The majority of the American population obeys the law of the land and follows any and all rules provided by authority figures. These respectful individuals most likely grew up in safe, well-organized neighborhoods with good parents who were there for their children and socialized them well into the community. These people not only attended school throughout their childhood and into adulthood, but also did exceptionally well which led them to successful, enjoyable careers.

Ronald Akers argues that not all people are rule followers; an increasingly growing population is rule breakers (Scarpitti et al. 215). The question people often ask is why do people commit crime? How can people have no remorse and no regards for the acts that they do, especially the acts committed against another person? Over the years, researchers have continuously studied and attempted to explain why people commit crime. One interesting fact that Walter Miller has encountered throughout his research is that people who are involved in gang activity or have some affiliation with a gang, commit the highest amount of criminal acts (Scarpitti et al. 235). Furthermore, Elijah Anderson argues that girl gangs are becoming increasingly more violent and committing more crime, perhaps due to the amount of crime they see committed by the boys, or to prove themselves to the boys or to someone else (Scarpitti et al. 245). No one truly knows the answer to why girls are becoming increasingly violent and hostile, but there are an astounding number of theories as to why this might be.

This paper will focus on why girls join gangs in the first place, and once in the gang, why they commit crimes against society. Two different, yet similar theories will be used to potentially explain the answers to these questions, with some additional information based on social control theory. In addition to the theories’ explanation, material from journalist and author Gini Sykes in her book “8 Ball Chicks,” will be used as prime evidence of the discussion of why girls commit crime in gangs. Feedback from other studies conducted by researchers will also be used in attempt to provide theories on why these girls engage in this kind of behavior. These perspectives are not to argue that these are the exact reasons why girls commit acts of violence, but to present an explanation on what leads them to this particular way of life and what keeps them engaged in this lifestyle as they struggle for their lives on a daily basis.

The nature of a youth’s peer relationships, social and family environments, and self-image are prime factors associated with juvenile deviant behavior. Haynie, 2001 and Patterson and colleagues, 1989, provide evidence that deviant behavior in adolescence leads to an increased likelihood of adult criminal offenses (Church et al. 3). Through differential association theory, one may develop greater associations with law-breaking behavior than with law-abiding behavior.

Church et al.’s study uses an integration of social control theory and differential association theory to examine how family cohesion, family stressors, youth’s perceived importance of nonfamilial relationships, youth’s perceived self image, and their association with delinquent peers affect delinquency. Of the primary variables of interest, family stressors is the only variable that had a direct effect on juvenile delinquency (Church et al. 11).

It is the belief of the researchers that the integration of differential association theory and social control theory allows for a more cogent explanation of the phenomenon as opposed to examining it using the theories independently (Church et al. 11). Differential association theory states that delinquent behavior is learned via social interaction with others (Hoffman, 2002; Sutherland, 1939). This theory focuses on how individuals learn to become delinquents, including motives, drives, attitudes, and rationalization, but does not concern itself with the reasons why they make delinquent choices (Church et al. 11). Differential Association predicts that an individual will choose a criminal path when the balance for definitions for “law-breaking” exceeds those of “law-abiding” (Church et al. 11).

Furthermore, Cernkovich, Lanctot, and Giordano (4) focus on the impact of a variety of family factors derived from social control theory that show physical and sexual abuse during childhood and adolescence are prime indicators of adult criminality. Studies report that males are more antisocial than females (Cernkovich et al. 5). More specifically, studies conducted by criminologists show that female criminality, as well as self-reported delinquency, is less serious, begins later in adolescence, and is less persistent then male criminality and delinquency (Cernkovich et al. 5).

As I previously mentioned, researchers rely on social control theory as a guide in attempt to explain female delinquency. Hirschi’s (1969) social control theory states that the causes of antisocial behavior are obvious and need little explanation; such behavior is fun, expedient, and a reflection of a pleasure-seeking state (Cernkovich et al. 7). People who are attached to parents and conventional peers, committed to school and academic pursuits, and have conventional beliefs will be unlikely to engage in antisocial behavior, either in adolescence or adulthood (Cernkovich et al. 7). Social control theory continues to argue that youth who continue their antisocial behavior into adulthood do so because they are unbounded with positive reinforcements (Cernkovich et al. 7).

If a child is bonded with these conventional ideas, he or she will have no need to experience antisocial behavior. Furthermore, if the child was never bonded even into adulthood, that child, now an adult, can be bonded to some ideas and perhaps be reintegrated as a newly bonded individual. According the Cernkovich, Lanctot, and Giordano, a person who is bonded within the community will help deter delinquent behavior into adulthood. Also, a bonded person will not engage in antisocial behavior.

In their study, Piper and Aage (1) explored the relative contribution of social bond, self-control, and social learning concepts to the explanation of male and female violent offending. It’s no secret that the focus of gang activity is on males; the gang membership has been viewed as a male phenomenon, excluding females as legitimate gang members (Piper and Aage 1). However, there is an increased interest in violent and gang activity in young females.

Many people believe that control theory offers the best possibility for explaining female delinquency. According to social control theory, gender differences in delinquency would be accounted for by variations in the weaknesses of social bonds (Piper and Aage 3). Lower rates of delinquency for females are related to stronger attachment to family, school, positive peer associations, and involvement in conventional school activities (Piper and Aage 3). Their findings are very similar to Cernkovich, Lanctot, and Giordano in that people who are more closely related to and bonded to society will be less likely to commit acts of violence and ultimately, be involved with a gang.

According to Akers, Differential Association theory is a process whereby an individual is exposed to normative definitions favorable or unfavorable to illegal or law-abiding behavior (Scarpitti et al. 215). In other words, an individual follows the norms associated within his or her neighborhood whether the norms are right or wrong, or bad or good. Akers explains that often times, people don’t even realize that what they do is wrong; they’ve simply grown up watching certain things taking place or have been integrated into society through intimate groups, specifically through family or peers, that a particular behavior is accepted because everyone around them is doing it (Scarpitti et al. 216). The major false belief is that if everyone is doing it, then it must be okay.

One key idea that Akers highlights regarding Differential Association is that crime results from an excess of definitions favorable to law violations over definitions unfavorable to law violations (Scarpitti et al. 215). This means if more norms that identify with criminal behavior exist within a community, then more crime will exist within that community as well. In contrast to that, if more norms exist that identify with law-abiding (or legal) behavior, then less crime will take place within that community. A second idea that he highlights is that criminal and noncriminal behaviors are the result of learned needs and values (Scarpitti et al. 216). This idea is based on material success and how strong the desire is to acquire this success. Someone who was raised by parents who commit crime to get what they want will more likely than not evolve into committing crime as well, specifically for their desired pleasures. On the contrary, someone raised by parents who always obeyed the laws and worked diligently and legally to achieve success, will also follow that path.

With respect to differential association and gang membership, Winfree, Backstrom, and Mays (1994) stated that “the concept of differential association, typically operationalized as the proportion of one’s best friends that engages in some illegal act, has a natural linkage to gang research (Kissner and Pyrooz 480). Thus, it is possible that differential association exposes gang members to gang-favorable definitions, offers rewards in the form of satisfaction, offers the promise of reinforcement of criminal tendencies, or provides discriminative stimuli encouraging gang membership, perhaps in order to secure protection (Kissner and Pyrooz 480).

Differential association with gang members might precipitate gang membership for the sole purpose of trust. People form groups and cliques as a way to build a sense of loyalty to one another as well as to further strengthen their commitment to something that is important to them. People are more willing to join a group with members who are trustworthy and who have positive perceptions towards one another. Therefore, joining a gang is one way for girls from poor neighborhoods or broken homes to gain and maintain some feeling of trust.

Sikes visited the city of Los Angeles as one of her three chosen locations where girl gangs are a significant problem (3). While in Los Angeles, Sikes met a girl named TJ who was a member of the Playgirl Gangstas (21). Sikes got to know TJ and made her feel comfortable enough to discuss the gang life and how she got involved in gang activity. An interesting point that TJ makes is when she says, “mostly, you get into gangs to fit in. ‘Cause some of these girls, they come from really abusive homes and they’re just looking for some comfort” (qtd. in Sikes 21).

TJ’s quote is an example of the interactional dimension of differential association. According to Akers, the interactional dimension is the direct association and interaction with others who engage in certain kinds of behavior, as well as the identification and relation with reference groups (Scarpitti et al. 215). TJ is outlining the feelings of girls who have come from broken homes and who have been previously hurt, and the fact that all they want is to interact and identify with people who have dealt with the same issues and who can relate to each other’s feelings. Associating with people who have the same problems as you can help you through something a lot more easily than can someone who has never had an experience like yours before.

Sikes continued to talk to TJ about how she got involved in gang activity. TJ stated that she learned how to break into houses by watching crime shows on TV and that she especially liked stealing cars and could start an ignition without a key in under a minute (Sikes 22). At her peak, she broke into four cars a day (Sikes 22). TJ’s criminal activity is a form of differential association by how she learned the activity. She mentions that the TV shows that she watched taught her how to break into homes and steal cars. Since differential association is a micro counterpart to social learning theory, it is clear that TJ learned how to engage in crime simply by watching TV, which is something people do as part of their daily routine.

While in San Antonio, Texas, her second city that Sikes chose to visit, she spoke with a gang counselor concerning why these girls engage in certain acts, even if they don’t like to do so (103). Cynthia Test, the gang counselor, explained, “gangs mirror society, what society teaches them. Society doesn’t want to look inside its dark soul. Children always come forward with the truth, whether it’s ugly or beautiful. And we’ve become an ugly society. Our kids are mirroring that and no one wants to take the blame” (qtd. in Sikes 103).

Cynthia Test’s describing society as “ugly” will only teach children that exact concept; that society is bad and what happens in that society is the norm. Ironically, children don’t understand right from wrong or good from bad; they mimic what they see and what they learn. Therefore, they will attempt to participate in the gang activity and the crime that they see in their neighborhoods. Those that live in good neighborhoods with little crime won’t learn, more or less, the negative activity and bad behavior that might occur in poverty-stricken areas.

Edwin Sutherland came up with three essential elements associated with Differential Association. The first element says that criminal behavior is learned (Teasdale, 14 March 2011). The second is that this behavior is learned through interactions with other people, and the third element says that these interactions particularly take place within intimate groups, specifically the family or peers (Teasdale, 14 March 2011). As I previously discussed, individuals who grew up with criminal parents and were associated with delinquent peers learned and acquired this criminal behavior simply by witnessing it. Sutherland’s elements lead us to the view of Differential Social Organization.

The idea of Differential Social Organization, which is a macro level counterpart to Differential Association, focuses on aggregate units of crime, particularly neighborhoods or subcultures (Teasdale, 14 March 2011). Social organization determines the extent to which individuals are exposed to competing definitions of criminal behavior (Teasdale, 14 March 2011). If a neighborhood is socially organized, neighbors will be more likely to trust and to look after one another. A neighborhood that is socially disorganized is characterized by a lack of involvement within the community and with each other, and most of the residents within the neighborhood are clueless as to what occurs in the house directly next door to them.

The theory of Differential Association can be used to provide an explanation of why girls join gangs and commit crimes by the understanding that people conform to the norms in which they were raised whether the norms were good or bad. Research suggests that girls in general commit less crime because they are brought up as nurturing, caring individuals who avoid harm and confrontation of others. However, girls that are raised in surroundings of norms that favor illegal behavior usually don’t realize that the acts they witness are bad. Because it is the environment that they’ve always been around and that they have become integrated into, it is quite possibly the only lifestyle they’ve ever known how to abide by.

Akers argues that in order to fix this realization, the residents living in these neighborhoods should become more involved with their neighbors and the activities that take place within their community, which will ideally deter young girls away from a life of crime and onto a more successful path (Scarpitti et al. 220). Neighborhoods that are more socially organized typically have less crime than those that have no established organizational skills (Scarpitti et al. 220).

Walter Miller defines a subculture as a cultural pattern that sets apart some segment of society’s population; an example of a subculture being a gang (Scarpitti et al. 226). He explains that the main problem that created the Subcultural theory was the need for a way to account for delinquency rates among lower-class males which later expanded to include delinquency rates among lower-class females as well (Scarpitti 233).

Miller continues to explain that all subcultural theories focus on normative content of cultures (Scarpitti et al. 226), which relate back to Differential Association by its focus on the common norms within a community. However, subcultural theory focuses more on culture conflict, which Thorsten Sellin argues is when disorganized neighborhoods give rise to social attitudes that conflict with norms of the dominant society (Teasdale, 16 March 2011). Sellin discusses how this argument actually evolved in attempt to link Social Disorganization and Differential Association, but ultimately explains how a particular subculture becomes detached from the dominant society through a specific set of norms (Scarpitti et al. 236). Sellin also explains the idea of secondary conflict which occurs when subcultural norms clash with norms of the dominant society (Teasdale, 16 March 2011). An example of secondary conflict occurs when the norms of a gang community become conflicted with the norms of a well-organized neighborhood, for example, and violence is often the produced result.

Researcher Walter Miller conducted a study of lower-class, inner city youths in Boston and identified six focal concerns that characterize this particular subculture, including trouble, toughness, smartness, excitement, fate, and autonomy (Scarpitti et al. 227). Miller argues that youths learn these values as a result of being socialized as members of a subculture (Scarpitti et atl 232). His findings explain why girls commit crime in the same way that boys do; to establish a reputation and make a name for themselves. These girls have no regards for what society says and what kind of reputation that mainstream society will make for them. They have no attachment with the dominant society anyway and probably have little attachment with whatever parental figures are in their lives as well; they are solely concerned with the code of the streets that they grew up on and gaining respect within that community.

Miller’s formal definition of a gang is a self-formalized association of peers, bound together by mutual interests, with identifiable leadership, well-developed lines of authority, and other organizational features, who act in concert to achieve a specific purpose(s), which generally include the conduct of illegal activity and control over a particular territory, facility, or type of enterprise (Petersen 3). Rebecca Petersen argues that having a clear definition of what constitutes a gang can be useful in understanding gang life in society, and can have both a research and a policy impact (3). She also argues that there should be a universal definition of a gang, even though people view gangs differently (Petersen 3). However, even if a universal definition is impossible, gang activity still has an effect on public policy (Petersen 3).

Rebecca Petersen’s study hoped that by allowing youth to express themselves, they would become mobilized and develop a greater sense of belonging to society (7). She concludes that only broader social justice will reduce or prevent crime, therefore, policymakers need to be aware of what tools work best for each target population (Petersen 7). Qualitative research can help policymakers conceptualize gang issues and anti-gang strategies so that gang prevention policies can be developed (Petersen 7). In the end, policies need to improve the lives of children and youth in our society and such policies must be fully integrated into practice.

Elijah Anderson’s code of the streets, which explains violent and criminal subcultures, is characterized by norms that govern urban street violence (Teasdale, 16 March 2011). These norms are learned along with the idea that violence is a rational response to the rewards and punishments of street life (Teasdale, 16 March 2011). Anderson argues that global economy, poverty, prejudice, and drugs lead to social isolation and alienation from conventional ways of life including the criminal justice system, which triggers these individuals to conform to the code of the street, which ultimately leads to violence (Teasdale, 16 March 2011).

Anderson’s code of the streets also highlights competing values between the decent family and the street family (Scarpitti et al. 241). He says that street families believe in the street code, but they must coexist in poor, urban neighborhoods with the decent families (Scarpitti et al. 241). He also argues that it is a known stigma that parents who live in poor, inner-city areas and raise their families in these neighborhoods are bad parents, but that is not always the case; there are some decent families that exist within these areas as well but are too poor to live anywhere else, which often pushes these families to conform to the street code (Scarpitti et al. 242).

Furthermore, Anderson explains that people conform to the code of the streets to establish reputations because they feel like they have few other ways to assert themselves (Scarpitti et al. 244). The children who have become alienated through upbringing and who are lacking in strong and conventional social support experience racist rejection and contempt from mainstream society which forces them to conform to the street code (Scarpitti et al. 244). Decent people make an effort to be a part of mainstream culture, but the racism that they encounter helps to legitimate the oppositional culture (Scarpitti et al. 244).

Also when discussing the code of the streets, Anderson mentions that youths, mainly males, conform to the code in attempt to acquire respect along with self-esteem and a sense of control (Scarpitti et al. 245). Youths that campaign for respect often show public displays of violence, which explains why many of these youths conform to the street code (Scarpitti et al. 245). Girls are trying to achieve respect also by using violence and abusive language that has been demonstrated by the boys (Scarpitti et al. 245). In the past, they would get an older brother or cousin to do her fighting for her if she ever felt threatened or attacked, but girls are increasingly doing their own fighting, even though they are often not life or death struggles, as a way to demonstrate toughness and courage, but specifically respect (Scarpitti et al. 245). Respect is probably the most important reason why girls join gangs and commit crimes. They feel as if they have to prove themselves to their peers and their culture and they don’t want to feel inferior to the boys, or anyone for that matter.

In her prologue, Gini Sikes mentions that her first gang encounter was in New York City with Carmen, Tiny, Isabel, and Happy of the Nasty Fly Ladies (xv). This encounter took place at a local Burger King where Sikes questioned the girls as to why they engage in the acts that they do and what they plan to do in their futures (xv). The discussion was interrupted when Tiny made verbal threats against a girl who was standing outside the Burger King and making offensive gestures toward her (Sikes xvi). Even though Tiny didn’t recognize the girl, she explained, “let me break it down for you: round here it’s all about respect. Because people will disrespect you. Call you a sucker. And if you don’t punch them in the mouth and say, ‘no I’m not a sucker!’ they gonna keep picking on you” (qtd. in Sikes xvi).

Tiny’s explaining of the concept of respect demonstrates that it is a very important norm of the gang subculture. It is understandable that if Tiny didn’t react to the girl’s gestures that she would be viewed as weak, have no self-confidence to stand up for herself, and possibly lose respect by the other gang members. It is also a possibility that the girl would have kept on taunting and instigating Tiny if she felt that Tiny wasn’t a threat to her. On the other hand, Tiny could have acquired respect by her gang members by ignoring the gestures as a way to de-escalate the situation instead of building up more anger and hostility towards a girl that she didn’t even know. She could have also been respectful to her friends and the people around her by reacting in a more subtle manor, or not reacting at all.

While in Los Angeles, Sikes met a young girl named Wanda who was the niece of Coco, an older gang member who had aged out of gang activity after having to be responsible for five children (8). During a discussion, Wanda says, “people say kids join gangs ‘cause they came from a bad home; that’s a fucking lie. People join gangs to get what they never had. Some guy in a gang hangs out with a homegirl, he ain’t probably never had no sister” (qtd. in Sikes 45). What is interesting about this quote is that even though Wanda is contrasting TJ’s theory of girls joining gangs to get out of their abusive homes, she is theorizing that people join gangs to fill a missing part of their lives. She describes the code of the streets, again using the concept of respect. People join gangs as a way to require respect, which may be the thing that they are lacking within their homes. Therefore, people turn to gangs and others who are also attempting to gain respect in order to fulfill what has been missing in their lives and to perhaps, be happier.

Mama Sheik was Wisconsin’s most famous female gangster (Sikes 180). Sikes got an opportunity to speak with her about her lifestyle growing up and how it molded her into the person she is today (180). While talking to her about why she took on the role of the abusive male and beating her own lovers, Mama Sheik mentioned that she had been raped by a relative when she was little (Sikes 190). After that, she decided that no one would ever hurt her again (Sikes 190). Superintendent Powell explained of Mama’s personality more in depth; “she felt in order to protect herself from rape, she had to be a male. It probably did help her. She was beating up people to demand respect. That was Mama’s whole thing. ‘Nobody’s gonna give it to me, so I’ll just take respect’” (qtd. in Sikes 190).

Mama’s story is an example of subcultural theory by the way she adopted her abusive and aggressive personality. Having to go through the negative experience of being raped, her thoughts and expectations of respect were shaped. She takes respect from people by being abusive towards them and overpowering them, making them feel inferior to her, which in turn, gets her the respect she wants. To Mama Sheik, it is the only way she will get what she wants because people won’t give it to her otherwise.