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**ABSTRACT:** Testing bidirectional contextual effects of adolescents risk factors on young adulthood outcomes: A life course perspective to gangs

Leading theories in developmental science emphasize the role of the individual as an active agent in shaping her or his environment. Yet, most empirical work has focused on unidirectional models, ultimately treating the individual as a passive recipient of environmental risk. Part of this gap between theory and analysis is methodological in nature – i.e., classical statistical methods typically do not allow for the modeling of bidirectional influences or complex longitudinal relations. Recent advancements in longitudinal methodologies, however, expand our ability to answer more nuanced developmental questions. In this dissertation, I demonstrate how advanced longitudinal methods could be used to better understand complex relations between the individual adolescent and naturally-embedded systems of ecological risk. I apply a novel statistical model that explores how familial response to gang initiation explains the pathway to young adulthood outcomes among high-risk youth. I examine bidirectional effects by estimating how individual behavior alters longitudinal trajectories of parenting risk; and, how this change, in turn, mediates and moderates long-term developmental outcomes. Data for this dissertation came from the Fast Track Project, a multi-site investigation of the development and prevention of conduct problems in a sample of high-risk youth. Given the quasi-experimental design of gang research, I matched gang members to non-gang members uses balanced risk set matching, yielding a final sample of 404 youth matched on level of background risk. Results showed that, in this high-risk sample of
youth, there was no systematic change in parenting communication or monitoring over time, even after youth initiated into a gang. In terms of long-term outcomes of gang-involved youth, results show that, even after controlling for background risk, gang members were more likely to be arrested, engage in aggressive acts, and use more substances than non-affiliated counterparts. Additionally, gang membership were more likely to utilize the health care system more frequently, suggesting that gang membership may carry an economic cost to society. Interestingly, gang membership was also associated with an increase in pro-social behavior during adulthood. Nonetheless, these relations between gang affiliation and young adulthood outcomes were not moderated or mediated by parenting risk. I conclude with a discussion of both the methodological and substantive contributions of this dissertation. Limitations and challenges of the method are discussed and areas for future work are suggested.