

1 **Risk factors associated with urban gang membership in juveniles: A systematic review**

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32 **Risk factors associated with urban gang membership in juveniles: A**  
33 **systematic review**

34 **Abstract**

35 The involvement of juveniles in urban gangs has increased in different territories.  
36 Consequently, government resources have been invested to dismantle and contain  
37 such gangs. The aim of this paper was to analyse studies that relate risk factors with  
38 the increasing integration of juveniles into urban gangs. Nine scientific articles were  
39 included, out of a total of 394 publications. Different risk factors significantly related  
40 with the integration of juveniles into urban gangs were identified: social  
41 disorganisation, unsafety neighborhood, school failure, absenteeism, and failure to  
42 pass assessment standards, involvement of family members in criminal acts,  
43 depression, substance use, low self-esteem, rebelliousness and elevated feelings of  
44 leadership, social disadvantage, or lack of resources. The risk factors analysed should  
45 be integrated into prevention programmes.

46 Keywords: urban gang; risk factors; juvenile; gang membership

47 **Introduction**

48 Organised crime has become a problem to citizen security, due to the growth it has  
49 experienced in recent years (Bruneau et al., 2011; Wolf, 2021). This has had an impact on  
50 the application of formal control, for example, through increased police work to dismantle  
51 urban gangs, most of which are formed by juveniles between 13 and 15 years of age. The  
52 phase between 13 and 15 years of age is characterized by changes that provoke certain  
53 behaviours such as: difficulty in relationships with parents and the environment,  
54 disobedience, defiance of teachers, identification with the group and, to a lesser extent,

55 risky behaviours that imply endangering physical or moral integrity (UNICEF, 2020).

56 Regarding the duration of adolescence, an exact starting age, or a duration applicable in all  
57 cases is not usually specified, since biological and psychosocial maturation does not begin  
58 at the same time in all individuals and depends on genetics and the context itself (Sacks,  
59 2003). UNICEF (2020) limits the age range to be between 10 and 19 years, which is  
60 therefore the age of most urban gang members. However, there is no clear agreement on the  
61 definition of this age range. Other authors point out that it is between 12 and 24 years  
62 (Howell, 1998) or between 12-35 years of age, with an overrepresentation of ages between  
63 15 and 22 years old (Irwin-Rogers et al., 2019).

64 There is debate about how to define the concept of urban gang, as it is a fuzzy term with a  
65 multitude of interpretations (Petersen & Lagefoged, 2018). Moreover, there are different  
66 disciplines from which the concept can be defined. For example, anthropology shows  
67 interest in youth culture; sociology focuses on the social structures and conditions that  
68 affect people's lives; psychology investigates the behavior of these young people; and  
69 finally, criminology focuses on researching juvenile delinquency. All these different  
70 perspectives influence how the concept of gang is defined (Fraser, 2017; Petersen, 2017).

71 The term of urban gang can be defined as the association of three or more individuals, with  
72 a minimum of three, who adopt a group identity with the aim of instilling terror or  
73 intimidating other people or groups (The United States Department of Justice, 2021). Other  
74 authors consider an "urban gang" to be any grouping of young people between 12 and 25  
75 years of age that is problematic, long-lasting (3 months or more), oriented to street activities  
76 and whose participation in criminal acts is part of its identity as a group (Weerman et al.,  
77 2009). There does seem to be a consensus in the research field that these are groups of  
78 young minority ethnic males between the ages of 12 and 30 years old, approximately  
79 (Esbensen & Carson, 2012).

80 At this point, it should be noted that the United Nations (2004) uses the term "organized

81 criminal group" and not other terms such as "urban gangs" or "street gang".

82 Regarding their structure, Carrera (2014) states that urban gangs follow a hierarchical  
83 organisation, made up of several strata, generally no more than four. In the top layer is the  
84 leader, accompanied by people from the same family or those who have special  
85 relationship with him or her. This person does not participate in the perpetration of the  
86 crime, and his main functions are decision-making and orchestration of activities. This  
87 stratum also includes the leader's advisors and guards. In the intermediate layers, there are  
88 the members who carry out the criminal acts who, although they do not have decision-  
89 making power, can resolve certain issues that do not require too much authority. Finally,  
90 there is the last stratum, in which the members have the capacity to execute the crime, but  
91 no decision-making authority. This stratum is integrated by members of younger ages who  
92 can be replaced, while in the other strata the members are older and have a more  
93 permanent position. This vertical and static hierarchy of this type of organization has been  
94 described by other authors (Bouchard & Spindler, 2010; Howell, 1998).

95 Risk factors related to urban gang membership are not determinant for the development of  
96 risk behaviours, such as delinquency: they only indicate a probability. Risky behaviours,  
97 such as delinquency and, more specifically, crimes against property or public health, are  
98 associated with gang membership, since their commission and their seriousness increase if  
99 they are committed by gang members (Thornberry et al., 2003). Regarding previous  
100 studies, in the "Rochester Youth Development Study", Bjerregaard and Smith (1993)  
101 examined the similarities between the risk factors associated to delinquency and urban  
102 gang membership in a sample of 13 to 15-year-olds, including factors such as: low levels  
103 of family, school and social control. The results showed that extreme poverty,  
104 disorganised neighbourhoods, high rates of community mobility, rules favourable to  
105 antisocial behaviour, school failure, high levels of intrafamilial conflict, and favourable  
106 attitudes toward criminal behaviour were risk factors for delinquency, but not for urban

107 gang membership. Even so, this does not mean that these factors may not be present in  
108 gang members, since in other studies such as that of Hill et al. (2001) or that of Esbensen  
109 et al. (2009), these factors do appear to be related to gang membership. Esbensen et al.  
110 (1993) also point out other risk factors such as: high levels of family, social and school  
111 control, and negative definitions of the teenager by teachers.

112 Social psychology provides several theories that explain gang membership behaviour, the  
113 first of which is the theory of social identification and identity (Turner et al., 1987). This  
114 theory implies that belonging to a group helps to forge one's own identity in relation to  
115 that group, with intragroup similarities, and, at the same time, a different identity from  
116 other groups, with intergroup differences; therefore, juveniles with deficits in family  
117 relationships or community attachment, not belonging to any group, may become part of a  
118 gang in order to forge a social identity that they would not otherwise have (Woo et al.,  
119 2015).

120 Another theory analysed is the social identity communication theory, which analyses the  
121 different ways in which urban gang members convey their social identity to others. This  
122 can be done through specific tattoos or a certain way of dressing that favours  
123 differentiation from other groups and the feeling of unanimity with the reference group.

124 On the other hand, these symbols are not only a method of communication, but also help  
125 organise the structure of the gang, nurturing the strength of its members and the  
126 distinction perceived by others. Within this theory, it is relevant to highlight the  
127 "Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory" (Giles & Johnson, 1987) on the use and potential of  
128 street language which, in combination with the other symbols already mentioned, provides  
129 norms and behavioural patterns that, if broken, can jeopardise the life of the people who  
130 are not members of the gang, with gang membership being pursued as a form of  
131 protection against them (Woo et al., 2015). Additionally, the theory of social  
132 disorganisation (Thrasher, 1927) can be pointed out. This theory states that economic

133 destabilization in a given neighbourhood causes a breakdown of conventional social  
134 institutions, such as the school or the family. This is explained by the fact that most  
135 people living in areas of instability are newcomers to a country who, not having socialised  
136 the values of the new culture, find it difficult to socialise their children regarding these  
137 values. The general stress theory (Agnew, 1992; Agnew, 2013) indicates that tensions of  
138 high magnitude, considered unfair and related to low social control, can be an incentive  
139 for the development of criminal behavior. On the other hand, Hirschi (1969) developed a  
140 theory of social control based on the idea of social bonding. In contrast to those that  
141 focused on the motivations for crime, social control theories focused on the constraints  
142 and circumstances that prevent crime. In the causes, the offender is seen as relatively free  
143 of the intimate bonds, aspirations, and moral beliefs that bind most people to a life in  
144 which they act according to the law. The theoretical approach focuses on the socialization  
145 processes that limit the antisocial and delinquent behavior that all individuals may  
146 naturally engage in. Criminal acts would occur when an individual's bond with society is  
147 weak. Finally, in the field of criminology, social learning theory (Burgess & Akers, 1966)  
148 explains delinquent behavior by combining variables that encourage delinquency (e.g.,  
149 social pressure from delinquent peers) with variables that discourage it (e.g., parental  
150 reaction to discovering delinquent behavior in their children). Finally, some other theories  
151 are mentioned that are of value in the American field (Paoli, 2014). The first of these,  
152 "The Alien Conspiracy Model", presents the problem of organised crime as a problem  
153 originating in one country, in this case Italy, which has spread to other countries, making  
154 it not part of the society, but a foreign problem (Kleemans, 2014); the second, "The  
155 Bureaucracy Model" (Cressey, 1969), shows criminal organisations as any other form of  
156 bureaucracy that has emerged in society and is legally present; and finally, the "Protection  
157 Theory" explains the dominance and permanence of certain mafias over certain territories,  
158 which have taken control and are seen as alternative governments (Kleemans, 2014).

159 Currently, the growth of gangs has become relevant. It is worth noting the role of the  
160 global economic crisis that organised criminals, both from within and outside Europe, are  
161 taking advantage of, to bring in revenue through fraudulent enterprises. In relation to this  
162 crisis, there has been an increase in the people who do not have a legal livelihood option,  
163 which makes them more vulnerable to being lured by these groups (Europol, 2021).

#### 164 **Current study**

165 This systematic review aims to analyse the risk factors related with urban gang  
166 membership in juveniles from a criminological perspective, due to the scarcity of  
167 studies and the differences between urban gangs across countries, as well as  
168 examining the risk factors associated with these gangs in order to encourage the  
169 prevention of criminal careers.

#### 170 **Method**

171 To conduct this systematic review, specific items of the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting  
172 Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta- Analyses) statement (Page et al., 2021) and the  
173 guidelines specified in certain studies such as that of (Perestelo-Pérez, 2013) were  
174 followed.

#### 175 *Inclusion criteria*

176 Studies were selected according to the following inclusion criteria: (a) studies analysed  
177 population under 19 years of age, (b) studies included an explicit reference to urban gangs,  
178 (c) studies analysed several risk factors, (d) studies were published within the last five years  
179 to keep the review up to date, and finally, (e) peer-reviewed publications were included.

#### 180 *Exclusion criteria*

181 Regarding the exclusion criteria, studies that (a) used a sample of overage participants, (b)  
182 analysed other types of associated variables that were not risk factors, (c) did not specify  
183 age, either explicitly or by school year, and finally, (d) did not focus on urban gang  
184 membership but on other types of violence or criminal careers, were discarded.

185 *Search strategy*

186 The research was carried out in three databases: Scopus, Web of Science and PsycInfo,  
187 and it was limited to studies published in the last five years, from January 2017 to  
188 December 2022. The methodology used to locate studies consisted of using terms  
189 referring to risk factors, urban gangs, and the age of the participants, which should not  
190 exceed 19 years. These terms were: risk/risk factors, urban gangs/criminal  
191 organisations/criminal associations/criminal groups/organised crime/adolescents/young  
192 people/youth/teenager/juvenile/child/children.

193 *Identification and selection of studies*

194 Firstly, the studies that were repeated in the different databases were discarded.  
195 Subsequently, after reading the titles and abstracts of the studies, 234 articles were  
196 discarded out of the 270 from the previous step, leaving 36 publications. Finally, after  
197 reviewing the full text and using the aforementioned exclusion criteria, nine articles were  
198 selected. Figure 1 shows the process carried out:

199 [Figure 1 near here]

200 *Studies included in the review*

201 In accordance with the abovementioned inclusion and exclusion criteria, nine final articles  
202 were selected for the systematic review: study 1 (Nuño & Katz, 2019); study 2 (Ashton &  
203 Bussu, 2020); study 3 (Mukhametzyanova, et al., 2020); study 4 (Smith et al., 2019);  
204 study 5 (Forsyth, et al., 2018); study 6 (Howell et al., 2017); study 7 (Annan et al., 2022);  
205 study 8 (Bacchini et al., 2020); and, finally, study 9 (Garduno & Mestre, 2017).

206 *Data extraction*

207 Various recommendations (Kitchenham, 2004; Perestelo-Pérez, 2013) were followed to  
208 examine the study data. The data were classified into the following categories: aims of the  
209 studies; characteristics of the sample, specifically, gender, ethnicity, sample size,  
210 background, and type of sampling; origin context of the studies (country); instruments

211 used to obtain the results and, finally; risk factors identified.

212 *Analysis*

213 A qualitative analysis of the studies was conducted to extract the data, which are

214 summarised in Table 1.

215 [Table 1 near here]

216 **Results**

217 *Aims of the studies*

218 The studies presented, while considering the risk factors for urban gang membership,  
219 pursue different objectives. Among them are the following: to understand the role of  
220 community and school level in gang membership; to consider the analysis of risk factors  
221 for gang membership and criminal exploitation; to assess the ability of different sciences,  
222 such as Psychology and Criminology, to create a methodology to investigate the social  
223 and pedagogical characteristics of gang members; to examine the development of  
224 individual, peer and community risk factors, analysing their relationship to gang  
225 membership and antisocial behavior; and to explore the association between factors  
226 related to family, community, school, age of onset of three criminal behaviours (being  
227 arrested, bringing a weapon to school and attacking someone with intent to harm) and  
228 gang membership.

229 *Characteristics of the sample (gender, ethnicity, background, sample size and type of*  
230 *sampling)*

231 This classification aims to gather the different characteristics of the samples of each study,  
232 focusing on ethnicity and gender, on the sample size, the background (in order to  
233 differentiate between schools, prisons or community), and on how the selection of  
234 participants was carried out.

235 The sample presented in study 1 (Nuño & Katz, 2019) consisted of 35939 Arizona students,  
236 with 52.9% being female. The mean age of the respondents was 15.23 years old. Most of

237 the participants were White (47.6%), followed by Hispanic (32.7%), American Indian  
238 (8.5%), and African American (3.5%). In addition, 7.7% reported having a different racial  
239 origin. Of the total, 8.3% of respondents reported ever having belonged to an urban gang. In  
240 study 2 (Ashton & Bussu, 2020) the fifteen participants were purposively selected from a  
241 group of 14- to 18-year-old males who had been referred to a community program for gang  
242 involvement in the north of England. To be included in this study, participants had to have  
243 reported offending in the presence of at least one other person. Meanwhile, in study 3,  
244 Mukhametzyanova et al. (2020) conducted their study with 214 schoolchildren in the state  
245 government special educational institution for students with deviant behavior in the  
246 Vakhitovsky district of Kazan. In study 4 (Smith et al., 2019), the sample consisted of 2019  
247 children of Caucasian ethnicity (99.8%) from mothers enrolled in the study, who were  
248 followed over time until adulthood. Independent variables were collected from the mother  
249 when the child was 57 months old and again at age 7 years. Delinquency-related outcome  
250 variables were collected from the child at age 15.5 years. The sample was approximately  
251 equally male (50.6%) and female. Study 5 (Forsyth et al., 2018) uses data from 577  
252 schoolchildren from the 2014 Louisiana Caring Communities Youth Survey (CCYS), which  
253 assesses behavioral problems associated with juvenile delinquency. Of the total number of  
254 schoolchildren, 43.8% are male and 56.2% are female. With respect to ethnicity, 50.8%  
255 were African American, 28.8% White, 7.1% Asian, 4.2% Hispanic or Latino, 3.5%  
256 American Indian, and 0.7% Pacific Islander. In study 6 (Howell et al., 2017) the sample  
257 included 3072 youth who were sent to statewide probation or juvenile incarceration  
258 between January 2008 and July 2013. Most participants were male (84%). The ethnic  
259 composition of the sample was Caucasian (61%), Hispanic/Latino (22%), African American  
260 (9%), American Indian (3%), and Asian/Pacific Islander (1%). Age at pretrial detention  
261 ranged from 12 to 19 years, with a mean of 15.8 years old. In study 7 (Annan et al., 2022) a  
262 convenience sample of 26 subjects was used, being divided into two groups, one of young

263 people between 14 and 16 years of age and another group of young workers between 20 and  
264 30 years of age. This is a study that uses focus groups to evaluate different groups, so the  
265 present review focuses on the identification of risk factors associated with urban gang  
266 membership in the 14–16-year-old group. This subgroup consisted of 14 young people (13  
267 males and one female) recruited from two sports and performing arts related programs for  
268 young people in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. The main ethnicities in this study  
269 included Bangladeshi, Black, African and White British, although the percentage by  
270 subgroup is not provided. The sample of study 8 (Bacchini et al., 2020) is composed of 817  
271 adolescents (46% male), with age range between 12 and 18 years, who lived in Arzano, a  
272 city located in the metropolitan area of Naples, Italy. Finally, study 9 (Garduno & Mestre,  
273 2017) has a sample of Hispanic youth enrolled in public middle and high schools in  
274 Maryland, United States. They were considered Hispanic if they, or at least one of their  
275 parents, were born in a Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking country in Latin America, the  
276 Caribbean, or Europe. They were also considered Hispanic if they or one of their parents  
277 were born in the United States and spoke Spanish or Portuguese. The final sample consisted  
278 of 936 respondents (51% male), ranging in age from 12 to 20 years old. Of the youth in the  
279 sample, 6% reported being members or former members of urban gangs.

280 In general, in terms of the ethnicity and gender composition of the samples, Caucasian  
281 ethnicity appears in all the studies that mention the ethnicity of the participants. In the study  
282 that interviews juveniles who are already involved in offences, the sample is exclusively  
283 male. In the remaining studies, the percentages between males and females are similar,  
284 although the percentage of males is predominant in study 6 and 7.

285 The sample size differs between the individual studies, with the number of participants  
286 varying greatly from one study to another. Specifically, the ranges vary from 14 to 35939  
287 participants, with one study not specifying the number of subjects. The studies with the  
288 fewest participants conducted direct interviews with individuals who were already involved

289 in crime and focus groups, so the number of 14-15 people is in line with the research  
290 design.

291 Regarding the background of the juveniles, it varies from study to study. Data are found for  
292 secondary school juveniles from public and charter schools provided by US institutional  
293 agencies; there is also juveniles from community-based reparation programmes for violent  
294 offenders and gang members in the North of England; from government special education  
295 institutions for secondary school adolescents with deviant behaviour; juveniles of mothers  
296 participating in a previous longitudinal study; juveniles from public and private schools;  
297 adolescents who were from a prison context or were currently on probation; adolescents  
298 who have participated in urban gangs or have showed antisocial behaviours.

299 Finally, the sampling used in the selected studies was varied: stratified random sampling,  
300 non-probability by quotas, and convenience sampling. Most of the study designs are cross-  
301 sectional.

### 302 *Origin context of the studies*

303 The origin of the studies is very diverse. More specifically, both the origin of the subjects  
304 and the place where the research is carried out are as follows: California, Arizona,  
305 Louisiana, Oregon (USA), Northern England, Avon (UK), London, Naples (Italy), and  
306 Maryland (USA). Finally, only one study has a sample from Russia.

### 307 *Instruments used to obtain the results*

308 In this section the instruments used to obtain the data analysed in each study were grouped.  
309 Surveys, questionnaires, self-reports, interviews, focus groups, autobiographies and, in  
310 addition, other data sources such as census data, data from social security, ministries,  
311 healthcare services, care institutions and child protection services were used. Certain  
312 instruments, such as interviews, questionnaires, and self-reports, allow obtaining  
313 information from parents and teachers. Among the surveys, it is worth mentioning the  
314 Arizona Youth Survey, which measures 27 risk factors and 13 protective factors in four

315 domains: community, school, family, peer group and individual; it also assesses other  
316 aspects such as drug use and delinquency. As for the use of the interview, the semi-  
317 structured interview, in which the juvenile describes a criminal act that occurred in the  
318 presence of another person, stands out. Finally, emphasis is placed on the use of the  
319 DAWBA (Development and Well-Being Assessment) interview, used to assess the risk of  
320 depression or aggression in childhood and drug use, among other problems. This instrument  
321 has three versions, designed for juveniles, parents and teachers of juveniles from 2 to 17  
322 years old.

### 323 *Risk factors identified*

324 Regarding risk factors, it was sought to summarise those that had been demonstrated to be  
325 related to the objective of this review, urban gang membership, therefore not including  
326 protective or unrelated factors.

327 In terms of community-related risk factors, the following were identified: high levels of  
328 community disorganisation, infrastructural deficiencies, violence perceived in the  
329 community, unsafety neighborhood, limited opportunities offered by society to progress in  
330 employment or education, lack of institutional support, high mobility in the neighbourhood,  
331 lack of participation in pro-social activities, high levels of immigration, high population  
332 density, and the availability of drugs and weapons. It is found that juveniles are up to 1.6  
333 times more likely to join urban gangs if they perceive that weapons are available. This  
334 probability is lower in communities where there is no such perception.

335 As for school-related risk factors, the following were identified: high school failure, school  
336 absenteeism and failure to meet the minimum standards required in assessments in  
337 disciplines such as mathematics.

338 At the family level, the following risk factors were identified: history of antisocial  
339 behaviour in the family, having older siblings in urban gangs, favourable parental attitudes  
340 towards antisocial behaviour, parents forcing juveniles to commit criminal acts, parents'

341 rejection of their children, teaching juveniles' skills related to criminality, the normalisation  
342 of delinquency and a history of imprisonment in the family.

343 At the individual or personal level, the risk factors for urban gang membership identified by  
344 the selected studies are: high levels of rebelliousness, early commission of antisocial acts,  
345 self-justification of deviant behaviours, early onset of alcohol use, favourable attitudes  
346 towards criminal behaviour and drug use, higher levels of depression, obtaining rewards for  
347 antisocial behaviour, association with peers exhibiting the same behaviours, African-  
348 American background, low motivation to avoid failure, elevated feelings of leadership,  
349 having been previously arrested, having brought a weapon to school, having attacked  
350 someone with intent to do serious harm, having a high escape risk (in the case of  
351 incarcerated juveniles), having been in foster care, and having no health insurance.

352 In the economic sphere, economic deprivation, social disadvantage, and lack of resources  
353 are highlighted.

354 Other interesting results are discussed below. The study 1 uses two models for the analysis  
355 of the risk factors included in that study, the first of which is the multilevel model. In this  
356 model, participants can be classified hierarchically according to different dimensions such  
357 as, in this case, the community or school. Sometimes participants can be part of not only  
358 one dimension, but two: a school and a neighbourhood at the same time. In the second  
359 model used, the cross-sectional model, it is possible to extract effects from several  
360 dimensions at the same time, in this case from both the community and the school.

361 Considering the different models, it should be noted that, despite finding a relationship  
362 between immigration and urban gang membership in the multilevel model, in the cross-  
363 sectional model this relationship shows the opposite, with the probability of gang  
364 membership decreasing as the number of immigrants increases. The high concentration of  
365 immigrants is a protective rather than a risk one. On the other hand, in this study, drug use  
366 shows a weak relationship with gang membership, while the relationship between social

367 disorganisation and living in a disorganised neighbourhood shows a moderate association  
368 with urban gang affiliation. It is also highlighted in study 6 that those juveniles who have  
369 committed a crime solely to improve their status are three times more likely to be part of an  
370 urban gang, as are those who committed it for revenge, money, strong emotions, or those  
371 who lead others to commit criminal acts. Finally, it is noteworthy that study 7 shows that  
372 the main risk factors associated with youth gang involvement are related more with the lack  
373 of available support networks than with individual factors.

#### 374 **Discussion and Conclusions**

375 The purpose of this study was to carry out a systematic review to analyse the relationship  
376 between risk factors present in various domains of a juvenile's life and membership in  
377 urban gangs.

378 After analysing the data and the results provided by the studies that constitute this review,  
379 it is concluded that the risk factors that have shown a significant relationship with the  
380 integration of juveniles in urban gangs are present in the domains of the community, the  
381 school, the family, individual characteristics, and the economic area.

382 Other investigations, such as the one carried out by Hill et al. (1999) obtained similar  
383 results. The authors of this paper emphasised the risk factor of antisocial behaviour  
384 carried out by family (specifically, drug use and problems with the police). Other research  
385 that supports the results found in this review highlights the importance of the family,  
386 individual, school and community domains and emphasizes factors such as: having  
387 beliefs that justify violence, depression, or the availability of weapons in the community,  
388 which are consistent with those found in the studies reviewed (O'Brien, 2013). In line  
389 with the results of this study, in which the highest number of risk factors identified are  
390 related to the individual level, Shong et al. (2019) show that criminal acts associated with  
391 poverty are closely related to the character and development of juvenile delinquent  
392 behaviour. At the individual level, having favourable attitudes towards gangs and

393 violence is significantly related to gang membership, as is having high levels of  
394 impulsivity (Chu et al., 2014).

395 On the other hand, from this review, the risk factor related to the context of origin is  
396 striking. Other authors have pointed out that juvenile women from the youth services did  
397 not commit more crimes, nor used more drugs and alcohol than juvenile women living in  
398 residential care or young women without identified adjustment problems. However, these  
399 girls (from the youth service) did have more problems related to school failure (Azad &  
400 Hau, 2018). Nevertheless, other studies such as that of Bjerregaard and Smith (1993)  
401 found no relationship between social disorganisation and an increased risk of urban gang  
402 membership.

403 It is also important to note that both the risk factor of gender and high levels of  
404 immigration have not been included in the results since, in relation to immigration, the  
405 study by Ashton and Bushu (2020), did not find a correlation between immigration and  
406 urban gang membership in the cross-sectional model, despite finding a relationship  
407 between immigration and urban gang membership in the multilevel one. This risk factor  
408 should be examined in the future, as not only does the study itself show contradictory  
409 results, but other authors also bestow great importance to this risk factor for urban gang  
410 membership (Decker et al., 2009). In relation to gender, further research is also needed.  
411 For example, the study by Smith et al. (2019) finds no relationship with a higher  
412 probability of gang membership, while other studies such as Hill, et al. (1999), do.

413 On the other hand, it is necessary to specify that articles analysing risk factors for  
414 membership in criminal organisations have not been included in this review. Since this  
415 study focused on minors, to include in the review articles dealing with criminal  
416 organisations would mean focusing on members with an average age of around 33 years,  
417 while the average age of members in urban gangs is 17 (Nonprofit Risk Management  
418 Center, 2003). Furthermore, the terms "criminal organisation" and "urban gangs",

419 although similar, are not synonymous. Therefore, articles that did not address urban gangs  
420 were discarded. Criminal groups maintain a level of organized crime with severe codes  
421 and sanctions, as well as a high level of entrepreneurial experience that accumulates  
422 income from drug trafficking to perpetuate the business. However, urban gangs are  
423 structured with strict but more transient leadership and maintain more informal codes for  
424 members. Few urban gangs would meet the essential criteria to qualify as a criminal  
425 group (Klein, 2005).

426 Regarding the country or state of origin, it is particularly relevant to note that the majority  
427 come from both the USA and England, with the states of Arizona (Nuño & Katz, 2019),  
428 Oregon (Howell et al., 2017), Louisiana (Forsyth et al., 2018) and Avon (Smith et al.,  
429 2019) standing out. In all US states, gun possession and use are permitted by law. For  
430 example, in Arizona, an adult can carry a gun to school if it is unloaded and can legally  
431 purchase one at the age of 14 if it has an adult's permission (Arizona State Legislature,  
432 2022). This explains the analysis of this factor in the studies from these states. On the  
433 other hand, England has one of the strictest gun laws in the world. This means that, in the  
434 countries where guns are legal, the risk factors and the results obtained by measuring the  
435 population may vary when compared to territories where guns are not allowed. In this  
436 sense, future studies should analyze the evolution of urban gangs in other regions as well,  
437 such as Central America, where decades ago, in the 1980s, there was a severe economic  
438 crisis with lasting effects in terms of mass poverty and social exclusion, which led to the  
439 emergence of small territorial armies, such as youth gangs and organized crime  
440 (Koonings & Kruijt, 1999; Kruijt, 2011).

441 Regarding the sampling used in the included studies, greater homogeneity is needed. Risk  
442 factors are different from a population coming from a school to a population coming from  
443 prison contexts, as in studies 1 and 6, and errors may be made if the risk factors of the  
444 participants obtained from prison contexts are generalised to the population coming from

445 schools.

446 In conclusion, it is important to mention that the results should be interpreted with  
447 caution. For example, variables such as depression may be a risk factor for school  
448 absenteeism and not for urban gang membership, but because of the methods of analysis  
449 used (mostly surveys) it is not possible to separate variables favouring other variables  
450 from those favouring urban gang membership.

451 In conclusion, it is relevant to point out that, although the risk factors are known, it would  
452 also be useful to focus research on analysing the influence of the identified factors on  
453 subsequent behaviour, i.e., to what extent they are truly determinant for the development  
454 of criminal behaviour and gang membership.

455 Among the strengths of this paper is the classification of a wide range of risk factors  
456 identified by domain, providing combined information on these factors associated with  
457 urban gang membership in different territories and analysing their differences. In addition,  
458 the results obtained in this systematic review can guide towards intervention to mitigate the  
459 possible effect that these factors may have on subsequent behaviour. Furthermore,  
460 comprehensive prevention programmes can be developed to avoid the future integration of  
461 juveniles affected by these characteristics in an urban gang, applying public policies in  
462 those disorganised community environments and in situations of economic or social  
463 disadvantage and promoting early intervention in those risk factors at the individual and  
464 social level.

465 Among the limitations of this work is the difficulty in the search due to the difference in  
466 definition of the concept "urban gang" from one study to another. This difference is also  
467 observed in the definition and classification of participants by age, as some studies included  
468 terms such as "youth" or "children" but did not specify the age ranges of the sample. On the  
469 other hand, regarding the sample characteristics analysed, the studies by Ashton and Bushu  
470 (2020), and Mukhametzyanova et al. (2020) do not include information on the population

471 origin of the participants. Moreover, in the other studies, Caucasian ethnicity is over-  
472 represented compared to other ethnicities, which may make it difficult to make the factors  
473 analysed representative of other ethnicities and to compare across studies. In terms of  
474 gender, in study 3 this characteristic is not specified, in study 2 the sample is made up  
475 exclusively of men and, in studies 6 and 7 the sample is mostly men. Finally, about the  
476 sample, it should be noted that a minority of studies presented samples with few  
477 participants, making them too specific and unrepresentative. It is important to mention that  
478 several of the studies, for example, studies 2, 6, 7, use non-probability sampling, which has  
479 the disadvantage that, as participants are chosen for a specific reason, the samples are not  
480 representative of the population, whereas in the probability studies, the sample has the  
481 possibility of being more representative of the population (Otzen & Manterola, 2017). On  
482 the other hand, it is important to mention that the different instruments used for data  
483 collection are different in each study, as well as the methods that have been followed for the  
484 analysis and the areas that have been analysed. In all the studies, the main form of data  
485 collection is through surveys, interviews, or self-reports. According to Del Valle and  
486 Zamora (2021), the use of self-reporting can lead to the collection of information that is not  
487 true, causing the results to be inaccurate.

488 As the main conclusion of this study, several risk factors for urban gang membership in  
489 minors were identified, grouped in the following domains: community (community  
490 disorganisation, violence perceived in the community, unsafety neighborhood, limited  
491 opportunities offered by society to progress in employment or education, lack of  
492 institutional support, high mobility in the neighbourhood, lack of participation in pro-social  
493 activities, high levels of immigration, population density, availability of drugs and  
494 weapons); school (school failure, absenteeism, failure to pass assessment standards); family  
495 (antisocial behaviour in the family, parental obligation to the commission of criminal acts  
496 by their children, parent's rejection of their children, having older siblings in urban gangs,

497 teaching juveniles criminal skills, normalisation of delinquency, history of incarceration in  
498 the family); individual (rebelliousness, early commission of antisocial acts, self-justification  
499 of deviant behaviours, early onset of alcohol use, favourable attitudes towards criminal  
500 behaviour, drug use, depression, getting reinforcement for antisocial behaviour, association  
501 with peers exhibiting the same behaviours, African-American background, low motivation  
502 to avoid failure, high feelings of leadership, having been previously arrested, bringing a  
503 weapon to school, having attacked someone with intent to do serious harm, high escape risk  
504 (in the case of incarcerated juveniles), having been in foster care, not having health  
505 insurance; and finally, economic (economic deprivation, social disadvantage, lack of  
506 resources).

507 The above-mentioned factors should be included holistically in prevention and treatment  
508 programmes for children and their families, as well as community and public policies  
509 and/or legislation.

510 For future research, it is relevant to propose an analysis carried out in multiple territories or  
511 states and conformed by a sufficiently large number of participants, to avoid generalisation  
512 biases in the results.

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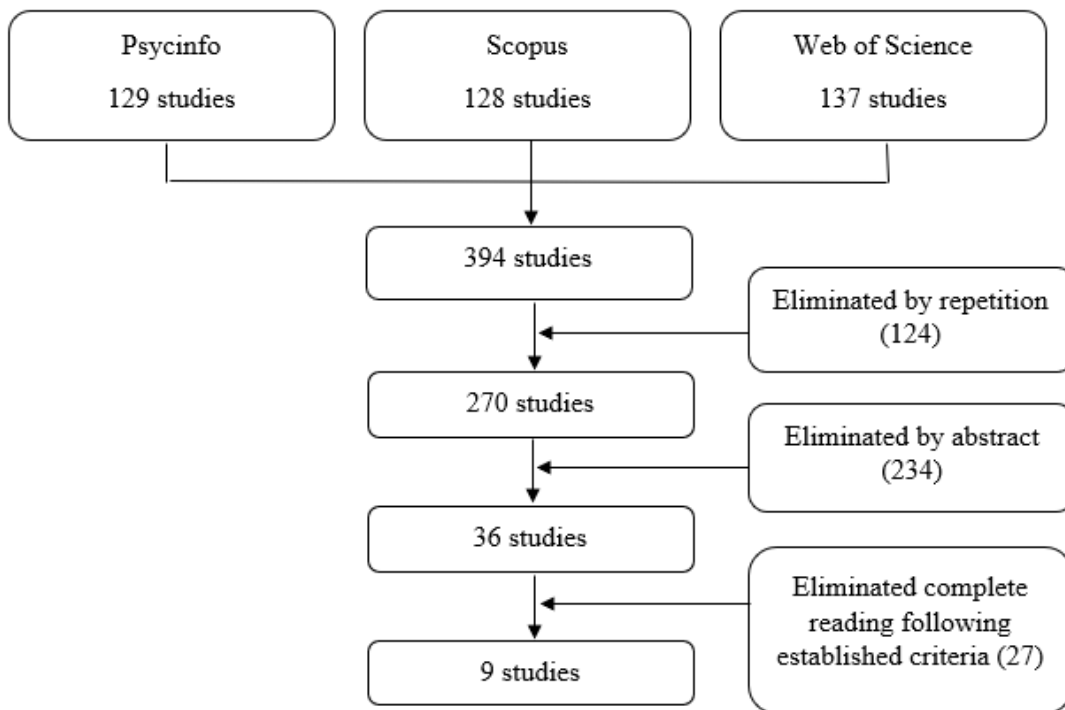
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**Figure 1.** Study selection process.

**Table 1.** Summary of results by categories of the selected studies.

Study	n (Background)	Gender	n (Size)	Ethnicity	Instruments	Sampling	Origin	Risk Factors
1	Public and charter schools	52.9% women 47.1% men	35939	Caucasian (47.6%) Hispanic (32.7%) American Indian (8.5%) African American (3.5%) Others (7.7%)	Arizona Youth Survey. Self-report survey	Stratified random sampling	Arizona (USA)	Community disorganisation, high mobility, school failure, presence of antisocial behaviour, substance use
2	Community-based reparation programmes for violent offenders or gang members	100% men	15	ND*	semi-structured interview	Non-probability by quotas and convenience sampling	United Kingdom	Family involved in delinquent behaviour, criminal exploitation, disadvantaged background
3	Government special education institutions for secondary school adolescents with deviant behaviour	ND*	214	ND*	Surveys.	Non-probability by quotas and convenience sampling	Kazan (Russia)	Low motivation for success, high leadership, paternalistic attitudes, low motivation
4	Pregnant women from Avon with delivery dates between 1991 April 1st and 1992 December	49.4% women 50.6% men	15445	Caucasian (99.8%)	ALSPAC DAWBA	Non-probability by quotas	Avon (United Kingdom)	Individual, peer group, community (differential association)
5	Public and private schools	ND*	ND*	ND*	Louisiana Communities that Care Youth Survey (CCYS) and self-report survey	Stratified random sampling	Louisiana (USA)	Previous arrests, carrying a weapon, attacks with intent to harm
6	Juvenil justice archives	16% women 84% men	3072	Caucasian (61%) Hispanic (22%) African American (9%) Native American (3%) Asiatic (1%)	Risk/Needs Assessment (RNA), self-report	Non-probability by quotas	Oregon (USA)	Beliefs justifying violence, foster care, school absenteeism

**Table 1.** Summary of results by categories of the selected studies (continuation).

Study	n (Background)	Gender	n (Size)	Ethnicity	Instruments	Sampling	Origin	Risk Factors
7	Low-income districts. Programs based in the London borough of Tower Hamlets	92.8% men 7.2% women	14	ND*	Focus groups	Convenience sampling	London	Lack of institutional support, Limited opportunities offered by society to progress in employment/education, infrastructural deficiencies
8	The eighth and eleventh grades of two middle schools and three high schools	46.9% men 53.1 women	817	ND*	Questionnaires: Antisocial Behavior Questionnaire; Exposure to Community Violence Questionnaire; Parental Acceptance–Rejection Questionnaire; How I think Questionnaire	Convenience sampling	Naples (Italy)	Parent’s rejection of their children, violence perceived in the community, unsafety neighborhood, self-justification of deviant behaviours
9	Public schools; Identity, Inc: organization that serves Latino youth and their families by providing programmes and services	51% men 49% women	936	ND*	Self-Questionnaires	Non-probability by quotas	Maryland (USA)	Having older siblings in urban gangs, higher levels of depression, low grades, low expectations to graduate

687 \*ND. Non-defined.