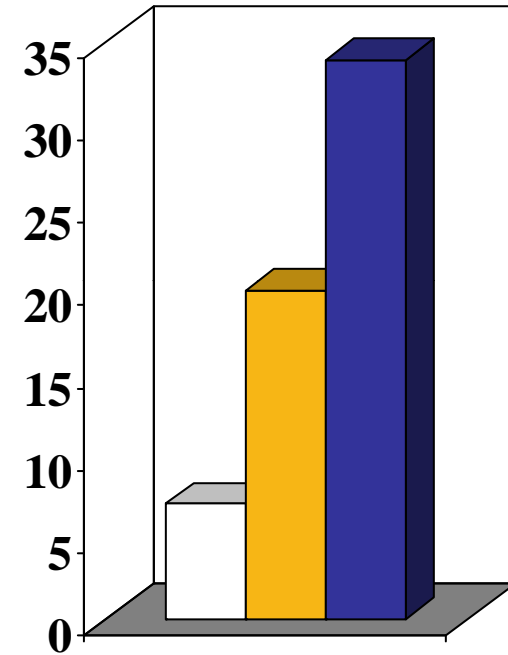
# Gang Status & Self-Reported Delinquency St. Louis STG Study



% Used Violence



% Carried Gun



% Shot At

## Gang Status

None

Involved

Member

What if we reduce gang SRD to pre-gang levels? What is the “saving” in crimes committed?

# Organizational Structures of Gangs

## Corporate

Super Gangs  
National Presence  
Older Members  
Long life of the Gang  
Prison involvement  
Profit motives dominate

## Cells

Purposive  
Small  
Focused  
Specialists  
Isolated  
Criminal events

## Episodic Groups

Local Gangs  
Cafeteria offending  
Younger members  
Non purposive  
Hanging out  
Cafeteria style

How are gang members organized in your community? What is your source of information about their organizational structure?

What are the implications for **understanding** gangs? Human Smuggling? Terrorism? Drug Smuggling?

What are the implications for **responding** to gangs by law enforcement, the community, social services and NGOs for each type?

# Six Risk Factors for Gang Membership



1. Poor parental supervision
2. Early childhood aggression
3. Delinquent belief systems
4. Significant negative life events
5. Peers that are gang members
6. Commitment to street oriented peers

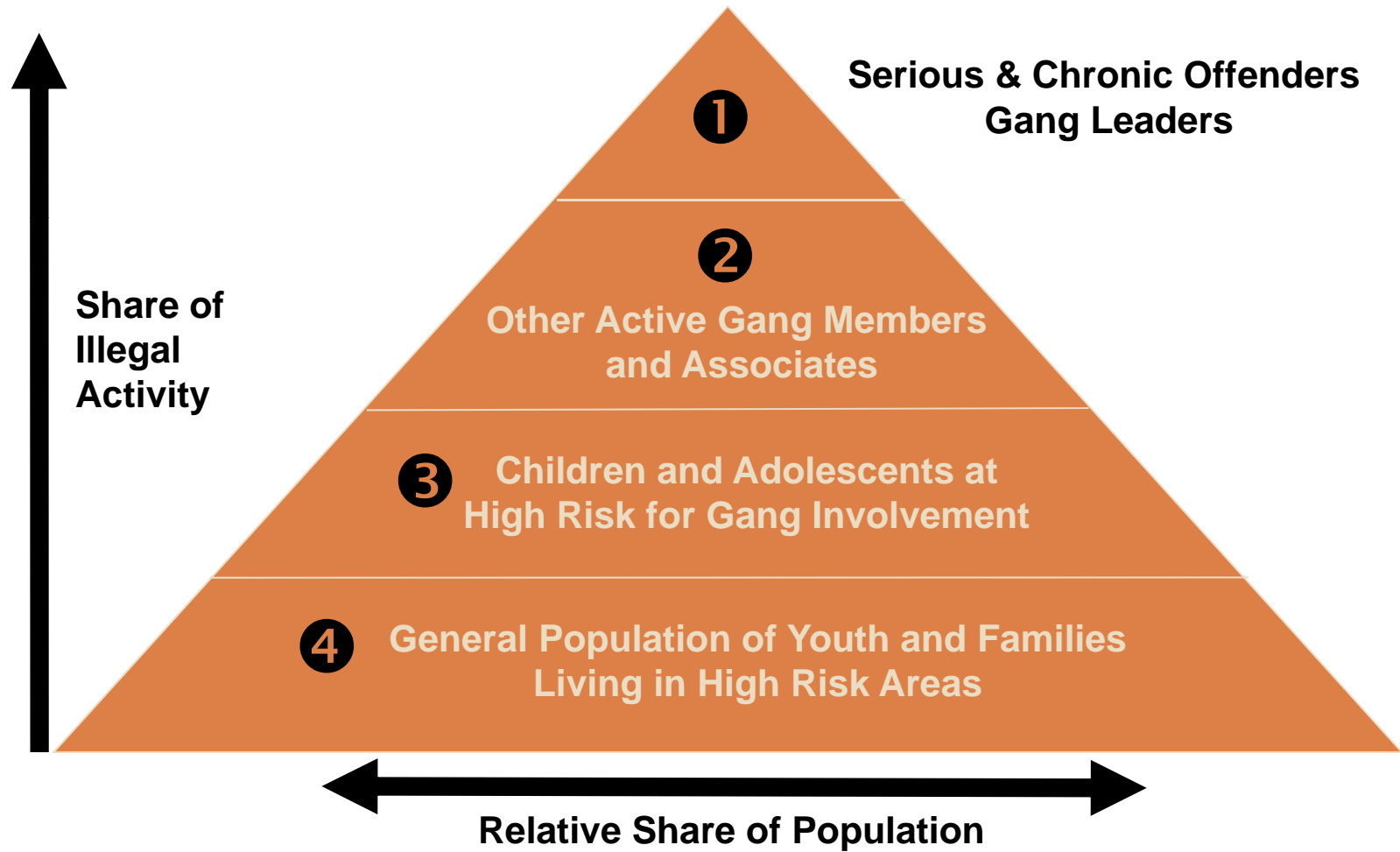
Number, Intensity, Duration, Early Onset

# Longitudinal Research on Gangs Shows:



1. Gang membership, on average tends to be of short duration, typically less than two years.
2. Five Percent of gang members stay in the gang beyond four years.
3. Gang members commit significantly more crime and more serious crime, three to five times more than their population share.
4. We don't predict gang membership very well.

# Who is “involved”?



# Framework

- Gangs from a life-course perspective
  - ▣ Onset, persistence, and desistance
- Exiting the gang
  - ▣ Sudden vs. gradual departures (Maruna; Decker)
  - ▣ Pushes and pulls (Bjorgo)
- Implications for leaving the gang
  - ▣ Offending and victimization
  - ▣ Pro social relationships
  - ▣ Collateral Consequences (neighborhood, family)

# What does the literature show?

(Not much)



Leaving the gang occurs as the result of:

1. Normal maturational processes (jobs, marriage, family)
2. Growing tired of “the life”
3. Exceptional events “extreme violence”
4. Rarely, very rarely, but occasionally programs

# What does “former” mean?



The end of:

1. Emotional ties? Feelings, emotions and beliefs.
2. Social ties? Being together in social space.
3. Joint activity? Acting together in a purposive manner.
4. Criminal behavior that supports group objectives?

# Conceptual Focus



- ▣ 1. What factors increase the number of ties to the former gang network?
- ▣ 2. How does the number and strength of ties increase criminality? Especially since longitudinal research shows that gang membership increases F and S of offending and victimizations.
- ▣ How do ties vary in priority, duration, strength, intensity and number?

# Ties to Former Gang and the Former Gang Network

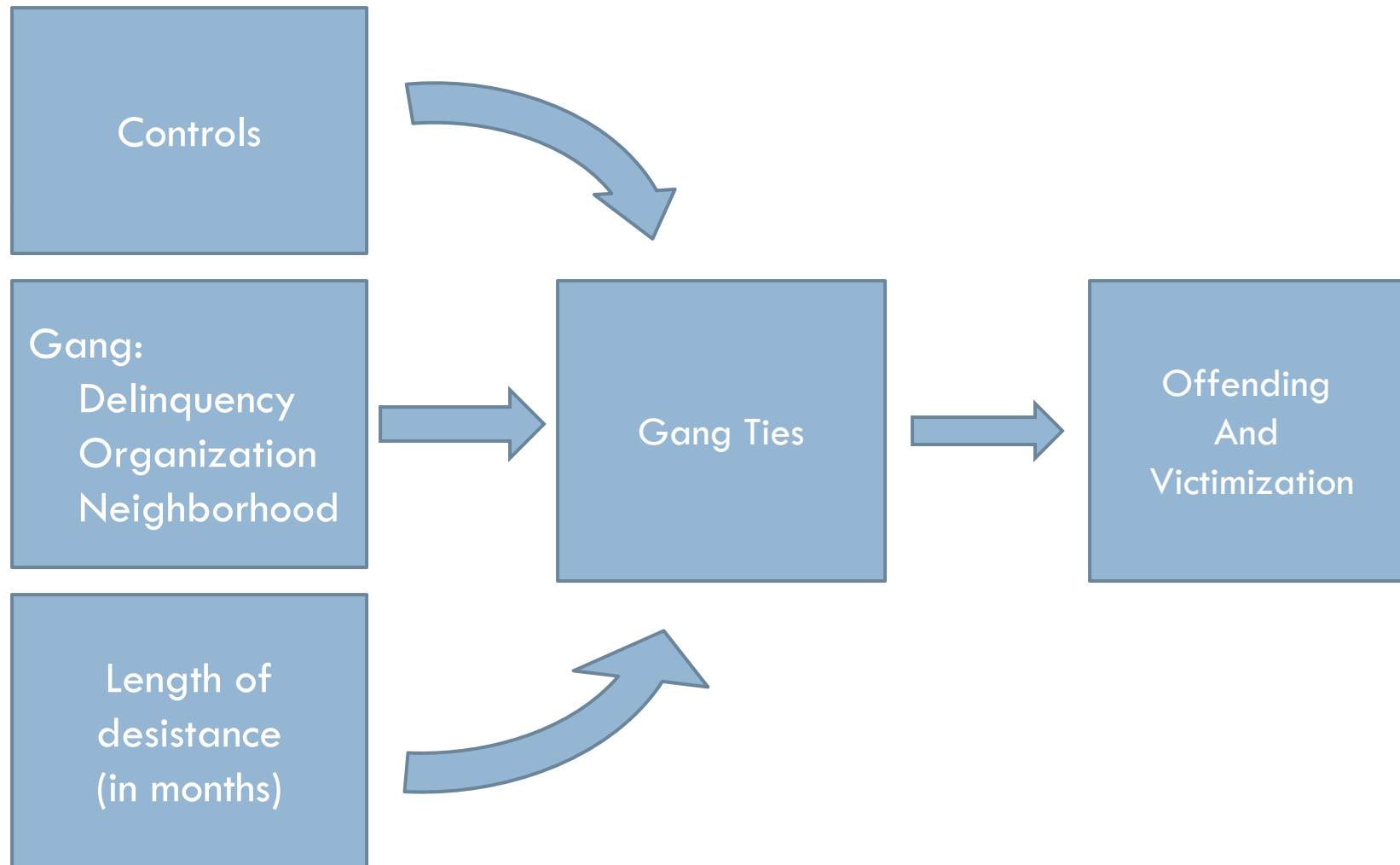
- Definition of Gang, Gang Member and Former Member
- Importance
  - ▣ Life course
  - ▣ Leaving the gang
  - ▣ Victimization risk
  - ▣ Offending risk

# The Nature of Ties

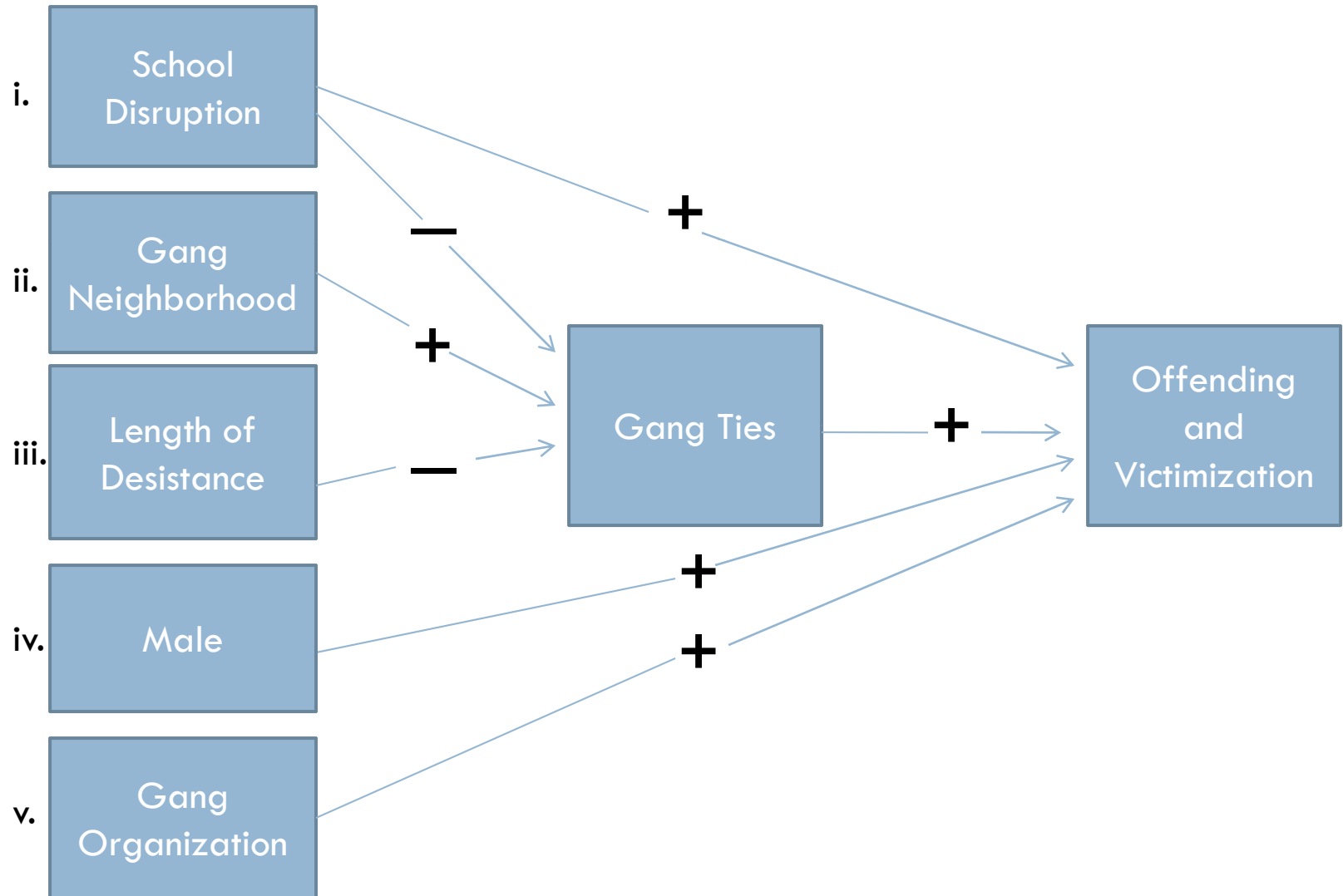


- Desistance, Gang Ties, Offending and Victimization.
- A sample of 120 former gang members in Phoenix.
- The number of ties declines the longer one has left the gang.
- Social ties to former gang members show a different pattern than emotional ties. Social ties persist, particularly for former members who don't leave their neighborhood.
- Emotional ties, particularly to family members in gangs, persist longer and stronger.

# A Conceptual Focus for Gang Desistance



# Discussion Model



# Discussion



- Gang departure alone is a start, but not a “cure-all”
- Closer to the former gang network = more offending and more victimization
- Intervention efforts should focus on: “knifing-off” gang ties and concentrate on pro-social relationships and atmospheres, especially neighborhoods
- How do gang ties interact with other mechanisms, such as programming, life course changes (jobs, marriage)

# Discussion



- The impact of lingering ties to the gang
  - ▣ Neighborhood gang activity increases ties, thus making it harder to leave the gang
  - ▣ School disruptions decreased ties to the gang
  - ▣ Lengths of months in desistance decreased ties
  - ▣ Increases in gang ties is increases risk for both victimization and offending
  - ▣ Implications for policy: It is not just length of time since leaving the gang, it is reduced ties – social and emotional – to gang networks that reduces victimization

# Discussion



Pro social ties need to be fostered, particularly for gang members so that those ties can counteract gang ties.

Working with the gang structure remains a bad idea as it reinforces ties among gang members.