Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies
2025, Vol.12, No. 5, 1-18
http://dx.doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/2147

ISSN: 2149-1291

'They Knew Where I Was Coming From': Sociohistorical Identity Factors in Cambodian American Gang Involvement

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Abstract: This qualitative study applies bioecological systems theory to understand Cambodian American (CA) gang-involved youth, including their motivation for joining and the sociohistoric and relationship factors contributing to their gang involvement and later disengagement. Insights from six CA men (M_{age} = 34 years, *SD* = 12.3 years), collected through qualitative interviews and coded through content analysis and grounded theory approaches, suggest that most joined due to a lack of a father figure and weak parent-child relationships. They remained affiliated due to peers, proximity to risk, social support, and protection from discrimination, and left gang life due to incarceration, family, and recognition of danger. Implications for promoting positive change among this understudied population are discussed.
Keywords: Cambodian American, Gang Identity, Externalizing, Qualitative

Developmental science has neglected Asian Americans (Tseng et al., 2016; Yip et al., 2021), and few studies have focused exclusively on Cambodian Americans (CAs), a sub-group of Asian Americans that faces distinct risks due to pre- and post-migration contexts (Mak et al., 2021). Many CAs arrived as refugees in the late 1970s-early 80s. The transpiration of the Khmer Rouge, the 1975-1979 Cambodian genocide carried out by Pol Pot and his Communist party, contributed to this influx as hundreds of thousands of Khmers fled from persecution. Hence, although CAs can be cast as the "model minority" like other Asian subgroups (e.g., high achieving, well-educated), domain-specific reasons for immigration – in this case, political persecution – have played significant roles in their identity and psychosocial adjustment (Lui & Rollock, 2012). Indeed, Cambodians are pan-ethnically Asian, being similar physiognomically and sharing some cultural traditions with South and East Asians, but their circumstances are incomparable and, for some, the Asian identity narrative does not resonate (Yamashita, 2022).

For example, in contrast to the model minority image, CAs and other Southeast Asian Americans are often cast as deviant minorities and stereotyped as academically inferior, dropouts, and gang members (Yi, 2025). Yet, CAs are often at real risk for gang membership, or at least must push back against such risks, which speaks to great urgency in better understanding their developmental contexts (Chhuon, 2025; Ortiz, 2018). Most Khmer refugees arrived with little knowledge of the American educational system or English, likely hindering chances for economic success (Yang, 2004). Many live in poor, urban areas with high crime rates and have higher poverty rates compared to other Americans (Rodriguez-Gitler, 2017). The nationwide graduation rate of CAs from four-year universities is low (18%), rivaling rates of Latinx' and Black Americans', and substantially lower than the 51% found among other Asian Americans (Rodriguez-Gitler, 2017).

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In the face of such challenges, CAs remain understudied in the psychological literature (Ngo & Lee, 2007). Not only are CAs members of the broader pan-ethnic group of Asian Americans, a group that is widely underrepresented in the developmental literature (Tseng et al., 2016), they are hidden even within Asian Americans. The already limited research base has focused on East and South Asians, who are typically better adjusted than Southeast Asians. Moreover, most of the research conducted on CAs has focused on those in California, neglecting smaller, less-urban, non-traditional receiving communities (Kiang & Supple, 2016; Yamashita, 2022).

The primary goal of the current study is to address these literature gaps, starting with our unique sample and approach. Lowell, Massachusetts houses an enclave within which one of the largest Cambodian/Khmer populations in the U.S. resides. Almost 15% of Lowell's population of nearly 110,000 consists of CAs. Through qualitative interviews with CAs in the understudied context of Lowell, we provide insight on the cultural and migration-related reasons for why and how individuals who comprise this hidden population exhibit risk for developing externalizing and gang-related behaviors (Le & Stockdale, 2008). In doing so, we focus on personal perspectives and individual stories of those who are, or were, gang-involved. An in-depth approach to gathering these personal stories could cast a more comprehensive light on the identity challenges and possible resiliency that face this group.

A Contextual Perspective on Gang Involvement

Bronfenbrenner (1986) created the bioecological systems model to understand how an individual's ecology influences their circumstances, delineating the micro-, meso-, exo-, macro, and chrono-systems as interacting spheres. He and colleagues later expanded on the model by incorporating more specific aspects related to components of *person-process-context-time (PPCT)*, which provides a holistic perspective on individual-environment interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). In brief, the expanded model consists of four interrelated components: the developmental *process*, the *person* and their individual characteristics, the *context* of human development, and *time*, which moderates change across the life course. These elements conceptualize an integrated system that frames the developmental course (Bronfenbrenner, 2005)

Previous research by Hong (2010) used the bioecological model to analyze Vietnamese youth gangs in America, an ethnic group with similar problems to CAs in their adaptation to America after a trauma-ridden escape from their home country. Hong's study presents a brief historical background on Vietnamese Americans (VA), and then identifies risk factors for VA youth gangs, from which intervention and prevention strategies were formulated. For example, Hong (2010) described how child characteristics, parenting practices, parent-child conflicts, and peer relationships – all part of the microsystems level – contributed to Vietnamese youths' decisions to join gangs. Moreover, Hong reported how the mesosystem, such as the processes of migration and lifestyle changes, negatively altered how parents interacted with their children, as they both continued to adjust to the new environments with differing acculturation levels. Exosystem level influences were characterized by the diminishing role of Vietnamese men, due to their lack of education and marketable skills, causing fathers to feel emasculated and inadequate. This further affected their roles as parents, especially compared to their usual role as breadwinners of the family. The macrosystem encompasses how Vietnamese cultural values, especially those in conflict with American values, and racism faced by immigrants contributed to VAs' feelings of discontent. Lastly, Hong endorsed how the chronosystem can explain how the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 allowed for greater immigration rates from Asia, leading to large-scale

ISSN: 2149-1291

immigration of ethnic groups competing for economic resources, which further widened the disparities between VAs and other Asian subgroups.

Similar to Hong's (2010) prior work, the current study draws on Bronfenbrenner's model to analyze how personal and historic factors have affected CAs' decisions to pursue gang involvement. More specifically, the extent to which themes of parent-child interactions, peer relationships, and connection to culture and ethnic identity are a part of individuals' narratives was examined. Inspired also by Bronfenbrenner's *PPCT*, the person is affected by a cascade of factors, beginning with the broad effects of historical events in the chronosystem, specifically the Khmer Rouge, which then trickle down into the more proximal systems in individuals' lives.

For example, in the microsystem, parent-child interactions are of considerable importance, especially when framed within acculturation perspectives. Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's attention to context, within the scant literature on Southeast Asian American delinquency, the largest predictors of youth violence are acculturative dissonance (AD) and intergenerational cultural dissonance (ICD) – that is, the process of changes in beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors as a result of contact with another culture (Le & Stockdale, 2008). These concepts are associated with parents' level of acculturation and their personal experiences with others.

AD is a more salient, significant predictor of youth violence, when mediated by peer delinquency, in comparison to ethnic identity (Le & Stockdale, 2008). Furthermore, ICD indirectly predicts problem behaviors (i.e., violence, robbery) by increasing parent-child conflict, which weakens parent-child bonding (Choi et al., 2007). These findings suggest that CA male youth could feel disconnected from their parents and thereby turn to peers for social support. Furthermore, acculturation processes and intergenerational/intercultural conflict could place youth at increased psychosocial risk (Ngo & Le, 2006). For instance, Dinh and Nguyen (2006) state that greater perceived parent-child acculturative gaps are significantly associated with lower relationship quality between Asian American parents and children.

Another unique struggle for Southeast Asian families is that much of these acculturation conflicts pertain to how each parent and child conceptualize what makes a good parent or a good child. Xiong et al. (2005) found that children want their parents to express their love and to be more empathetic, which tend to be characteristics valued by White Americans. On the other hand, parents think that good children should care more about their native culture and language, but their children do not value this quality as much. These contrasting views can lead to AD and conflict, which may then contribute to gang involvement for youth who need social support.

Social and structural factors also play a role. CA men experience more discrimination than do women (Sangalang & Gee, 2015). By experiencing frequent discrimination, both physical and verbal, CA men might seek gangs for means for protection. Whether being labeled as the Asian American "model minority" or, on the opposite end of the spectrum, lazy, truant gang members (Ngo & Lee, 2007), these experiences could strain ethnic-racial identity and lead to their seeking out same-ethnic peers (e.g., gang members) as role models. Joining gangs could not only provide protection from discrimination from other ethnic-racial groups, but could also reinforce their own identities, increasing their self-esteem and motivation to remain in the group.

This Present Study

In summary, despite growing concern around gang involvement among CA youth (Le & Stockdale, 2008), there remains a critical gap in understanding the complex developmental and contextual factors and shape their lived experiences (Chhuon, 2025; Yi, 2025). A qualitative approach using in-depth interviews provides indispensable insight to better understand CAs' points

of view, in their own words, and their personal motivations to engage in, and subsequently relinquish, gang-related behavior. Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological theory was applied as a framework and concepts of *person-process-context-time* were also used to guide the following research questions: 1) Why do CA youth join gangs, 2) What sociohistorical factors (e.g., pre-post migration circumstances) influence their developmental trajectories, and 3) How do relationships with parents, peers, and community (e.g., educational system, social groups) contribute to gang membership and decisions to leave? By addressing these key developmental research questions, which center personal narratives and phenomenological realities across time and context, the present study offers insight into the unique perspectives of an underrepresented and understudied population, with the ultimate goal of promoting their positive adjustment.

Methods

Participants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six former CA gang members. "Former gang members" was operationalized as those who participated in gang involvement and then decided on their own accord to be less active. All participants were male adults, ranging from 20 to 54 years, M_{age} = 34 years, SD = 12.3. Two were middle school graduates, two were high school graduates, one attained an associate's degree, and one attained a bachelor's degree. Participants worked in a variety of occupations, including food services, factory labor, machine operation, assembly labor, and non-profit organizations. Four of six reported having full-time jobs, one was searching for a job, and one was enrolled in an academic program for high school dropouts. Four of six lived in large households (two or more siblings) – one had no siblings, another had two adopted siblings, three had four siblings, and one had seven. Five of six reported living in a poor area in the same city in the Northeastern region of the U.S., and one reported living in a neighboring suburb. Five of six joined their respective gangs between the ages of 11 and 14, and one joined at age 20. All participants had knowledge about the history of the Khmer Rouge. Three of six were born in Cambodia and moved to America between ages 4-17.

Procedures

A community-based program that aims to help troubled youth gain employment was primarily used to recruit participants. Some were also recruited through snowball sampling. All were invited to participate in an interview study on CA gang involvement. Upon consenting, the interviews were conducted in public settings, including cafes and courthouse rooms. Each interview was audio recorded. Interviews ranged from 20-40 minutes. Each participant was compensated with a $10 gift card to a neighborhood restaurant. All activities were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the authors' university.

Measures

The interview was divided into four sections. The first included inquiries about family and basic demographic information (e.g., age, living situation, education, immigration history). The second centered on participants' gang involvement. They were then asked more specifically about their parental relationships. The final section asked participants to reflect on their connection with Cambodian culture. The Appendix provides a full list of the interview questions.

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Ethical Considerations

All research activities were approved by our university's Institutional Review Broad (IRB#00023177).

Results

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author onto a password-protected laptop using standard word processing software. A foot pedal was used to play and pause audio recordings as needed during the transcription process. Narratives were then read repeatedly by the first author, who led all stages of coding and analysis, to identify recurring themes reported by participants. This approach allowed for deep immersion in the data and consistency in interpretation. The overall method of interpretation was guided by qualitative content analysis, inspired by grounded theory, to allow specific themes to emerge from the data without any preconceived notions, and until saturation, in an attempt to build theory from the bottom up (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

During the coding process, the principal coder met with the co-authors and research assistants for feedback and guidance. Once codes were developed, the principal coder trained an additional coder on what each category/variable describes. The second coder then read and categorized all responses, and these categorizations were compared with those of the principal coder. Inconsistencies were discussed and resolved via consensus. Interrater reliability was calculated by way of kappas, and a 95% agreement rate between the two coders was achieved. For any disagreements, the principal coder chose the code that seemed to be more accurate, based on his discretion and interpretation. Methodological rigor was maintained through reflexive journaling and detailed debriefing with undergraduate and graduate research assistants and scholars in the field. This overall approach is consistent with recommendations for constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) and descriptive qualitative research (Sandelowski, 2000), which emphasize meaning-making through the researcher's interpretive lens, and which are especially suitable for small, exploratory studies.

Coding and analysis followed a hierarchical and iterative process. Open codes that describe general concepts were developed first. Repeated readings produced successively refined coding of specific variables. We used Bronfenbrenner's model to help organize narrative data, but we also allowed participants' experiences to speak for themselves and refrained from forcing responses into specific spheres of influence. For example, when a participant described his relationship with his parent, this was indicated as a micro-system code. In addition to identifying broad categories or themes, specific descriptions were also coded to provide more detailed analyses. For instance, descriptions regarding the strength of the parent-child relationship was coded on three levels (weak/low, neutral, strong/high) based on the coder's interpretation of what each participant reported.

Similar coding procedures were completed for participants' relationships with peers on the micro-system level, and their connection to ethnic identity at the micro-, meso-, and macro- levels, with participants who reported that they felt comfortable around their gang peers and felt strongly about their connection to their ethnic identity coded as "strong/high". As further examples, ethnic identity at the meso-level could reflect interactions between peers, school, neighborhood, and other institutions, with members with "strong/high" levels expressing pride in their CA identity across contexts. At the macro- level, ethnic identity could manifest through participants' SES, social

capital, resiliency in the face of oppression, and other higher-level concepts that speak to what resources they have.

Contextualizing CA Gang Involvement

Participants started joining gangs from the ages of 11 to 20, reporting middle school as the age most joined. Most were introduced to gang life by close peers or family members, with the following ecological factors playing a role in their joining. Four of six grew up in poor neighborhoods that were suffused with gang involvement. They remained in their respective gangs for various durations, from 1 to 21 years, for an average of 9.2 years. Typically, there is a 'jump out' process during which gang members who decide to leave are beaten by other members, and this often results in death. None of the current study's participants were jumped out, but they each did not consider themselves active gang members. With the exception of one participant, whose gang consisted of various races including Blacks, Latinos, and Asians, five of six participants joined a majority Khmer gang.

Participants were asked a series of questions to gain insight into their cultural connection. Despite their weak relationships with their parents, Khmer culture was emphasized for five of six participants, and five of six spoke Khmer/Cambodian fluently. For four of six, Khmer was the main language spoken at home. Five of six reported strong levels of ethnic-racial identity, and all six labeled themselves as Khmer/Cambodian or Khmer/Cambodian American.

Motivation for Joining Gangs and Continued Involvement

In terms of our first and second research questions, participants reported several primary reasons for joining and remaining in gangs, which span all levels of Bronfenbrenner's model. The *process* aspect of Bronfenbrenner's *PPCT* also explains how one's family relationships, peer relationships, context, discrimination, and connection to culture and ethnic identity interact to contribute to CAs motivation to join and remain in gangs. Family relationships and cultural influences emerged as prevalent themes.

Family relationships. One recurring theme was that the participants reported weak family relationships during childhood. Four of six endorsed not having had a father figure while growing up, while all six reported having weak relationships with the parent(s) who raised them. They described their parents as being limited in nurturing them and their siblings, stating that they were not often present to spend time with them, either due to work or by choice. One 33-year old reported, "…as a kid, we didn't have no relationship growing up. Like I said, they wasn't around." A 44-year old reported, "Unfortunately, my dad was actually killed during the killing fields when we fled the civil war during the Khmer Rouge…The relationship is not really fully fully there because my mom's always working." All four who did not have a father figure in their lives stated that they wished they had one growing up. For example, a 26-year old who did not live with his biological father reported, "When I was growing up, it was just…[my mom] didn't really put too much effort. That's why I feel like I'm here, where I am today. But I can't blame my mom. I'm my own man, so I did my own choice, my own decisions. So I can't blame her…I would say, if I had a father figure, it would be a different story."

One of the participants was adopted, having lost his parents during the Khmer Rouge. This 53-year old reported having a loving relationship with his adopted White American parents when he immigrated, but still felt that he was missing the connection of biological parents. He stated about his adopted mother, "I think she's a loving lady. She cares. She loves me just as if I were her

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2025, Vol.12, No. 5, 1-18
http://dx.doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/2147

ISSN: 2149-1291

own biological kid, but at the same time, I'm missing that parent, that biological mother…So, in another word, I don't have this sort of real mother-son bonding love, although my father, my adopted mother love me very much. But still, we're missing that connection."

Another aspect of parent-child involvement consists of how much education is emphasized within the family unit. Given the high delinquency in this participant pool, the interview probed parental educational involvement, which has been positioned as a source of resilience in prior work (e.g., Garcia Coll et al., 2002). Only one of six reported that his parents were actively involved in helping him with education, through reaching out to teachers about specific problems, helping with communication, and seeking out aid when needed, and this was the participant who was adopted by White parents. Two of six endorsed that their parents were uninvolved in education attainment, with the 20-year old endorsing that his mother had not completed school: "She never finished school herself… she dropped out when she was 17 because that's when she had my older brother. She never went to school ever since… She did [care if I went to school], but after a while she just didn't care anymore because it was my life." A 26-year old participant reported that his mother only interacted with the education system when his actions required disciplinary action: "One time, I was starting to like getting suspended. You know, it's like a little vacation for me. I don't need to go to school! And my mom, she hated that, and then she'd get called in so much that they already, every teacher know her."

Three of six reported that their parents were somewhat involved. Their parents emphasized the importance of education and going to classes, but went no further than that, not actively attending parent-teacher meetings or other school events. For example, one 44-year old stated, "When it come to school, education, we're Cambodian. We're minority. We don't know anything about parenting meetings, nothing. None of that. So all she know, 'Alright, every morning, you go to school.' And then she goes to work. That's it… That's what's hard about us, our culture. We're not really involved like that."

Peer relationships. After joining gangs, peer involvement, social support, and protection from discrimination all contributed to continued involvement. When asked whether they had good relationships within the gang, all six endorsed having strong favorable attitudes toward their peers. They reported themes that included having a mutual understanding of each other's experiences, having a sense of brotherhood, and generally enjoying the time that they spent with each other. A 44-year old stated, "They actually show me love. They actually care for me. They actually buy me food, and they actually protect me. Anybody try to mess with me, we'll walk in a crowd now instead of just me by myself. We're all in a crowd now. I feel like I belong to somebody right now... We [are] just like a brotherhood." A 26-year old endorsed, "They were my family. They're like my second family. I would say some is like, they was more there for me than my own family."

Another example of how peer relationships were a driving force in gang involvement was reported by a 20-year old who stated that he got along with gang members "Because we had a lot in common." He went on to state, "I chill with those people because they relate to me, they been through what I been through. And I can't talk to you guys [(White, Black, and Latino peers)] about it because you guys never been there. They have everything that's given in front of them. They have a better lifestyle than us. They never been through the worst. They never been through the downpoint. They never been in the slums, you know? They don't know what it's like. They don't understand. That's why. That's why I joined the gang early. They knew where I was coming from. And they showed me love, like I was family."

Social support and protection against discrimination. Furthermore, before joining their respective gangs, all six participants had been discriminated against, both verbally and physically. For example, one 20-year old stated, "When I was back in middle school, they always kept calling

me 'wide eyes, wide-screen eyes.'" A 26-year old said, "[It happens] even right now, where I used to work… I was there for a year and a half. My boss, he's a white guy. He's a Christian guy too, but he seems like a good guy. He IS a good guy. He just look at me because I'm Asian, he doesn't want me to be above him, but I proved him wrong." A 28-year old endorsed that people often said, "Go back to your country, you [expletives]," when he was younger. A 53-year old stated, "I continue to see, even current day, to this present day, I believe there are continue to be bias. And I'm not talking about that lightly. I think there's a lot of bias in this because of our color, because of where we come from, we've always been – you can put it any way – biased, discrimination, stereotype, however you put it. I think it's all fitted in there. Even with, sometimes, employment, has been very very tough… And even when you find a job, you get in there, you are being treated a little bit different than because of your race and your color, so it's a typical stereotype. And that come from either ignorance, come from bias, come from discrimination, comes from I don't know, all over the place."

Participants appeared motivated to join and remain in their gangs to cope, in part, with these experiences. For example, one 44-year old reported joining a gang because he wanted reprieve from the incessant discrimination: "Well, um, when I was in Boston – I used to live in Boston too – and, I was picked on by all the cultures before me, because I was different. Because I'm Cambodian, [a] minority. I'm a refugee, and I wear second-hand clothes. So other cultures there before me, they saw me different. So then I get picked on every day, and bullied at school, and they call me names like, 'Hey, chink' this and that, 'Go back to school.' And then, I get picked on every day, and finally, a guy from California, he's Cambodian, [he's] like 'Hey, you wanna join my crew? We protect each other.' So at [the] age of 13, I end up joining. We didn't call ourselves a gang, we were just a crew, [a] brotherhood."

After joining, they stated that their gang members helped protect them against other groups through intimidation and social support. One 44-year old participant stated, "I already get picked on by other cultures… So if anybody try to look at me the wrong way, my brothers [are] behind me. Like, [they] back me up. And I feel comfort." A 33-year old stated, "I'm less involved now, but when I was involved, gang life was about protection. Was about love. Was about, you know, fighting for what's yours and the people around you. Like, especially me, it was all family, blood family, so it was just fighting for them. For my life, for their life. You got rival gang members coming just trying to kill some of us. I mean, I think it's human nature to protect what you love, you know what I mean? Whether you['re] involved in a gang or not. If somebody rolled up on you, your father would protect you. If somebody rolled up on your father, you will protect your father. It's family. It's just human nature to protect what we love." A 53-year old endorsed the social support he gained from his peers in the gang, stating "Well, at first it was fun, until trouble started. That's something that I did not foresee. And also I feel a reason [was], because I was fairly new to this country, so I was still adjusting to it, and hard time, and here you go. You find comfort somewhere, and that's how I just have friends."

Leaving Gang Life

Regarding our third research question, all participants reported not desiring to return to their respective gangs, due to their family prioritization and hope for a better future. A 20-year old stated, "[It's] just not worth it. It's not worth losing your life over a gang. Over colors." One 26-year old participant similarly stated, "Is it really worth it selling drugs? The money, it's good, but, is it really worth it? You know what I mean? Is it worth your time being away from your family? I thought about it. You can't put a price on freedom, no freakin' way." A 20-year old participant left after

Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies
2025, Vol.12, No. 5, 1-18
http://dx.doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/2147

ISSN: 2149-1291

recognizing that gang life would lead him to more risk, stating, "Honestly, I just… I had a mature mind, so I just looked through all that bullshit, all the outcomes, all the possibilities that could happen to you, just being affiliated with gangs. I just ended up getting out of it just so I could better my life, [and] break my family cycle."

The desire to be more positively involved in current family relationships was another common theme. Five of six already had children, and three reported that they began prioritizing their relationships with their children as a father figure. One 33-year old reported, "Just, my priority is my family right now. A wife, three kids. I got bills. I got rent. That's my priority. I dedicate my time to my family." A 26-year old reported, "I'm a family man now. I don't need to prove nothin' to nobody no more, 'cause I already done proved so much, and threw my six months of life away. It's a waste of time."

In one case, a crucial developmental crisis was described, which was resolved by the participant recognizing the danger of gang life and deciding that he did not want to be gang involved anymore. This 44-year old participant left after becoming a drug addict, eventually leading to a failed suicide attempt. He said, "Once that drug lifestyle became in my lifestyle, people don't trust me as much anymore because they know that I'm using them… So I end up became a homeless and couch surfing, sleeping in basement here and there, sleeping on the bridge, stuff like that. Drug is my best friend now. So then I almost killed myself, with a gun, about to kill myself. And I was like, 'I'm gonna end it.' So as I end it, for some reason, I hear my mom's voice, like, 'Don't do it.' Maybe I was drunk…So then I actually, this is like the end of my gangsterhood, then I end up became a Buddhist monk."

Incarceration was another reason for decreased gang involvement, which was specifically reported by three of six participants. These three believed that they needed to leave in order to stay safe and live within the limits of the law. Notably, three of six participants still considered themselves to be a part of gangs, but in significantly less-involved ways. A 33-year old described the process of leaving, known as being 'jumped out': "You can never really… I mean, me personally, I never really… for you to get out, you gotta get 'jumped out', and to get jumped out, 90% of the time it ain't gonna end well." For the 20-year old and 44-year old, his gang members allowed him to leave without a jump out. For the 53-year old, his group decided against partaking in dangerous behavior after he was arrested in 1993, essentially disbanding as a gang.

When asked what they thought if their kids joined gangs, five of six reported negative attitudes. A 20-year old who does not have a child but answered in a hypothetical situation stated, "Honestly, I'll have a serious long talk with him about that, 'cause I do not want him joining no gang, no nothing. If he needs anything, just come and ask me, 'cause I'm the parent, so he shouldn't be scared or anything to ask me a question. He should feel comfortable 'cause I'm his dad. I'm always gonna be there around him. So he shouldn't be scared to take part in asking." A 33-year old stated, "The reason why I joined the gang was because it was all I know. It was the environment I grew up in. It was the time of hate. The 90s was a lot of hate, racial disputes. Now, as I'm older, I can provide a better future for them."

Discussion

In contrast to the experiences of voluntary immigrants, many Southeast Asians, such as CAs, immigrated as refugees from political persecution, coming to America with few social, economic, and academic resources, which makes them immediately behind in nearly all aspects of livelihood (e.g., social class, education) (Rodriguez-Gitler, 2017; Yamashita, 2022). For CAs in particular, there is great danger in grouping them with the larger pan-ethnic Asian American label,

as their struggles are often disregarded due to the general academic and economic success of East and South Asian American subgroups (Chhuon, 2025; Yi, 2025). Indeed, CAs have been found to rank substantially higher in youth violence and problem behavior compared to other groups (Le & Stockdale, 2008). The primary aim of the current study was to remediate gaps in knowledge by examining a largely ignored phenomenon in the broader developmental literature, and especially within Asian American research, and explicating the contributing sociohistorical and identity factors that shape CA youth's gang involvement.

Considering the unique contexts and developmental risks among Cambodian Americans (CAs), the present study more specifically addressed three central questions: (1) Why do CA youth join gangs and (2) what influences their decisions to remain or (3) leave? Within developmental literature, very few studies examine the cultural contexts of Asian Americans (Tseng et al., 2016; Yip et al., 2021), and even fewer explore subgroup-specific experiences like those of CAs (Chhuon, 2025; Mak et al., 2021). Hence, our use of an in-depth qualitative approach to amplify the neglected voices of a unique group within an understudied community responds to calls to gain knowledge on these especially hidden populations and contexts (Kiang & Supple, 2016; Yamashita, 2022).

Why do Cambodian American Youth Join and Remain in Gangs?

Our findings suggest that parent-child interactions (or lack thereof) within microsystems can be seen as primary contributors to CAs initiation into gang life. Consistent with prior work documenting family disruptions and trauma among CA refugee youth (Mak & Wieling, 2024), many of the former gang members (four of six) in the current study reported not having a father figure to take care of them while growing up, either due to their deaths during the Khmer Rouge or due to their leaving at or near their child's birth. Most likely, they had very few male role models in their childhoods, and when they recognized older male peers in gangs as being strong, they gravitated towards them. These older peers then took the place of their father's role in helping them develop, also providing social support. These ideas are consistent with the bioecological model, which states the importance of the micro-contexts within the family structure, and how a strong base can provide a positive springboard for youth development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). With the lack of a father figure, CA youth appeared drawn to influences and role models outside of the family in the form of older peers who were current gang members. These interpretations are consistent with prior quantitative work showing that CAs rank high in peer delinquency (Choi et al., 2007; Go & Le, 2005; Le & Stockdale, 2008).

Several additional reasons can be attributed to participants' weak relationships with their parents, which were reported by all six participants. One might be due to acculturative dissonance (AD) and intergenerational cultural dissonance (ICD). These concepts are attributed to CA children's acculturation to the American culture and language at a much faster rate than their parents by attending the social structure of school, while their parents retain traditional Cambodian values (Ngo & Le, 2006). Dinh and Nguyen's (2006) study suggests that the perceived parent-child acculturative gap is a significant predictor of the quality of relationship between Asian American parents and children, with a greater acculturative gap predicting worse relationships. It can be interpreted then that AD and ICD can lead CA adolescents pining for those that are able to understand their experience, whether it be a father figure or other CA peers. In poverty-ridden environments with low education, however, few peers can serve as positive role models (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009). Hence, youth might look towards gang involvement to find other strong CA men.

Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies
2025, Vol.12, No. 5, 1-18
http://dx.doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/2147

ISSN: 2149-1291

PTSD within parents might also play a role in parents' strained relationships with their children (Pol-Lim & Slater, 2024). Many of the older generation of CAs are survivors of the Khmer Rouge and have witnessed executions of family members, experienced intense labor in concentration camps, starved due to malnourishment, and experienced a multitude of other atrocities. After surviving such an event, their functioning capabilities, including parenting skills, might have been inhibited, further deteriorating the strength of their parent-child relationship. For instance, following the Khmer Rouge, the effects of trauma have been shown to significantly change how parents interact within the family, with numbness, avoidance, and vulnerability to stress leading parents to be scared, confused, or disinterested in the care of their children (Danieli, 2011). Relatedly, a 44-year old in this study reported, "And my mother, she's traumatized too, during the war, so she kept it to herself too. And she's always telling me stories about how my dad's a soldier, this and that, a good man, but I don't know him."

One striking example of both family influences and possible PTSD is found in the story of a 53-year old participant who experienced the Khmer Rouge genocide firsthand as a child soldier. He was taken away from his biological parents at around the age of seven and never saw them again, being adopted by White American parents following the war. He reported that when conflict arose after immigrating, the only way he knew to solve it was through violence or brute force. He described being pointed at with a gun by a gang member during an accident of misidentification: "As a child soldier, it triggered me. I need to survive. So, in order for me to survive, I have to move down here and hunt that guy down. So I intentionally moved from Connecticut to hunt for this guy, so I can kill him. But when I get here, I got no way to… I didn't find him. I didn't know where he went." This desire was most likely greatly influenced by his participation in the war. He had a non-existent to weak relationship with his biological parents and a strong relationship with his adopted parents, but when he reached adulthood, he continued to face similar experiences as other CA youth, reaching out to CA peers for social support and protection from discrimination. His post-migration experiences also appeared shaped by traumatic events in his broader chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

For many participants, the sense of cultural identity that came with gang life could have compensated for the lack of family connection. Five of six reported a strong connection with their Cambodian culture. When they joined their respective groups, five of the six gangs consisted of a majority Khmer demographic. As such, they all felt positively about their perceived support, describing their social unit as a brotherhood. The gangs most likely represented safe havens to which participants could return. Consistent with the general literature on how peer relationships can shape identity development (Makrooni, 2019; Rivas-Drake et al., 2017), CA gang members' ethnic-racial identity levels were likely reinforced by the time spent with one another.

Their broader peer contexts which included close proximity to danger and risky settings also contributed to their continued gang involvement. Four of six participants lived in poor neighborhoods surrounded by gang activity, and many of their peers as well as family members (brothers, cousins, uncles, etc.) were gang-involved, so no matter where they went, they were surrounded by violence. However, joining majority Khmer gangs provided both social support and protection from discrimination by other races, especially considering that CA men tend to report more instances of discrimination compared to women (Sangalang & Gee, 2015). Their connection with majority Khmer gangs might also increase their ethnic-racial identity levels, with the social support and protection from discrimination provided by peers further heightening their cultural connections. With all participants experiencing discrimination, having a tight-knit community (microsystem) that provides them with comfort might help them feel more positively about themselves, especially after being low on the social totem pole of recognition and respect

(mesosystem), due largely to their low SES and other contextual challenges (macrosystem) (Hong, 2010; Ngo & Lee, 2007).

Why Did They Ultimately Leave Gang Life?

Officially leaving gangs is not possible without a 'jump out' process, which none of the participants took part in. Many who are 'jumped out' do not survive. As such, to be a "former gang member" is to be less involved in risky gang activity, such as shootings, drug dealing, robbery, etc. The three recurring reasons why each participant became less involved were due to incarceration (three of six), family prioritization (three of six), and recognition of danger (two of six). All three factors overlap in that all the participants described wanting a better life for themselves and their families. All six endorsed that they understood what it felt like to not have a father growing up, so those with children (five of six) reported that they wanted to provide the emotional and economic support that they did not have growing up. All six reported meaning-making through their gang involvement, recognizing the importance of having a father figure and strong familial ties, leading them to prioritize their fatherly roles after leaving.

Hong (2010) describes how having a father who earns an inadequate income could lead to dysfunction in the traditional Vietnamese family structure, negatively affecting how his children view his role as the money-earner; as fathers become more lucrative breadwinners for their family, they might be considered better role models for their children. Similarly, CA adults who decide to leave gang life could be driven by the desire to earn an income within the limits of the law and to serve as a positive role model for others. Consistent with this interpretation, all but one participant reflected that they would not want their own children to join a gang. Hence, corroborating some of the literature on post-traumatic growth among gang-involved youth from mostly Latinx backgrounds (Dierkhising et al., 2021), there seem to be promising intervention opportunities in helping CAs derive meaning from negative experiences and potentially develop a sense of purpose in light of their proactive role in breaking the cycle of violence for younger generations.

Limitations, Implications, and Future Directions

Despite new knowledge generated by this study, one limitation that should be noted is that the participant pool was small ($N = 6$) and only representative of one regional community, albeit one of the largest in the U.S. Another limitation is the open-ended nature of using a semi-structured interview, with trustworthiness of the participants being unverifiable, and potential biases in the coding and interpretation of results. With a largely retrospective interview process, it is also difficult to investigate causal effects that might have led to participants' gang involvement. However, there are benefits of an in-depth qualitative approach, including its usefulness in researching understudied subjects, theory development, its ability to create new theoretical frameworks, and the amount of rich data that quantitative methods cannot measure (Lim, 2025).

Limitations notwithstanding, developmental science is severely lacking in both qualitative and quantitative research on Southeast Asian Americans and their contextual stressors and challenges following immigration (Yamashita, 2022). This study makes a significant contribution by providing insight into potential sources of problems contributing to CA gang involved individuals, an oft-ignored group, and brings to light the continued struggles of CAs overall. Their gang involvement most likely results from the trickle-down effect of the Khmer Rouge, a sociohistorical factor that continues to play a role in their poverty and education levels, negatively affecting relationships with family, eventually leading CA male youth to externalizing behavior

ISSN: 2149-1291

such as gang involvement (Smith-Hefner, 1999). Structural hindrances in the post-migration context (e.g., discrimination, lack of resources) also contribute to the bioecological stressors in CA's lives.

Our findings highlight the urgent need for culturally grounded prevention and intervention strategies for CA youth. For example, given intergenerational trauma and disrupted parent-child relationships, clinical practices and health-related policies could prioritize bolstering the family system and addressing relational needs. Attention towards possible treatment for PTSD, especially for first-generation parents, could also be useful in improving parental functioning which, in turn, can protect against youth gang involvement. Culturally competent parenting interventions could also be developed and implemented to emphasize the importance of familial ties, and in particular, the role of the father. Similarly, given that some of the participants in our study mentioned that their gang activity originated from the search for older role models, programs that connect youth with prosocial mentors could illustrate possible alternative life paths. There should also be more rigorous outreach in the exposure of alternative activities/resources/sports to youth to encourage positive developmental outlets (Mahoney et al., 2008).

More broadly, the impact of racism and discrimination as contributing to gang membership points to the need for institutions and policies to protect youth and help then navigate and cope with such experiences. In terms of fostering opportunities for growth and change, our results underscore the potential for job training, parenting initiatives, and social and economic support programs to help gang members who have left or who want to leave build resources and resilience to do so. Finally, to continue overall understanding and to further clarify the developmental context of CAs, it is important for future research to consider how Asian Americans, as a group, are not a monolith. There is a need to interrogate the applicability of Asian stereotypes to specific subgroups and to recognize the unique needs and experiences of specific Asian American communities.

In summary, in light of the challenges that face CAs, the implications of our work point to the importance of the following sociocultural research, practice, and policy initiatives:

- Family-based interventions and programs to strengthen relational functioning
- Community mental health services that integrate trauma-informed care
- Mentoring programs that introduce CA youth to positive role models.
- Recognizing and managing the developmental impact of racism, perhaps strengthening anti-bias initiatives in schools, workplaces, and policing
- Developing re-entry programs that center on job training, parenting support, prosocial behaviors, and socioeconomic growth and stability
- Disaggregating Asian American data in research, practice, and program evaluation, discarding a one-size-fits-all approach to Asian American health, and considering the unique needs of Asian American subgroups.

In conclusion, more research should be conducted on other discrete groups living in the U.S., such as CAs and others who are unable to have a say in the workforce or in academia due to obstacles in reaching higher educational levels (Yi, 2025). Wider implications of our work are relevant to researchers and scholars as well as clinicians, teachers, and other practitioners who work directly with marginalized youth so that they might ultimately come out of the shadows and thrive.

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Notes on Contributors

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Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies
2025, Vol.12, No. 5, 1-18
http://dx.doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/2147

ISSN: 2149-1291

Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Demographic Information

- How old are you?
- Tell me about your living situation. Where do you live right now?
- How about your educational experiences?
- And your work experiences?
- Do you have a mother figure in your life? Did you live with your biological father?
- Any siblings? Brothers or sisters?
- When did your family come to the U.S.?
- Do you know what the circumstances were like for your family before and after you came?
- Do you still have family in Cambodia? Have you ever visited, or do you plan to visit them later on?

Gang Involvement

- When did you first join the gang? How old were you?
- How were you first introduced to the gang?
- How long were you in this gang?
- Tell me what gang life was like.
- Do you feel you got along with those guys well? Why do you think so?
- When was the last time you were in the gang?
- Why did you decide to get out?
- What was the process like?
- Would you ever go back to the gang? Why or why not?
- Is there anything you miss about being in the gang?
- Do you see people from the gang in everyday life? How are your relationships with them now?
- Do you have a child? Even if not, if you had a teenage son, what would you think about him joining the gang?
- What else do you do in your free time?

Relationships with Parents

- How good do you think your relationship with your mom/dad is (from 1–10, 10 being extremely good)?
- Do you take part in Cambodian culture often (e.g., eat Cambodian food, speak Khmer, take part in religious traditions)?
- How much has your family emphasized or taught you about Cambodian culture?
- Do you know Khmer well?
- Do you talk often with your parents? If so, about what?
- Do you argue often with your parents? If so, about what?
- How involved is your mom/dad with your school life? What do they tell you about education?

Identity

- What labels would you use to describe yourself?
    - Do you consider yourself Cambodian? American? Cambodian American?
- How strongly do you feel about your ethnic identity (i.e., how close your identity is to your ethnic group)?
- Do you identify as “Asian”? Why or why not?
- What does it mean to you to be Cambodian? Asian? American?

    - Do you ever feel like you have to do well in school because you're Asian?
    - Or do you ever get treated differently because you're Cambodian?
- How often have you experienced discrimination from others? Any examples? If so, who are the people who do the discriminating (e.g., white people, other Asian people, other Cambodians, African Americans)?