Published in final edited form as:
Child Youth Serv Rev. 2013 August 1; 35(8): 1197–1205. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.02.013.

Dissolving Borders: Reframing Risk, Delinquent Peers, and Youth Violence

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Abstract

Although "association with delinquent peers" is commonly identified as "a risk factor for youth violence," this framework leads us to blame individuals and ignore the complex lives of youth who face state, symbolic, and interpersonal violence. This study is based on interviews with young adults about their adolescence in a low-income immigrant gateway neighborhood of Oakland, California. Most of the interviewees have peer networks that are racially/ethnically diverse and also include both delinquent and conforming peers. We show that having these "doubly diverse" friendship networks helps youth move through their neighborhood safely and feel anchored to their community even when they leave to attend college. Even successful youth in our study do not erect borders between themselves and "delinquent peers." It is easy to assign blame to youth for their friendships, their violent behavior, their lack of education, their unstable and low-paying jobs, but this calculus ignores both the structural factors that constrain youth choices and the benefits that seem to be linked to diverse friendships, even with delinquent peers. Growing up in a site of global capital accumulation and disinvestment in the era of neoliberalism, our interviewees challenge us to reframe risk.

Keywords

Risk; delinquency; peer network; violence

1. Introduction

"I know a lot of people think birds of a feather flock together. But that's not necessarily true." Benjamin, a 24 year old African American male, described how some of his friends

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An earlier version of this article was published as "Birds of a Feather? Peers, Delinquency, and Risk" in *Education and the Risk Society: Theories, Discourse, and Risk Identities in Education Contexts*, edited by Steven Bialostok, Robert L. Whitman, and William S. Bradley (2012). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, pp 203–223. It is reprinted here with permission of the publisher.

Disclosure Statement

Kenzo K. Sung is the Chair of the Board of Directors of East Bay Asian Youth Center

were drug dealers and gang members who were in and out of jail while others were academically successful and ended up in college. Much social science research on youth, peers, and violence has suggested that birds of a feather flock together, as reflected in the common finding that association with delinquent peers is a risk factor for youth violence. In this article, we draw on the experiences of youth growing up in a diverse low-income community of Oakland, California, to complicate this claim.

As we will show, youth with diverse peer networks are able to survive and sometimes thrive in a difficult environment. Their networks of friends and acquaintances are diverse in terms of race/ethnicity, school performance, and/or delinquency. In their social context of rampant unemployment, inadequate public schools, and a non-profit sector creatively trying to fill the gaps left by the reduction and underfunding of state services, having friends or acquaintances who are delinquent is the norm. Furthermore, for many "successful" students having diverse peer networks seems to contribute to, rather than deter from, their relative success professionally or academically. We will argue that the narrow focus on risk factors and peer delinquency understates the structural factors that make life difficult for these young adults, neglects the organizational contexts that promote engagement across social boundaries, and implicitly blames youth for the violence in their community.

As a "scientific" process, risk assessment is supposed to result in blaming only the "real causes" of misfortune. Yet Douglas (1992, p. 7) shows that our culture shapes which risks we attend to and which causes we blame. In recognizing the social construction of risk, we argue that the focus on delinquent peers as a risk factor shifts our gaze from the structures of power to the choices of individuals. Uncovering how delinquent peers serve as positive resources for young people motivates us to reexamine risk and challenges social workers to think about different ways to approach working with youth who have delinquent peers. Instead of seeing delinquent peers as inherently bad influences, we argue that they can be viewed as potential resources/partners in promoting positive youth development.

This article begins such a reframing: we start with a brief review of the literature on risk and peer social groups. Next, we describe our qualitative methodology. We then present two intersecting levels of analysis to understand the context and significance of youth who make and maintain diverse sets of friends. The first section focuses on the broader structural factors that are often minimized in research on risk factors, while the second section focuses on the youth friendship patterns and experiences of violence. In the conclusion, we return to these two scales and recommend ways that social workers can work on both of these levels to promote positive outcomes for youth.

2. Literature Review

Research on youth violence often uses a framework of risk and protective factors, which posits that individuals who have many risk factors and few protective factors are more likely to be violent (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2010). This model, taken for granted in much social science and policy discourse, frames a social problem as primarily the result of transgressive behavior by individuals (Douglas, 1966, 1992). Because these risk and protective factors are derived from survey research, they are depicted as one-dimensional and do not reflect the rich, contradictory, subjective understandings and actions that shape peer relationships and the social worlds of youth.

The risk and protective factors that dominate research on youth violence are normally divided into four levels – most commonly individual, relationship, community, and society (or individual, family, peer/relationship, and community) – to reflect the different levels of the social ecology. This ecological framework for adolescent delinquency, which considers the role of structural and organizational contexts and not just individual risks or peer

networks, is aligned with the "person-in-environment" concept (Karls & Wandrei, 1995). Yet even though there is an explicit focus on community/societal characteristics in this risk and protective factors model, the individual is still deemed responsible in two ways.

First, societal/community factors are often "held constant" in order to delve more deeply into the individual and family characteristics. For example, Klein and Maxsons's (2006) review of risk factors for joining gangs only included "studies that permit appropriate comparisons among youth who live in the same neighborhoods and attend the same schools" because "comparing gang youth from inner-city slums to upper-class suburban youth reveals more about race, class, and employment levels than about the risks of joining gangs" (p. 141). While their parameters are logical, it leads them to conclude that research has "mostly not supported" poverty as a risk factor (p. 145); in other words, the studies they reviewed did not find relative poverty *within a poor community* to be a risk factor. However, poverty would be the number one risk factor if they had included studies of youth in rich and poor communities.

Our second critique of these ever-present inventories of risk factors is the visual schema of the lists themselves, where the different ecological levels almost seem to equate social factors with individual factors. For example, when "diminished economic opportunities" is placed a few lines down from "low commitment to school," the structural condition of poverty is presented as analogous to a personal characteristic like "low commitment to school" (which could itself be unpacked to reveal the systemic factors that make this "individual" attribute so much more likely in impoverished and segregated neighborhoods) (CDC, 2010). As Rose (2000) argues, "risk thinking," the process of identifying risk factors, "has become central to the management of exclusion in post-welfare strategies of control" (p. 332). By identifying risk factors that are implicitly "attached" to individuals, even if they are out of that individual's control, it becomes easier to view that individual's exclusion or marginalization as their fault. When one of the risk factors is association with delinquent peers, the blaming of individuals rather than systems or structures becomes even more evident.

Numerous studies have found that association with delinquent peers is strongly correlated with youth violence: it is universally portrayed as a risk factor (Haynie & Osgood, 2005; Institute of Behavioral Sciences, 1987; Multisite Violence Prevention Project, 2004; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Thornberry, 1987; Thornberry et al., 1994; Warr, 1993, 2002). Indeed, Haynie and Osgood (2005) write that "it is difficult to overstate the importance attributed to normative peer influence in the study of crime and delinquency. It is the key causal variable in many studies…" (p. 1111). But even when association with delinquent peers is statistically significant as a risk factor, this finding means only that youth with delinquent peers are somewhat more likely to engage in delinquency themselves; it may explain little of the variance in actual behavior.

Also, as Haynie and Osgood (2005) acknowledge, there are methodological problems with studies of peer delinquency. For instance, much research uses data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health, which asks respondents to name their five closest female friends and their five closest male friends. As we describe below, our findings suggest that analyzing broader social networks, including acquaintances, may add an important dimension to our understanding of peer relationships and delinquency. Within these broader networks, the density of the network seems to be a key characteristic. For example, we describe youth who successfully follow a "social butterfly" pattern characteristic of a more diffuse (less dense) network.

Our intention in this article is to complicate, rather than contradict, the findings from quantitative studies by introducing both theoretical claims and interview data that ask what risks youth face in low-income neighborhoods and how their peer relationships may help them navigate their social worlds and the risks around them. Having delinquent friends is seen as unequivocally negative in the literature, thus a boundary is erected and maintained between delinquent and "prosocial" or conforming youth as if to suggest that youth can be polluted (led astray) by their friends. In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas (1966) analyzed how beliefs and rituals regarding pollution serve to maintain inequalities in status and resources. The literature on youth violence delineates delinquent or tabooed behavior and people as outside the social norm, but no sharp boundary exists in the social worlds of our interviewees. In fact having delinquent friends may be both normative and beneficial. As we will show, being "known" as an associate of delinquent youth seems to allow conforming youth to move more safely through their school and neighborhood.

Most research on youth and peers has found that youth typically have friends who are similar to them (Eckert, 1989; MacLeod, 1987; McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1987; Willis, 1977). Delinquent youth in particular are known to have delinquent friends, though Haynie and Osgood (2005) suggest that this similarity has been overstated. Our interviewees describe living in a dangerous world; having a diverse mix of friends seems to help them manage the risks they face and feel at ease and safe in their schools and streets. In their study of "street-life-oriented" (delinquent) young African American men, Payne and Brown (2010) suggest that "resilience … is understood in terms of how the streets organize meaning around feeling well, satisfied, or accomplished as well as how the young men choose to survive in relation to adverse structural conditions" (p. 318). In a similar vein, having delinquent friends seems to be a source of resilience for our interviewees who are not street-life-oriented, but who live in the same adverse structural conditions.

In addition to having both conventional and delinquent friends, the young people in our study had diverse friendship circles in terms of race and ethnicity. While racial/ethnic diversity is often seen as a source of conflict for youth (Bettie, 2003; Lewis, 2003; Lustig, 1997; Olsen, 1997; Sung, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999) and something for schools and other institutions to manage, living in a racially/ethnically diverse neighborhood can have some positive effects for youth. Gutiérrez, Baquedanó-Lopez, and Tejeda (1999) describe how in some diverse classrooms and after school programs, linguistic minority and English speaking students have access to each others' linguistic, cultural, and cognitive resources, which facilitates learning and helps students negotiate the linguistic and sociocultural borders of communities. These supportive institutional spaces seem to help translate the diversity of the neighborhood into cultural capital for the youth participants. Lewis-Charp, Yu, and Friedlander (2004) also found that youth who could move seamlessly between groups of students who were different from themselves experienced long-term social and academic success. As we will discuss, some youth in the San Antonio neighborhood experience their schools, community organizations, and neighborhood as fostering this diversity, hybridity, and border-crossing.

But this border-crossing does not happen naturally just due to the proximity of different groups. The institutional context seems to be key to creating greater levels of social capital and social engagement and bonding across social boundaries. Some organizational settings facilitate and strengthen connections and relationships, which can lead to more social capital for individuals and more social cohesion for communities (Small, 2009). Participation in shared activities such as sports can help to soften racial/ethnic group boundaries (Duster, 2010).

We will discuss one organization in particular, the East Bay Asian Youth Center (EBAYC) that seems to foster this border-crossing (despite the name, the organization serves youth of all racial/ethnic backgrounds). While not all interviewees who participated in EBAYC had friends of different racial and ethnic groups, this organization and others like it may play a critical role in helping youth develop comfort with peers who are different from themselves. As we will show, this comfort seems to be associated with minimal involvement in violence and successful transitions to adulthood. Yet in the current budget climate, these organizations themselves are "at-risk," despite the critical role they play in meeting the needs of youth.

3. Methods

This article reports on some of the findings from an interdisciplinary team project (see acknowledgements) investigating young adults' experiences of coming of age in a diverse and changing neighborhood of Oakland, California. Beginning with our contacts in community organizations, we used snowball sampling to find young adults (ages 19–24) who lived in the San Antonio neighborhood in 2000, when most of them were in eighth grade. In order to avoid having all of our interviewees come from the same network, we started our snowball at several nodes and also sampled for range (Weiss, 1994), asking our contacts and interviewees to help us find specific categories of young adults.

In 2008–9, we interviewed 38 young adults[1] who reflect the diversity of the neighborhood. We interviewed 13 Asian Americans (Cambodian, Vietnamese, Mien, and Chinese), 15 Latinos (all Mexican American except for two of Salvadoran and Guatemalan heritage), 8 African Americans, and 2 youth who identify as African American/Asian American. We interviewed 18 women and 20 men. At the time of the interview, 5 were currently attending a four year college or university full-time; 27 had finished high school (a majority of whom were attending or had attended community college, sometimes sporadically); and 6 did not complete high school.

The semi-structured interviews consisted of open-ended interview questions covering a range of topics including where they lived; any subsequent moves; their perceptions of their neighborhood(s); experiences with victimization or perpetration of violence; interactions with police/criminal justice; family, peer, and neighborhood relationships; and their educational and employment trajectories. Allowing the youth to describe their neighborhood and their social worlds resulted in richly detailed narratives of their coming of age.

Most of the interviews were conducted by author Kenzo Sung, a second generation Chinese American man in his thirties, who at the time of this research was a graduate student in education at the University of California at Berkeley and a board member of East Bay Asian Youth Center (one of the main community-based organizations serving youth in the neighborhood). From 1999–2004, he was a teacher at the neighborhood's middle school, and many of the young adult interviewees were his former students or knew him as a teacher. This insider status helped us gain access to interviewees but also probably made school-oriented young adults more willing to participate in the project.

The interview transcripts were analyzed in an iterative process, moving back and forth between theory, data, and interpretation (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Various members of the research team wrote memos, which were then circulated and discussed at monthly team meetings. A formal coding scheme was developed by the group, working from several

[1]We also interviewed older community residents and leaders about their perspectives on youth, but this chapter draws only from the youth interviews.

transcripts to create codes that captured the range of issues of interest to the team (Lichterman, 2002) and those that emerged as central to the interviewees. Additional codes were added as coding progressed. Because of the multi-disciplinary composition and the various life experiences represented by the team (including two research assistants who grew up in the neighborhood and were the same age as the young adults we interviewed), we were able to consider multiple interpretations of the data and identify both consistencies and contradictions across the accounts we collected.

Instead of seeking to isolate specific attributes of the youth or their peers which correlate with experiences of violence, our goal is to present a detailed portrait of their peer relationships and convey some of the real risks they face growing up. We begin by presenting a snapshot of the neighborhood and analyzing the "structural risks" that the youth identified, such as unemployment or inadequate schools, as well as the positive attributes like strong community-based organizations. These topics came up repeatedly, yet are often ignored in discussions of risk and youth violence. We then turn to an analysis of the interviewees' peer network patterns and our surprising finding that almost all (36 out of 38) of our interviewees had delinquent friends and acquaintances. While we cannot assert a causal relationship between individuals' friendship patterns and life outcomes (such as academic performance, work history, or involvement with violence), our data complicate existing claims about the risk of "association with delinquent peers."

4. The Ecology of Violence: Risks Around Every Corner

Viet is a Vietnamese/Cambodian college student who lived in the San Antonio from when he was 10 to 13 years old. When Viet was 13, he and his family moved due to a robbery. He was asked how he would describe the neighborhood to somebody who didn't know the neighborhood at all.

> Viet[ii]: Like for real? [Laughing] So, not like just the good things and not the bad things?
>
> Kenzo: Say anything.
>
> Viet: It was nice 'cause I was living like around all my friends; we all lived around this area, and [my best friend] lived like right over there. I would just hang out at his house like everyday, that's why we were always at the park. Overall, it was nice, but I lived across the street from, I think it was a whorehouse, and I don't know if it still is now, but people would tell me stories about it, so that was kind of scary. And International, that's like one of the main streets there, and there's a lot of like women [prostitutes] who walk by. Yeah, I didn't go out late at all; it was too dangerous. But, for the most part, I felt pretty safe 'cause you know everybody is around: friends were around, family were around. There was a lot of resources, I guess: school's right there; my family doctor is like a block away, like right there, and, yeah, overall it was okay, I don't know how else to explain it.

Many of the interviewees characterize their neighborhood in similar terms describing a sense of comfort and close social networks alongside poverty, prostitution, drug dealing, inadequate schools, scarce employment opportunities, and lack of investment in infrastructure. This section describes the neighborhood and highlights what we see as the serious "structural risks" of poverty, unemployment, inadequate investment in education, and police harassment, as well as the assets of strong community organizations. Power, as reflected in historical and contemporary structural conditions, shapes possibilities for young people in the particular place of the San Antonio neighborhood. As we asserted above, the

[ii]All names are pseudonyms. Unless otherwise stated, all quotes are transcribed from audio-recorded interviews.

political-economic context is largely ignored in the literature on risk factors and youth violence, yet we see it as key to understanding the opportunities, constraints, and social worlds of the youth we interviewed.

The San Antonio neighborhood is mainly residential with a few commercial streets that primarily cater to local residents. Overall the commercial areas are depressed, as evidenced by the numerous empty boarded up storefronts alongside community non-profits and urban-church conversions. The built spaces are a mix of redeveloped "urban renewal" style projects alongside signs of neglect tied to lack of funding for upkeep of basic infrastructure (Institute of Urban and Regional Development [IURD], 2004). The San Antonio Park, the most referenced neighborhood landmark, exemplifies this conundrum. While the park itself has a new playground, soccer field, basketball courts, urban garden, and recreation center that many residents utilize, nearly all the paths leading up to the park are lined with cracked sidewalks, broken street lights and potholed streets.

The San Antonio is known throughout the Bay Area for being exceptionally diverse in terms of race and ethnicity; it represents many of the promises and limitations of a traditional immigrant "gateway" neighborhood (Younis, 1998; Marech 2002). Until the end of housing covenants in the 1950–60's, East Oakland, including the San Antonio, was a White[iii] neighborhood. During the Civil Rights period, White flight to the surrounding cities and the influx of African American residents into East Oakland quickly changed the San Antonio to a largely African American neighborhood by the 1960–70s (Self, 2005). The 1980s brought two critical changes to the San Antonio. The first was the crack epidemic that ravaged Oakland's streets and communities; the second was the rapid increase of immigrants and refugees from Asia and Latin America due to changes in immigration policy and global economic and political destabilization, including the end of the American war in Vietnam. Though the socio-economic composition of the neighborhood has not changed (a majority of students continue to be eligible for government support like free/reduced school lunches), by 1990 the student body of San Antonio schools was nearly 50% Asian American and 30% Latino.

According to the 2000 US Census, about half of all San Antonio residents are foreign-born. About one-third of the population lives below the federal poverty line with another quarter living on less than double the poverty level. Over 90% of San Antonio residents are people of color: 38% Asian American; 31% Latino[iv]; 21% African American; 6% White; and 4% mixed-race, Native American, and Pacific Islander (US Census 2000). Within these racial groupings there is also a wide diversity in ethno-nationality. There are sizable Mien, Lao, Cambodian, and Vietnamese communities, alongside smaller groups of recent immigrants from China, Thailand, Burma, and most recently Mongolia. There has also been an increase in the number of immigrants from Latin America including Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras.

4.1 Youth and Employment

The employment opportunities in the San Antonio mirror larger issues in the Oakland flatlands and other inner-cities across the United States. Deindustrialization and outsourcing of manufacturing led to the shuttering of Oakland's large factories, leaving a struggling working-class at the start of the twenty-first century. Then, the economic downturn starting

[iii]We capitalize "White" and "Black" to draw attention to them as social categories and not natural facts.

[iv]Latino/Hispanic is considered an ethnic, rather than racial, category for purposes of the U.S. Census. As a majority of the residents and local policies consider this category to be equivalent to other racial labels, we chose to use 'Non-Hispanic or Latino' percentages for all other racial categories (ie – 'White' counts all those who self-identified as 'non-Hispanic/Latino White').

in 2008 produced a national unemployment rate that flirted with double-digits and a youth unemployment rate (19.6%) double the national average in 2010 (Meece, 2010).

Of the youth who work in the San Antonio or adjoining neighborhoods, most fall into three categories: 1) working for their family in small ethnic-based businesses such as family restaurants or stores, 2) working in entry level manual labor positions for whatever large employers are left, such as the Oakland Airport or FedEx, or 3) working for local non-profit organizations that serve the neighborhood, such as the East Bay Asian Youth Center. However, a majority of San Antonio residents are forced to find work outside of the neighborhood, and most often also outside of Oakland.

Particularly for younger adults, there are very few job opportunities in the San Antonio or Oakland regardless of educational attainment. Most youth looking for work are forced to take low-wage, dead-end retail and service jobs in smaller adjoining cities that ring Oakland. As Andres, a 21-year-old African American high school graduate who has worked a variety of manual labor jobs, explained: “All these jobs that I had, it’s like you don’t get nowhere. It’s a job that you have to do to pay bills—that’s how it is. It’s been my whole life, being by myself. That’s how you get that low self esteem because you’re like, ‘Man, what am I doing?’”

4.2. Youth, Education and Community Organizations

Oakland public schools continue to be among the lowest scoring public schools in the region and state. The public schools in the San Antonio are largely neighborhood-based and include four elementary schools, one middle school (Roosevelt Middle School) and one high school (Oakland High School) that serve the vast majority of youth in the area. The dropout rate at Oakland High School (OHS) is 22% (California Department of Education, 2009a). The OHS senior class of 2005 was roughly 400 students. A little less than 50% of all seniors passed enough classes to be eligible for California public university admission, and half of those eligible, or 101 students (about 25% of the total class), continued on to a four year college (California Department of Education, 2009b).

Most of our interviewees condemned the public schools for not providing an adequate education. Juan, a 21 year old Mexican American man who works in retail and attends a California State University, said “I had some teachers that did motivate me and I learned a lot from them, but others – I didn’t like the system. They were just being there, some of them, they didn’t do their job.” Juan’s sentiment was echoed by many of our interviewees who expressed appreciation for specific teachers but described those committed teachers as working in a dysfunctional system.

Although both youth and adult interviewees say there are not enough structured activities for youth outside of school time, the San Antonio stands out for its exceptionally strong community organizations. Two active Park and Recreation youth centers provide after school and summer activities. There are also a number of youth-focused non-profit organizations working in the neighborhood (Maly, 2005) and community organizing in the San Antonio often crosses racial lines (Jeung, 2006).

The East Bay Asian Youth Center (EBAYC), the largest of these organizations, has active daily afterschool programs in all six neighborhood public schools and has helped develop student-community health centers at Roosevelt Middle and Oakland High since 2000. EBAYC was founded in 1976 to meet the needs of Asian American children and youth and their families. In 1998, partly in response to inter-racial violence, EBAYC began to serve all youth and to promote multiculturalism. In the same year, EBAYC began a popular after

school program at Roosevelt Middle School, the middle school that most of our interviewees attended.

Our cohort was among the first to attend this program, which was implemented in part to promote increased tolerance and solidarity among students. Several of our interviewees, in addition to attending the program as students, went on to work for EBAYC at Roosevelt or one of the other sites. Thirty out of our 38 interviewees had racially/ethnically diverse peer networks, and we think this can be attributed largely to EBAYC. While our study cannot answer the question of whether participation in EBAYC *led to* this friendship pattern, it is also informative to think about youth finding validation and support for their existing friendship patterns and even translating those dispositions into jobs. In this time of extreme cuts to "recreational" activities for youth, we want to highlight the great value of this organization and others like it.

4.3 Youth, Police, and Violence

At the same time that jobs paying a living wage were disappearing from Oakland, retrenchment in social welfare policy and the rise of an increasingly draconian justice system have created new challenges for urban neighborhoods (Gilmore, 2007). The combination of increasingly strict "zero-tolerance" policies towards punishment and hiring practices have left many Oakland residents with criminal records and unable to find jobs. In a poor neighborhood of color like San Antonio, youth are especially likely to experience "governance through crime," in which the state relates to its citizens through surveillance, security, and punishment (Simon, 2007), and this governance through crime, coupled with changing demographics, is likely to lead to conflict.

In a study on the criminalization of youth in Oakland, Victor Rios found that poor youth of color "face stigmatizing and punitive interactions" with various people in their community, including family members, school staff, and police (Rios 2006, 2011). Our interviewees also consistently expressed that the police harassed them (Ossei-Owusu & Lindahl, 2010). Edward, a 21-year-old Latino high school graduate, described coming home late one evening when he was 13, "I think [my neighbors] were like stealing parts out of cars and stuff, and I was coming right from school from a field trip. So I pulled up and I am going to my apartment; the police pull up right in back of me, and since I was right there they threw me to the ground too. They were cussing at me. They cuffed me up and put me in the back of the car."

Many Oakland youth confront and negotiate real fears and experiences with violence in their daily lives. One survey of Oakland ninth graders found that 13% said they had been pushed, shoved, or hit two or more times; 23% were in a physical fight; 11% were threatened or injured with a weapon on school property over the prior year. For many of these youth, their limited choices for responding to fears and incidents of violence contributed to equally disquieting statistics, including 9% reporting having carried a gun to school at least once and 13% being in a gang (Oakland Unified School District, 2010). As we will show, some youth rely on "delinquent peers" to help them stay safe at school and in their neighborhood.

Though known as a hot spot for prostitution, the San Antonio has lower rates of most crime and violence compared to areas in 'Deep East' Oakland or West Oakland. Yet the San Antonio residents deal with high rates of "everyday" problems like street gangs, drug dealing, prostitution, car and home break-ins, and armed robberies on top of the occasional murder, rape, or aggravated assault. All of the young adults we interviewed talked about violence in their community. Some have direct experience as victims of violence, being stabbed or shot. A few talked about being perpetrators of violence. The physical violence that the interviewees told us they were involved in personally as perpetrators was almost all

fighting without weapons, though one person told us of driving a car when their friend, a passenger, threatened someone with a gun, and another said he was "trying to beat a robbery charge" but did not specify if it was armed robbery. Most talked about witnessing violence. All talked about violence as an ever-present reality in the wider neighborhood, even if they felt safe on their block. The strategies they used to survive this violence included choosing when and where to walk or take the bus, getting rides, choosing to attend schools outside the neighborhood, moving to different neighborhoods or micro-neighborhoods, and maintaining relationships with delinquent peers.

5. Peers, Delinquency, and Race

As shown in the prior section, there are serious issues that San Antonio youth face growing up; however, the disproportionate attention to violence, and especially youth violence, masks the "structural risks" created by neoliberal economic policies that leave more and more youth without a meaningful role in society and without a safety net. And the attention to peers as creating risks, rather than minimizing them, obscures the positive role delinquent youth play in the survival/success of their peers. As Douglas (1990) says, "This argument is not about the reality of the dangers, but about how they are politicized" (p. 8). As our interviewees grew up in this physical and metaphorical landscape, which they both valorize and denigrate as "ghetto" (Sung, Forthcoming), they, like all teens, relied heavily on their friends for a sense of belonging, identity, and in some cases, physical safety.

Based on quantitative studies of peer delinquency and violence, our interviewees seem to be anomalous, but they were able to have both casual and close friendships with delinquent teens without engaging in much delinquency or violence themselves. We categorized peers as being delinquent when interviewees described their friends as "up to no good," "wild," "bad," drinking and/or smoking in school, cutting school a lot, or involved in physical fights, gangs, robbery, or auto theft. Our most striking finding is that 36 out of the 38 young adults we interviewed had delinquent friends; this finding is all the more noteworthy because, as noted above, our sample is biased towards youth who were more academically oriented (32 of our 38 interviewees completed high school or beyond). The prevalence, indeed normativity, of having delinquent friends prompted us to look more deeply into other aspects of the adolescent social world in the San Antonio as described by the youth.

Most youth describe diverse peer networks across two dimensions: race/ethnicity and delinquency. Diverse friendship patterns along the dimension of race/ethnicity include friends from different racial and/or ethnic groups, e.g. African American and Asian American or Chinese American and Cambodian American. Diverse networks along the dimension of delinquency means having some friends who are delinquent and some who are conforming/academically successful. Most of the youth with delinquent friends did not join delinquent groups like gangs, although a few did. Although we recognize that it is impossible to assert a causal relationship in the patterns, our interviewees with diverse networks in both these dimensions also had positive outcomes in terms of violence, education, and employment.[v]

[v]There were four youth who did not fall into the two main categories that we will discuss in the remainder of the paper. Two of the youth deliberately maintained very few friendships, which they described as necessary for their safety. These youth seemed only to have delinquent friends. The other two youth had racially/ethnically diverse networks but said none of their friends were delinquent. Both were successful and neither was involved in violence. The most salient point about this category *is* that there were only two of them.

5.1 Doubly Diverse Peer Networks: Bridge Builders

Most of the young adults we interviewed (26 out of 38) describe their friends as diverse in terms of both race/ethnicity and delinquency/conformity. They do not describe living in a post-racial society; they are acutely aware of racial divides, yet they seem to navigate them with ease. They depict the social boundaries of middle and high school and their ability to cross those boundaries.

In some cases, these bonds across groups became extremely strong. Saysha, a 22 year old African American woman, explained, “They called me a Black-Asian person, because all of my friends are either Cambodian or Mien. I used to kick it with Liew [a Mien friend] a lot and you know, be over at their house the majority of the time. And it was just to be around a different ethnicity group, just to see how things were played out. I would go to different Mien tradition things.”

In addition to a racially-diverse set of friends, Saysha also had a range of friends in terms of delinquency/conformity, including one who was killed while being chased by the police and another who went to an Ivy League college. Saysha graduated from high school and has sporadically attended community college while holding a job at a community-based organization that seeks to teach youth about different cultures. Saysha’s formative embrace of other cultures may be one of her strongest assets. This echoes other successful young adults we interviewed who say their diverse peer networks have helped them navigate their current workplace or university environments, where they are often in the minority, in terms of race.

Many of the youth with delinquent friends talked about potential danger in the streets and school being mitigated by “being known” or “having back-up,” which suggests that having some friends who are involved in violence or who are thought to be potentially violent actually protects youth from risk. This strategy has been well documented in ethnographic studies (Anderson, 1999; Jones, 2009). We started the paper with a quote from Benjamin, who said that birds of a feather don’t necessarily flock together. In addition to having a racially diverse group of friends, he described having some high-achieving, rule-following friends, but he was also friends with two brothers from his neighborhood who were currently in jail.

> Benjamin: Those two [neighbor friends], I was—I’m not going to say close but I knew if I ever needed anything that I could call them. If I had any problems with anybody else I could call them. One of those type of relationships. Basically what we call that in the streets is hitters. Not necessarily say kill anybody or anything like that, but this guy was messing with me, I got jumped by this group of people, let’s—you know—Let’s go. Let’s go get payback. Let’s go get our retaliation. So—yeah, that’s kind of our relationship.

In addition to providing knowledge of and comfort with other cultures and protection from actual or potential violence, having close friendships across social boundaries seemed to provide a sense of connection to the neighborhood for the interviewees who were most successful in mainstream terms: the ones who went to a four year college. While some of them mention fading ties with friends who did not go away to college, they also talked about the importance of staying in touch with neighborhood friends. Viet, who identifies as half-Cambodian and half-Vietnamese, explains that though almost all of his Cambodian friends are delinquent they are still important to his identity: “Yeah, well when I hang out with the group of friends that dropped out and stuff, you know, they drink and smoke and all that kind of stuff. I don’t do it but still I hang out with them cause *we still have that kind of bond or connection”* (emphasis added). For Viet, these connections help him achieve success in

the world outside San Antonio because they ground him in his neighborhood and community.

5.2 Doubly Diverse Peer Networks: "Saying Hi" and Social Butterflies

A central characteristic of those who had the doubly diverse networks is that they knew a lot of people and were known by a lot of people. However, some did not describe strong ties across boundaries, rather they interacted with people in various groups in a superficial way. This knowing and being known seemed to be a key element in their ability to traverse boundaries and stay out of violence. For example, Gabriela is a 21-year-old Latina, mother of a toddler, high school graduate, and entry level employee in the health field. She described her adolescent social world:

> There is always a division between African Americans, Mexicans and Asians. And not just Asians, it's Miens together, Vietnamese together, Cambodian together. It was rare when they mixed with each other. I spoke to all of them. In middle school, I hung out with the Norteños [Latino gang] but I spoke to everybody. … I always spoke to the same people, but I was never with the same people. Each month, I guess, I hung out with different people. And yeah, there is always different cliques, there are always the gang related stuff, there were always the fighters, the taggers, the ones that considered themselves hippies, the ones that called themselves skaters. I just said hi to everybody, I did not care—football players, wrestlers, and yeah.

Like Gabriela, many of the youth used "saying hi" as an indicator of acquaintanceship. These relationships seem like the "weak ties" described by Granovetter (1973, 1983), which can bridge distinct closely-knit groups, for example racial/ethnic groups or cliques of school-oriented or delinquent youth.

Bellair (1997) found that such "weak ties" among adult neighbors led to job referrals and other social resources, and they may be especially important in immigrant communities (Hagan, 1998). Additionally, Granovetter (1983) suggests that the poor have relatively few weak ties compared to strong ties and thus they miss out on the advantages weak ties can bring. Becky, a 20-year-old Vietnamese American woman who attends community college, is the only interviewee who explicitly talked about cultivating friends or acquaintances for instrumental reasons: "Actually I network through work–I network through work and like, school and like— so I meet people all the time. … And like I guess when you know a lot of people it helps you too. Let's say if you want to get a job or something or yeah, it's good to network." While none of our interviewees reported getting a job through a peer, their weak ties may facilitate interaction with those different from themselves, allowing them to interact comfortably in diverse workplaces and thus increase their social capital: "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248).

When some of the young adults describe this pattern of socializing across group boundaries, it seemed that they performed an identity—the social butterfly, who actively and purposefully cultivates weak ties. Chiem, a 21 year old Mien American man who works at a city recreation center, describes moving between groups without forming close friendships.

> Kenzo: What about cliques or groups in middle school or high school? Do you remember different groups?
>
> Chiem: Middle school—I don't remember much about cliques. I just jumped around, it's either I go to lunch with some boys who went to lunch or some girls

who went to lunch. Come outside to the play yard and play basketball with some of the boys. I mean I had friends just all over. Diverse—you know what I mean?

Kenzo: Racially diverse friends, gender—you had girls and guys?

Chiem: It didn't matter—I just kicked it with them and made them laugh, you know what I mean? Or had fun and had laughs with them. Same thing with high school, it was just— it was either like cliques here, cliques here, cliques here, cliques outside and the funny thing is, I think about it now and I actually had time to jump around from clique to clique and go outside and play and then come back to class and make it on time, you know? I'm like wow. That's kind of crazy.

Kenzo: So you moved between different cliques?

Chiem: Yeah, I didn't stick with one group just because, you know what I mean? 'Cause I mean certain cliques knew each other but they just liked to stay within their group.

In this excerpt, Chiem identified his pattern of interacting with numerous groups as different from those middle and high school students who stayed "within their group." A bit later in the interview, he goes on to specify that gangs in particular were exclusive groups.

Kenzo: What about—okay—gangs? Were there issues of gangs or were there gangs in high school that you knew of?

Chiem: Middle school it was heavy. A lot of gangs around. They wanted me to be in it and stuff like that. I'm okay [I declined]. You know?

Kenzo: You're doing your thing.

Chiem: Pretty much if you want to be in that gang, *all you got to do is kick it with that group only*. That's something, I guess, I don't like doing that. You know? [emphasis added]

Here Chiem said that part of the reason he didn't want to join a gang was because he wanted the freedom to move between groups. We can also infer that by moving between groups, it was easier for him to say no to the gang, which probably consisted of other Mien American youth. The diversity of Chiem's network positioned him well to avoid getting drawn into violence. He described being with a group of friends when they beat up three "Mexican guys," but he says he was never directly involved in violence. By moving between groups, Chiem may have had an easier time staying away from gangs without outright rejecting them.

Chiem and others described a strategy of maintaining *and* limiting contact with delinquent peers. For example, Juan, a college student mentioned above, also had weak ties with delinquent friends: "I had friends from different types of [racial/ethnic] background, and from different gangs. I did talk to them but I didn't hang out with them [after school], and *it was my decision"* [emphasis added]. By stressing that it was his decision, Juan may have been clarifying that he was not choosing his friends based on pressure from authority figures. Rios (2011) documented how non-delinquent boys in Oakland were placed in a double bind by teachers and police officers who admonished youth to stay away from the "bad kids," thus also placing the non-delinquent boys "at-risk" of being labeled as snitches and bullied.

As discussed above, both weak and strong ties across social categories seem to help youth stay safe and also stay out of violence. About one-third of the youth with "doubly diverse" networks did report engaging in violence, but they emerged from that developmental stage well-positioned to enter adulthood. Both women (15) and men (11) describe having doubly

diverse peer networks, though they are somewhat more common among the women. In a study of adolescent immigrants and their social networks, Hébert and colleagues (2003) found that girls had more friends and more acquaintances than boys and were "adept at circulating, keeping in touch, and negotiating" (p. 100).

On the other hand, men seem slightly more likely to fall into the category we will describe next, those who had networks which were diverse in terms of delinquency, but not race/ethnicity. Only 8 of our 38 interviewees described their friends this way, but of those, 5 were men and 3 were women. In both categories (youth with doubly diverse and monocultural networks), men were twice as likely as women to say they were directly involved in violence as teenagers. Both young men and women with the monocultural networks were more involved in violence. This finding may be because much of the violence in this racially diverse neighborhood falls along racial lines. In the San Antonio, having friendships within a single racial/ethnic group does not seem to offer the same type or level of protection as having a "doubly diverse" set of friendships, whether based on weak or strong ties.

5.3 Monocultural; Delinquent and Conventional Friends

Having a network that is diverse in terms of delinquency, but not race/ethnicity, was much less common (8 out of 38 interviewees). Like the doubly diverse category, these interviewees talked about having a set of friends that range from academically-oriented to street-oriented. For the youth in this category, having delinquent friends does seem to be associated with delinquency, even though they also have conventional friends. Only 8 of the 26 interviewees who described doubly diverse networks were directly involved in violence, but 7 of the 8 interviewees with monocultural friendship groups were involved with violence.

Yet even this group had generally good outcomes, given the structural constraints of high unemployment, inadequate schools, and punitive policing. Lou and Kao are both 21-year-old Mien American men who were interviewed together. They both graduated from high school; Kao has worked in retail with periods of unemployment. Lou has a retail job and also works with youth at a community-based organization. When asked about groups in middle school, Kao talked about spending time with both conventional and delinquent peers:

> I do remember one group, like Lou mentioned they do drugs, and do this and that. Like the other side is the good side, like the other side was like I don't know, went to school I guess. … During school I would hang out with the people that are interested in school. I was hanging out with the people who were interested in school. Sometimes we hang out … with people who are not so into school so… [Laughs]

But unlike the interviewees with doubly diverse social groups, Lou and Kao only associated with other Asian Americans as teenagers. Not only were their friendship groups monocultural, but Lou and Kao were involved with violence between Asians and Latinos, between Asians and African Americans, and between different Asian ethnic groups. This violence took place both at school and in the neighborhood. In response to a question about violence in the neighborhood, Kao described one particular fight:

> I was at my cousin's house and pretty much at that time it was African Americans versus Asians too. So what happened was a whole bunch of African Americans just come out of nowhere, it was like a whole group so what happened was that my cousin's friends they went inside their parent's house and took out guns and stuff, so it was scary. … So what I am talking about it [was] probably 60 to 80 people, African American and compared to us, me and my cousin and friend we only had about probably like 12 heads, so if it come down to it, we would get our butt kicked

> for sure, because like my cousin's friend went inside and took his dad's weapon, and he shot at the stop sign. So that's when all the African Americans ran away, or else if we had no weapon nothing would scare them and they would probably attack the house or things like that. They had like woods [sticks] and bats and things like that too, so that was crazy!

Unlike Lou, Kao, and the other youth in this category, the youth with racially/ethnically diverse friendships seem better able to "associate with delinquent peers" without getting deeply involved in delinquency themselves. The design of our study does not allow us to determine whether the lack of racial/ethnic diversity, other aspects of the friendship networks, or other individual characteristics led to the greater involvement in violence of the youth with monocultural networks.

While they were more involved with violence as adolescents, 6 of the 8 outgrew that. Five of the 8 graduated from high school (and 1 graduated from a four year college). Seven of the 8 were employed part-time or full-time at the time of the interview. Darnell, an African American man who did not graduate from high school and who was working part-time, said that growing up in the San Antonio "was rough, but I think it made me better… See, I changed to a certain respect." More research is needed to understand the experiences of youth with monocultural networks in ethnoracially diverse settings, but from this small sample, it seems that having a monocultural network is more of a risk factor for involvement in violence than associating with delinquent peers is. These individual-level differences are intriguing and potentially useful for policy and practice, but when we take a broader view of the lives of our interviewees, these distinctions are minor in comparison to the shared risks of poverty, including schools where learning is often incidental and police officers who do not respond when they need help and who harass them when they are not doing anything wrong.

6. Conclusion

While most research in criminology and other social sciences finds that association with delinquent peers is a risk factor for violence, our interviewees did not report engaging in much violence. Douglas (1990) claims that "the concept of risk emerges as a key idea for modern times because of its uses as a forensic resource" (p. 3); by forensic resource, she means that risk is used to "hold people accountable" (p. 1) or to assign blame. We have argued that instead of blaming youth for having the "wrong" friends, we should examine the structural conditions that limit possibility.

For example, youth generally need to leave their neighborhood to find employment, and even those with a high school diploma and some college find it difficult to find a job anywhere that pays a living wage. Finn and Jacobson's (2003) Just Practice Framework outlines five key themes – meaning, context, power, history, and possibility – that should be central to social work. Drawing on this perspective, social workers should work to promote policies that invest in youth, especially employment, education, and youth development programs, and to change policies and practices, especially in policing, that stigmatize and alienate youth.

Within the broader context of a "risky" environment, we also focused on the composition and meanings of youth networks, identifying two main patterns. First, almost all youth we interviewed (36 out of 38), including those who were very successful in mainstream terms, had friendships with delinquent peers. Zero-tolerance policies are meant, in part, to keep the "bad kids" away from the "good kids," yet most of our interviewees (34 out of 38) maintained strong and weak ties with both delinquent and conventional peers and were skilled at limiting their contact with delinquent peers when they wanted to do so. Further

research should explore these broader networks and how they are linked to delinquency. In the meantime, we hope that this article will serve to mute arguments that association with delinquent peers always increases youth violence.

Second, we found that our interviewees who had racially/ethnically diverse friendships had especially minimal experiences of violence and successful transitions to adulthood. The importance of the racially/ethnically diverse friendships could be due to the diversity of the neighborhood; that is, in a more homogeneous neighborhood, we would not expect racially/ethnically diverse networks to be so prevalent or so strongly associated with positive outcomes. More research is needed in communities like the San Antonio neighborhood of Oakland. We also need more research on schools and organizations serving youth in order to understand the features of the institutional context that facilitate friendships across social boundaries and promote healthy youth development in a structurally risky environment. The major youth-serving community based organization in the neighborhood, EBAYC, had a deliberate focus on promoting cross-racial ties.

In addition to the policy recommendations mentioned above, these findings suggest some practical implications for case management and program design. Social workers should:

- Support adolescents' development of weak ties across diverse peer groups. Universal programs, rather than those aimed at high-risk youth, provide more opportunity for the formation of these ties, as long as enrollment/usage is monitored to be sure the programs really are universally used (Anyon et al., In Press). Especially in racially-diverse settings, multicultural programs are critical to promoting "doubly diverse" peer networks. These programs should be explicitly multicultural, not just diverse in enrollment, and should teach cross-cultural communication and historical and contemporary differences and similarities between groups (Lustig, 1997).
- Avoid labeling or dividing "good" and "bad" kids within an organization or school. For example, tracking has clearly negative effects on achievement (Oakes, 1983), but in addition, this practice can actually put the "good" kids at greater risk for experiencing violence. Instead of warning conforming youth against associating with delinquent peers, ask them about their friends and acquaintances in a non-judgmental way to see how they understand and value these relationships and to find out how they manage them (whether they have strategies to both maintain and limit those relationships when necessary).
- Assess youth's social networks to see if they have friends and acquaintances of different ethno-racial groups (if the school or neighborhood is diverse enough to make this possible). The assessment can be done individually or via survey and could inform case management and/or program development.
- Be cautious about using risk inventories. These tools tend to minimize structural inequalities and emphasize individual risk factors which may not be especially meaningful. Instead, find out from youth what they perceive as the risks or dangers in their environment and help them develop strategies to navigate those risks as safely as possible.
- View delinquent youth as knowledgeable about their social worlds and competent at navigating them. Consider them as partners who can help keep their non-delinquent friends safe. Facilitate discussions among diverse groups so they can talk about the dangers they face and share their skills and strategies for staying safe. One of these strategies is likely to be demonstrating the capacity for violence or a friendship with someone who has a capacity for violence.

While adults in authority should not condone this approach, they can and should understand these dynamics at the same time they seek to help youth find other strategies.

In this study, we asked youth about being teenagers and young adults in the 2000s, a decade of immense profits (and large losses) by ever expanding corporations and a decade of government withdrawal from responsibility for social welfare and expansion of punitive criminal justice policies. It is easy to assign blame to youth for their friendships, their violent behavior, their lack of education, their unstable and low-paying jobs, but this calculus ignores both the structural factors that constrain youth choices and the benefits that seem to be linked to diverse friendships, even with delinquent peers. Growing up in a site of global capital accumulation and disinvestment in the era of neoliberalism, our interviewees challenge us to reframe risk.

Acknowledgments

We thank the Berkeley Population Center for their support. This work was partially funded by a grant from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD R21 HD056581). This publication was also supported by Grant 1 U49 CE000743 from the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention. The Youth Experiences of Neighborhood Change research team includes: Alexandra Aylward, Morgan Elam, Dena Fehrenbacher, Mitzi Iñiguez, Shafinaaz Kamrul, Laure Kohne, Jennifer Millman, Luis Morales, Nicole Lindahl, Deborah Lustig, Shaun Ossei-Owusu, Victor Rios, Kyla Searle, Alex Schafran, Jonathan Simon, Kenzo Sung, Zachary Taylor, Sandra Yang. We thank Yolanda Anyon, Alexandra Aylward, David Minkus, Victor Rios, Jonathan Simon, Christine Trost, and the editors for their comments on this article.

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Highlights

- Youth in “at-risk” neighborhoods benefit from diverse friendship networks.
- Friendships with “delinquent peers” can help youth stay safe and feel connected.
- Youth with racially/ethnically diverse networks thrive.
- Community-based organizations are key sites for promoting these networks.
- Risk inventories understate risk from structural inequality and blame individuals.