Girls in Gangs: 
Listening to and Making Sense of Females’ Perspectives of Gang Life

Author: Ashlin Kelly

Supervisor: Dr. Valerie Steeves

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Department of Criminology

Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Ottawa
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Abstract

This thesis is an exploratory qualitative study that seeks to capture some of the experiences and challenges faced by females who have been gang-involved, either directly or peripherally. A total of eleven interviews were completed with seven women who were either former members of a gang (directly involved) or knew and associated with male and female gang members (peripherally involved) in Canada. The thesis examines my participants’ views of why women enter, persist and desist from gangs. My participants reported that girls join and stay in a gang primarily because they have a significant other who is a male gang member. A sense of kinship, financial dependency, and a lack of alternatives were cited as reasons for girls to join and persist in gangs. The main motivators for desisting were pregnancy, physical separation, treatment and hitting “rock bottom”. The principal findings indicate that there is a gendered hierarchy within mixed gangs that enables males to maintain power and control over females, impacting girl’s expectations, roles and responsibilities in a mixed gang. The significant social, psychological, physical and financial barriers to desistance are outlined and should be considered when devising programming to facilitate gang desistance for females. Furthermore, my participants stressed the need for comprehensive intervention initiatives that account for gender in order to help women desist safely and successfully. The study highlights that desisting from a gang can be a lifelong process, requiring ongoing support structures. The findings speak to the need to make the ‘invisible’ female gang members visible.
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I would like to dedicate this research to all the girls that have been or currently are, directly or indirectly, involved in a gang.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Criminal Intelligence Service Canada (CISC) has estimated that Canada has approximately three hundred street gangs with a total of eleven thousand members, respectively (CISC, 2006), including about twenty gangs in British Columbia, thirty in Alberta, twenty-one in Saskatchewan, twenty-five in Manitoba, fifty in Quebec, 175 in Ontario, and about fifteen in the Atlantic provinces. In the United States, the National Youth Gang Centre (2006) has reported that there are approximately 21,600 street gangs with a total of 731,500 members. When considering these statistics, it is important to note that how one defines a “street gang” and a “gang member” will have a significant impact on the total numbers reported. However, evidence illustrates that the phenomenon of gangs and gang membership is on the rise and gangs are becoming increasingly violent in North America (Spergel, 1995; Howell, 2000; Delaney, 2006).

Throughout the twentieth century, public awareness of gangs has been significant. During the Depression, gangs of bootleggers and bank robbers captured the public’s attention and earned notoriety (Lauderdale & Burman, 2009). Today, the general public sees concern regarding gang-related activity through increased police spending on gang surveillance, suppression efforts, and decreased spending on less politically charged issues (Rossmann, 2013). Moreover, as gangs have grown in the U.S. and Canada (Dorais & Corriveau, 2008), they are garnering increased attention from the media, political realms, academics, and policy makers. Gangs also affect individuals from all different types of backgrounds who purchase and consume illegal drugs; this, in turn, helps to sustain the gang’s enterprise, giving them a reason to exist and make money.

Gangs are an important area of research for a myriad of reasons. Gangs affect the safety of the general public and their members. Gun violence is more prevalent among street gangs,
which is particularly salient as gun violence in major cities across Canada has become a growing concern, especially in Toronto, Edmonton, Calgary, Vancouver and Montréal (Dauvergne & Geoffrey, 2006). Moreover, gangs provide and promote drug consumption which has negative physical, social, and emotional implications on individuals and communities. The two primary business initiatives of gangs are drug sales and prostitution, including stripping (ibid). The former creates and/or fosters addiction and dependency; the latter puts women at risk of physical and psychological harm, notably augmenting their risk of sexually transmitted diseases (ibid). Additionally, it puts women at risk of unwanted pregnancies and often women peripherally or directly involved in gangs will give birth to a baby that they do not feel ready, financially or emotionally, to support (ibid). This can create a vicious cycle where children are born into an environment that promotes criminal behaviour\(^1\), violence and fear. It also highlights the importance of examining the impact of gang life on gang-involved girls and women.

The number of females in gangs has been increasing over the past decade. Canada-wide, six per cent of gang members are estimated to be female, ranging from a low of three per cent in Ontario to a high of 12 per cent in British Columbia (MacDonald, 2009). Michael Chettleburgh (2008) believes the aforementioned figures are grossly understated. He believes that the true number of girls in gangs in Canada is closer to a third, noting that Canada recently welcomed its first all-female gang; the Indian Posse Girls—an auxiliary to the Winnipeg-based Indian Posse gang—are thought to control Edmonton’s sex trade (MacDonald, 2009). Like Chettleburgh, Totten (2008) contends that the number of female gang members is higher now, as media sources indicate that female gang involvement in Canada has been on the rise from 2002-2007 (McKee

\(^1\) In the context of this paper, all references to ‘criminal behaviour’, ‘crime’, ‘criminal activity’, and ‘offending’ refer to participation in actions or activities that are defined as illegal by the Criminal Code of Canada.
According to the statistics from the Guns and Gangs Unit, Ottawa Police Services (OPS), there are approximately 473 gang members/associates in Ottawa, five percent of which are reported to be females (Patterson, 2013).

Mark Totten’s 2008 research is one of the few reports written on youth gangs in British Columbia. According to Totten (2008), “Most gangs are male dominated. Females who participate in gangs are for the most part treated as sexual slaves [or trophies] and are forced to play tertiary roles. Often they are traded among gang members for coercive sex. Females are required to carry weapons and drugs because they have a decreased chance of being searched by male police officers” (p. 9). Most of the empirical studies of the 1960s and 70s found, similar to earlier researchers, few examples of exclusively female gangs (Short and Strodtbeck, 1965). According to more recent research conducted by Chesney-Lind and Hagedorn (1999), females do form gangs and experience the same pressures as males that lead to formation. Taylor (1993) studied girls in gangs in Detroit, reminding us that the crisis of the inner city does not discriminate between genders. She stressed that the American epidemic of guns, gangs, and drugs is not solely a male phenomenon (Taylor, 1993).

Relative to the United States, there has been very little research conducted on gangs in Canada and even less research that focuses on females and their experiences in gangs (MacKenzie & Johnson, 2003). This research fills that gap by analyzing the narratives of gang-involved women in Canada, looking at their lived experiences and their reasons for getting in, staying in and desisting from gang life. This research is also important because it provides some insight into girls’ and women’s involvement in violent crime. There has been a rising fear of violent crime committed by young women in Canada (Tremblay, 2000) and youth violence is a re-occurring policy issue. In the United States, studies of large urban samples illustrate that youth
gang members are responsible for a large proportion of all violent adolescent offences. On average, 20 percent of gang members were responsible for committing approximately 80 percent of all serious violent adolescent offences (Thornberry, Huizinga, & Loeber, 2004). Similar offence data on gangs is not available in Canada (Carrington, Matarazzo, & DeSouza, 2005). However, the percentage of female gang members admitted on warrant of committals to Federal Institutions in Canada has been steadily increasing, as indicated in the figure (MacKenzie & Johnson, 2003) below.

Figure 1: Proportion of Women Gang Members admitted on warrant of committals to Federal Institutions in Canada 1995-1999
The Correctional Service of Canada adopted a policy, Commissioner’s Directive 576, in early 2003 to direct the supervision of gang members in institutions and in the community. In an effort to prevent continued gang participation, one of the intentions of this directive is to address some of the areas in offenders’ lives that contributed to their original gang membership (MacKenzie & Johnson, 2003). However, the directive addresses the issues in gender-neutral terms, again highlighting the need for a deeper analysis of girls’ reasons for joining a gang and the need to include intervention strategies to facilitate desistance.

To date, the majority of research on gangs and girls is based on the accounts of professionals such as social workers, psychologists, lawyers, police officers, and community outreach staff (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009). Professionals generally use information gathered by official agencies, such as court records, probation and police records, which are often incomplete or only give one side of the story (Harris, 1988). This research intends to look at the gang’s formation and its impact on female members from the perspective of girls directly and peripherally involved. Research that provides a space for gang-involved women\(^2\) to speak for themselves is needed to understand their lived experiences.

Gangs are a complex social phenomenon, one that non-members often find difficult to understand (Rossmann, 2013). The stories of my participants simultaneously give a voice to the girls who have shared them, serve as a resource to individuals designing interventions, and provide a new perspective for readers having little prior knowledge of this context. Moreover, the girls who have successfully desisted and shared their stories serve as inspiration for girls currently in gangs who are contemplating getting out. These stories reflect girls who associated

\(^{2}\) “Gang-involved women”: For the purposes of this research, all of my participants are referred to as ‘gang-involved women/females/girls’ to encompass my participants who were directly and peripherally involved
with the gang, in a very peripheral manner, as well as girls who identified as members of the gang and were thus directly involved. My participants have identities that have formed and developed from their lives around gangs. I acknowledge the complexity of the issue of gangs and realize that I cannot offer anything that functions as a final answer to end the problem of gangs. Ultimately, the objective is to gain insight into the reasons that girls become gang-involved, the kinds of experiences they have as gang members, and why and how they get out of the gang life.

This study contributes to the empirical literature addressing gang structure and functions and to social-psychological theory about interaction among gang members. It is hoped that the practical import of this study will be its potential to inform the design of effective gender based programming for girls in gangs to prevent gang entry and provide viable social alternatives for girls who want to desist safely and successfully.

In Chapter Two, the body of literature pertaining to gangs and more specifically girls in gangs is discussed in detail. American and Canadian research is presented, as is a discussion of the definition of a “gang”. The gaps in the current literature on gangs are identified and how this thesis intends to fill some of those gaps is explained. Following this, the primary and tertiary research questions are outlined. Chapter Three explains the epistemological orientation that provides the framework for this research and discusses why a qualitative method best suited this project. The steps of the research are summarized, including the data collection method, the interview and the method of analysis, to ensure ease of replication. To conclude Chapter Three, the limitations of the research project are acknowledged. Chapter Four presents the findings of my data analysis. The chapter opens with a summary of each participant’s story, followed by each participants’ definition of a “gang”, and then sets out each participants’ reasons for gang-involvement focusing on entry, persisting and desisting. I then set out the findings of my
thematic analysis of the data, focusing on the “boy problem”, the gendered roles in gangs, and how girls feel “gangalized”. Social, psychological, physical and financial barriers to gang desistance are then outlined in detail. Chapter Five includes a summary of my key findings and sets out some potential future research questions pertaining to girls in gangs. In the final paragraphs, I reflect on the meaning of this research.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter provides an overview of the research that has been conducted on gangs, in the fields of criminology, sociology, law, anthropology, humanities, and public and mental health. It is important to note that there is no consensus in Canada regarding the definition of a “gang”; this will be discussed at the outset of this chapter. Pertinent definitions that attempt to encapsulate the meaning of “gang” will be outlined, including the specific definition that will guide this research project. The bulk of the research that has been completed to date focuses on the risk factors that influence gang members’ decisions to join a gang and their role in gangs. There is very little research on gang members’ decision to stay in and get out of a gang, and less attention given to female gang members. In this chapter, I will discuss any gender similarities and differences reported in the literature. Furthermore, I will explore how gang membership can be perceived as a form of problem-solving behaviour. In order to include differing perspectives, I will present a noteworthy finding that is paradoxical to the normative assumptions of gang membership. That is, I will explore some of the positive aspects of life for females who are gang-involved which surfaced in a few studies.

My review will also demonstrate that the bulk of gang research has focused on gangs in the United States. Although I will provide an overview of the existing research on the extent and nature of gang-involved women in Canada, this chapter will demonstrate that there is a gap in knowledge with respect to the experiences of Canadian girls and women involved in gangs in general, and with respect to girls and women’s lived experiences of gang membership in particular. Finally, I will identify the primary and secondary research questions that this qualitative study has addressed.
In sum, the literature forms the basis upon which I undertook my research. It also illustrates how the involvement of girls in gangs has increased across the decades and how gangs have become more violent, more pervasive and thus have more of an impact on those who inhabit them.

2.1 Defining the term “gang”: a lack of consensus

How a concept is defined is crucial because it determines whether that problem is perceived as significant or insignificant and the amount of resources that will be invested in resolutions. Moreover, the definition will shape the perception of that problem, what it entails and how policy will address the issue. The history of how the “gang” has been defined and consequently perceived is important to consider when conducting gang research. In the past, the gang was perceived as a relatively positive space with various role models who mentored younger members. More recent definitions highlight the shift from a less violent space to a more violent and criminal culture that more commonly defines a “gang” presently. Miller viewed the gang as a stable primary group, neither especially aggressive nor violent, that prepared the young male for an adult role in lower-class society (1956, 1962). In the 1970s, due to the fact that gang life had changed, Miller altered his definition and concluded that “contemporary youth gangs pose a greater threat to public order and a greater danger to the safety of the citizenry than at any time during the past” (1975, p. 44; see also Miller 1982).

Post World War II, there were a significant number of newly developing communities as a result of population migration. Numerous researchers investigated the scientific study of group formation which had important implications for the understanding and definition of gangs in the United States. The works of Parsons and Bales (1955); Hare (1962); and Sherif et al. (1965) supported the notion that individuals, males and females, naturally formed groups. If there was
no social structure, including norms and roles, people in interaction soon formed them, and the
distinction between groups and gangs was based on the norms; if the group violated social
norms, they were no longer labeled as a group but instead identified as a ‘gang’. This reasoning
can be supported by two important theoretical frameworks: Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and the
interactionist theory of societal reaction. All of us are looking for a sense of belonging, security
and a community but our strategy to obtain these needs may differ depending on how we
perceive which options are viable given our current environment.

There is no universal definition of what a “gang” constitutes and the definition of this
term has been highly debated in the literature: “The question of definition has plagued
researchers for years, and there is little consensus about a definition of gang or gang member”
(Rossmann, 2013: 18). The term “gang” can fluctuate with time, place, and location. There is
no legislated definition for gangs in Canada. However, several police services across Canada,
including the Ottawa Police Service, use a common definition for ‘gang’: “Any group of three
(3) or more people, formally or informally organized, which may have a common name or
identifying sign or symbol, whose members individually or collectively engage in or have
engaged primarily in street level criminal behavior, creating an atmosphere of fear and
intimidation within the community.” This definition was drafted by the Canadian Association of
Chiefs of Police Street Gangs Committee in June 2011 (Patterson, 2013). To determine gang
membership, law enforcement personnel in Ottawa use the 7 point criteria which was developed
and disseminated by Criminal Intelligence Service Canada (CISC) for use as classifying persons
as gang members and has been adopted across Canada (Patterson, 2013). These criteria include:
(1) reliable information that a person is a gang member; (2) police officer observes person
associating with known gang member(s); (3) person acknowledges gang membership; (4) person
is involved directly or indirectly in a gang motivated crime; (5) court finds the person to be a gang member; (6) person found to be displaying common or symbolic gang identification or paraphernalia (street-name, tattoos, colors,), (7) physical evidence, including photographs, documents, data or items of evidentiary value that speak to street gang membership (Patterson, 2013). The minimum standard to be met when classifying persons as a “gang member” is the fourth criteria, that is, “Involvement (direct/indirect) in gang-motivated crime”, plus any two other criteria (ibid).

Rossmann (2013) uses a different definition of gangs that I think encapsulates some of the motivations for joining a gang which provides the public with a more comprehensive understanding of the reasoning behind gang entry. For her research, Rossmann adopted the following definition of a gang: “A group formed largely by youth and adults of a marginalized social class which aims to provide its members with a resistant identity, an opportunity to be individually and collectively empowered, a voice to speak back to and challenge the dominant culture, a refuge from the stresses and strains of barrio and ghetto life, and a spiritual enclave within which its own sacred rituals can be generated and practiced” (Brotherton & Barrios, 2004: 23). This moves away from the strictly legal definition used by the Ottawa Police Service and towards a more socially scientific definition considering the causal relationships of gang entry and membership. It also highlights that how we define something will shape the public’s perception of that issue.

For the purposes of this research, the definition of a gang is: A group of individuals, with shared norms and criteria for membership, who are involved in illegal action(s), individually or collectively. I use this definition because it is broad enough to enable me to fully explore the
ways in which girls and women in gangs see themselves and experience their lives as gang members.

2.2 Overview of Research on gangs in the United States

The School of Sociology at the University of Chicago was the first to produce academic research on the examination of males in gangs (Park & Burgess, 1969; Shaw, Zorbaugh, 1929). The earliest and, by many accounts, most thorough ethnography of gangs was carried out by Thrasher (1927), who supplemented his 7-year-long personal observations with census data and court documents to provide an in-depth examination of 1,313 street gangs in Chicago. Since this seminal work was completed, fieldwork has continued to be one of the most effective data-gathering procedures for gang researchers (Horowitz, 1990). Thrasher (1927) examined the various aspects of gang life, including a discussion on how issues of nationality, gender, and race are dealt with in gangs. He also explored social patterns, structure, and leadership within gangs. His exploratory study focused on gang-involved males, particularly new immigrants to Chicago. Thrasher (1927) concluded that neighbourhoods which are in transition can be breeding grounds for gangs. He explained that “gangs represent the spontaneous effort of boys to create a society for themselves where none adequate to their needs exists” (Thrasher, 1927: 32).

During the roughest times of the Great Depression, when male unemployment was very high (in the 20 percent range), gangs were of serious concern. Whyte (1957) conducted research in Boston examining street life for low-income male youth. He presented participation in gangs as part of the standard coming-to-adult passage of American culture. Therefore, it was seen as common as opposed to surprising or abnormal for males in low-income populations to become gang-involved according to Whyte’s findings. Early gang research illustrated that youth who are
not in school or who have little extracurricular involvement in school or community-sanctioned organizations, including employment, are those most likely to be involved in gangs (ibid).

However, the issue of gangs was over-looked and not taken seriously for decades. It was only in the late 1980s that national records of gang activity were even collected in the United States. There was no national centre or agency for reporting gang data in the United States for many years (Spergel, 1989). “Neither the U.S. Census Bureau, the U.S. Department of Justice, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Department of Health and Human Services, the National Institute of Mental Health, nor the U.S. Department of Education collect or compile national-level data on youth gangs” (Spergel, 1989: 8). It was not until 1987 that the Drug Enforcement Administration and the General Accounting Office started to report on the drug-related scope and character of the street gang problem nationwide (ibid).

In the forties, fifties, and sixties, gangs were characterized as non-violent or reported to have a low level of violence. For example, Whyte (1943) indicated that street gangs in Boston did not typically engage in violence that caused serious harm. Miller (1962) and Klein & Crawford (1968) stressed that the gangs they evaluated in the 1950s and 1960s were not particularly violent. Miller (1962) studied Boston gangs and reported that they rarely used firearms and their fights seldom resulted in serious injury. Bernstein (1964) and Short and Strodtbeck (1965) concluded that delinquency and violence by gangs in the early 1960s were relatively mild based on their research findings. It was not until the 1970’s that gangs were reported as a group known to be violent. In 1975, Miller reported that contemporary gangs of that time period were markedly more lethal than gangs in previous decades (p. 41). Klein and Maxson (1987) reported that, in the 1980s, the culture of gangs was changing and the level of gang violence increased. Homicides committed by gangs had increased and gang violence had
become a more serious problem (Klein and Maxson, 1987: 4). By 1989, gang homicides accounted for 25 percent of all juvenile homicides in approximately 65 major cities in the United States (Spergel, 1989). In Chicago, gang homicides as a percent of total homicides were 1.71 percent in 1975 and increased to 11 percent in 1990 (Spergel, 1993: 22).

Therefore, by the 1980s, gangs were a serious issue as gang membership and gang violence increased but the research still focused primarily on male gang members. In the 1980s and 90s, the United States experienced a dramatic surge in the number of adolescents involved in gangs (Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001). In 1996, there were an estimated 31,000 gangs with approximately 846,000 members (ibid). It is important to note that these numbers only include the individuals who have come to the attention of law enforcement officials and thus the actual occurrence of gang membership is thought to be much higher (ibid). These numbers are significant because the fact that gang-involved youth are much more likely than non-involved youth to engage in delinquent and criminal behaviour is one of the most indisputable findings in criminological research. This suggests that the number of individuals as well as the level of violence in gangs has been increasing. Gangs are a serious issue in need of critical inquiry.

**2.3 Research on females in gangs in the United States**

Although girls participate in gangs (either in all-girl gangs or in mixed-gender gangs), little attention has been paid to their experiences as gang members. Campbell first looked at the issue in 1984, when he published his book on New York gangs, but much of the research since that time has either ignored girls or trivialized their participation (Moore & Hagedorn, 2001; Bell, 2009). The little research that does exist is almost exclusively focused on the experiences of American girls. The 2005 National Gang Threat Assessment noted that female gangs and gang-related activity are largely ignored or trivialized because law enforcement does not know
how to address the issue and “maintains archaic beliefs that females are less likely to be involved than their male counterparts”, are not as violent, or have less propensity to violence than males (National Alliance of Gang Investigators Associations, 2005: 11).

As noted above, Campbell (1984/1991) was the first researcher to focus solely on the role of females in gangs. In 1984, Campbell argued that research had neglected females for so long because females in gangs were still considered an anomaly that contradicted the established norms for femininity. How gender roles implicate the gang culture and roles of women in gangs was explored in this research. Campbell (1984) highlighted that a covert war exists between the sexes and males perceive the independent woman as “castrating” and notes that the most socially acceptable role of a female would be the “good wife” (p. 9). How males perceive women’s gender roles in general will influence what they expect from women in mixed gangs. Campbell’s (1984) female participant highlighted that many of the men in gangs feel oppressed by outside forces such as capitalism, racism, and the structure of the system; this negatively impacts their ego and thus they seek dominance over women to feel superior in one of the realms in their lives. There are many factors that must be considered when exploring gender roles in conjunction with social structure and how they impact the position and treatment of girls in gangs.

Campbell (1984/1991, 1987) and later Moore (1991) investigated the reasons why females join gangs. Both researchers found that the two main motivations for females were friendship and acquiring a sense of self. In addition, Moore (1991) and Padilla (1992) agreed that gangs provide a much-needed income for a large number of these women as many were members of marginalized ethnic minorities.
In 1988, Mary G. Harris published a book entitled *Cholas: Latino Girls and Gangs* that outlined her research of twenty-one females aged 13-21 involved in gangs in Los Angeles. Harris (1988) interviewed former and present Latina gang members as well as other persons involved (police officers, sheriff gang-detail workers, probation officers, gang workers and parents) in order to gain a comparative perspective on the issue of Latina girls in gangs. L.A. was chosen because it was known as the “gang capital of the country” with more than 30,000 gang members (Harris, 1988: 1). In the Los Angeles area, one person is killed almost every day as a result of gang activity; by 1980, the total number of gang-related killings in one year was 351 which was far higher than any other state in the United States (*ibid*). Harris focused on young girls because adolescence is a vulnerable time critical in the emergence of adulthood. Harris highlighted that her participants were “caught in a socially non-existent place” in terms of the dominant culture (p. 189). They had no place as Latinos nor as adolescents and thus were “compelled in search of their identification to create a culture of their own since they do not perceive themselves as a deviation from the dominant culture” (p. 189). This suggests that gang membership influences identity formation for gang-involved girls. Harris (1988) concluded that females’ motivation for gang entry is rooted in the following reasons: a common destiny; a sense of belonging and identity, and a need for group support and cohesiveness. Harris recommended that policy-makers consider the realities of these girls when designing programs. She urges policy-makers to develop programs based on the needs of the girls as opposed to the needs of society.

Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, and Chard-Wierschem (1993) conducted a longitudinal study exploring why females join gangs. They classified seven risk factors into seven domains: area characteristics; family socio demographic characteristics; parent-child relations; school factors; peer relationships; individual characteristics, and early delinquency. In addition, Thornberry et
al. (1993) identified four demographic characteristics significantly related to the risk of joining a gang: race, parents with low levels of education, family income below the poverty line, and living in a household where either biological parent is absent. More specifically, Thornberry et al. (1993) cited early dating, especially a female who is dating an older gang member, as a risk factor and predictor of gang entry. It is evident that the majority of gang researchers focus primarily on risk factors associated with gang entry but neglect to analyze why girls stay in and get out of gangs, a gap this research will fill.

In March 2001, Walker-Barnes and Mason examined ethnic minority girls’ perceptions of risk factors for female gang involvement. This study is unique because it included the perspectives of those girls who have not yet joined gangs but who have some experience and familiarity with these groups and may be on the fringe of becoming involved in gangs. Therefore, these were youth who were at risk for gang-involvement but who chose not to get involved in a gang. They lived in a neighbourhood that is in a high-crime, urban environment and they attended an all-female alternative school where enrolment targeted girls who were at high risk for delinquency, teenage pregnancy and gang membership based on referrals from the juvenile justice system, social service agencies or the public school system. This provides a new insight because it is not the opinion of a professional like a social worker, educator, or police officer but instead the voice of peers who know girls in gangs. Peer pressure was cited as the largest influence on female gang involvement (Walker Barnes & Mason, 2001). Additionally, the girls interviewed believed that females turn to gangs for protection from neighbourhood crime, abusive families, and other gangs. Lack of parental support and family conflict were also cited as family characteristics that are linked to female gang involvement (Walker Barnes & Mason, 2001). The illegal activities that gang members engage in provide two things according to this
research: excitement and economic opportunities. Walker-Barnes and Mason (2001) posited that excitement and economic opportunity are unavailable to these populations through legitimate societal institutions.

Merton’s social strain, or anomie, theory suggests that an individual’s decisions — to enter a gang, or to leave a gang, for example — will be influenced by those opportunities which are perceived as viable. From this perspective, social values can produce deviance when there is a discrepancy between culturally defined goals and the institutionalized means to achieve these goals (Merton, 1938). Societal norms or socially accepted goals, such as the “American Dream”, can place pressure on an individual to conform. In order for individuals to achieve cultural goals legitimately, the means to do so must be equally accessible to all. This includes equal access to education and employment. Since our society has failed to provide this equal access to all, a structural strain is created. The theory identifies five modes of adaptation when individuals feel this strain between socially accepted goals and their means to achieve them. The modes of adaptation include conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion.

This is relevant to gang membership because individuals who are unable to access legitimate means to meet their needs may respond to the strain this creates by seeking out illegitimate means. For example, when an individual sells illegal substances, he or she has rejected the culturally acceptable means of making money, but still shares the widely accepted cultural value of making money. Merton categorized this type of deviance as innovation, using unconventional means (dealing drugs) to achieve a culturally approved goal (financial security). Therefore, Merton regards the need and the strategy to meet this need as a form of problem-solving behaviour. This theory suggests that deviance can be the result of accepting one norm, but breaking another norm in order to pursue the first. Thus, an actor can accept social values but
use deviant means to realize them. It is pertinent to highlight that Merton’s social strain theory has limitations because it does not apply to crimes that are non-utilitarian, malicious and/or negativistic. For example, vandalism cannot be explained by a need for material acquisition. However, Merton’s (1938) social strain theory is still a valuable framework to consider when looking at the reasons why girls get in and stay in gangs.

Miller & Mullins (2006) identified “family problems as precipitating circumstances” for gang entry because their research indicated: 52% of gang-involved females had been sexually assaulted; 66% of these females were assaulted by a family member or someone acquainted with their families; 58% of the females in the study reported seeing one or more family members use drugs and alcohol in the home on a regular basis; 56% of these females witnessed adults engaged in physical violence, and 73% had incarcerated family members. Miller’s earlier research conducted in 2000 indicated that there are many reasons why females join gangs but the three principal factors were: having a family member in a gang; living in a neighbourhood where there is gang violence, and experiencing violence in the home, often directed at the female in the form of sexual abuse.

In 2007, Avelardo Valdez studied Mexican American girls involved in gangs in San Antonio and published a book entitled Mexican American Girls and Gang Violence: Beyond Risk. In his conclusion, he cited a list of common risk and protective factors for gang membership: individual (psychological disposition, attitudes, and values), peers, family (norms, activities), school (bonding, performance), community, and society (p. 179). Valdez (2007) emphasized the importance of pro-social attitudes and institutions as preventative mechanisms (i.e. families, schools, churches, civic governments, etc.) for female youth and that, in their absence, there is no one to neutralize negative influences. This study implicitly links gang entry
to the basic social process of obtaining autonomy and independence, not only from family oppression, but also from cultural and class constraints (Valdez, 2007). By interviewing gang-involved females, I was able to investigate whether my participants felt that gang membership provided autonomy and independence as Valdez purports. Valdez (2007) also highlighted that the majority of current research concludes that females are becoming involved in gangs at a much earlier age, often in their early teens. This reinforces the need to conduct research on this under-studied population because it is affecting girls at earlier, more vulnerable stages of their life.

In addition, Valdez (2007) discussed how traditional gender roles have changed and how this has an impact on the reasons that females join gangs. He stated that women are less likely to expect support from a male nowadays. Therefore, he believes that females are more likely to seek means, in this case illegitimate means, to support themselves (p. 180). This can be linked to the reasoning of joining a gang for financial reasons and autonomy. This raises questions about how gender roles serve as an important contextual framework based on the changing culture of society that could impact the reasons why females get in and stay in gangs, as well as how gender can implicate desistance. Moreover, Valdez (2007) examined institutional completeness and personal and peer risk networks, looking at how they can impact females’ decisions to join gangs. “Institutional completeness” considers the economy, family, education, and government and how they play a role in what means are perceived as accessible to populations of females involved in gangs.

Institutional completeness is an important consideration within Merton’s strain theory, given his functionalist perspective that largely sees gang involvement as a form of problem-solving behaviour. Merton suggests that poverty alone will not necessarily induce high levels of
criminal behaviour. Instead, it is poverty combined with the associated disadvantages in competition for the cultural values that are sought out by all members of a society that influences levels of criminal activity (Merton, 1938). Because, in North America, there is a cultural emphasis on monetary accumulation as a symbol of success and status, poverty and its association with limited opportunity has more of an impact on crime (ibid). This again illustrates how those members of society who feel they cannot attain cultural goods that are perceived as valuable through legitimate means seek out illegitimate means in order to feel accepted and successful within their society. Gang researchers drawing on Merton’s theory argue that individuals join gangs, in large part, as a means to attain “goods”, i.e. status and a sense of belonging. Gangs use status symbols, such as material goods, as a way to lure younger individuals to join the gang. The allure of money, respect, status, security, and power are characteristics associated with both the cultural values of North American society and a gang. Merton’s strain theory is accordingly an important lens when analyzing the reasons why girls enter into and stay in gangs because it provides social and cultural context to the reasoning involved in gang membership.

Liliana Rossmann, in her 2013 book Transcending Gangs, interviewed girls and women in the United States who are gang-involved (part of a gang at the time of the interview or former gang member) and gang-impacted (living in neighbourhoods known to have a strong gang presence or have a family member in a gang). I will be conducting a similar study but in a Canadian context. This is a new approach that provides a space for the voice of gang-involved girls to analyze their lived experiences. Rossmann (2013) emphasized how important it is to consider the marginal conditions of life that surround gang-impacted youth in our understanding of gangs. Factors that contribute to multiple marginalities include poor quality education, a
dismal labour market and an abundance of low-skilled workers. Poverty often accompanies social problems such as violence, unemployment and homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, and family disintegration (Rossmann, 2013). For some, gangs fill voids that these predicaments create. All gang research should consider these factors and their implications. In turn, Rossmann highlighted that gang membership functions to empower marginalized youth and make them feel like socially competent agents.

Rossmann (2013) also discussed a female’s perception of her life and how that can implicate the choice to join a gang. According to Rossmann (2013), when a woman views her life as inadequate, the solution to this inadequacy is to join a group (of consumers or of gang members) that will make her feel whole. This views gang entry as a form of problem-solving behaviour, addressing a feeling of inadequacy derived from a multitude of variables and a search for belonging. Rossmann (2013) posited that this false sense of community that the gang constructs can be one of the alluring features associated with gang membership. In addition the concept of inter(in)dependence, rooted in the literature of development communication, is a model by Servaes (1986) that focuses on “multiplicity in one world”. Rossmann (2013) used this model to examine the issue of culture and cultural identity within the process of development and how nations that are inter(in)dependent forge identities. How an individual forges an identity, particularly in a place that is not their place of birth, is an important factor to consider when looking at gangs because several gangs are divided by race. Moreover, cultural values influence gender norms which impacts the roles of females in gangs as well as the power dynamics and hierarchy within a gang. How one’s culture and community influences beliefs, values and actions can influence one’s decisions to join a gang and also can impact their experience in a gang.
Police departments looked at the role of females in gangs and how they will be used to run guns and drugs (Rossmann, 2013). Another reason that law enforcement agencies have started to avert their attention to females in gangs is the incidence of drive-by shootings. Females are more likely to have a valid driver’s license facilitating the act of a drive-by shooting (Rossmann, 2013). From her interviews, Rossmann (2013) learned that many girls’ attraction to the gang grew from their dismal home situations, especially their victimization at the hands of relatives (p. 65). In addition, she stated that for many females the gang replaces the family in economic, emotional, and moral terms. These findings have guided my own interview questions and research inquiries and I will be building on Rossmann’s research by looking at females from several different racial backgrounds, as oppose to only Latinas, in a Canadian context.

Variables that can increase the likelihood of gang entry for females are fights between parents or other adults living in the home, psychological abuse in the form of threats or taunts, and sexual abuse by someone acquainted with them (Rossmann, 2013). Both Miller & Mullins (2006) and Rossmann (2013) indicated that situations of domestic violence are one factor, of many, that has led women to join gangs. According to theorists Cooper, Anaf, and Bowden (2006), the term ‘domestic violence’ is inadequate when describing what some of these females went through at home and recommend the term ‘torture’, from a human rights perspective, to more adequately depict the experiences of gang-involved females at home. Exposure to violence, especially at a young age, can normalize it and females can become conditioned to use violence as a response to conflict (Rossmann, 2013).

Rossman found that dealing prematurely (i.e. prior to the age of 16) with stressful and emotional situations that some adults never deal with in their lives becomes the norm for Latina girls in gangs. The implication of this kind of accelerated childhood is another variable to
consider when developing prevention programs to address these impacts. To illustrate this, Rossmann (2013) described the circumstances of one of her participants:

She became a parent to her siblings and then to her own child when she was a child herself. She was visited by the worries of an adult who has the responsibility of caring for small children, and she responded as expeditiously and efficiently as she knew how - namely, by engaging in the highest income-earning activity [gang-related criminal activity] available to someone of her age and social position (p. 134).

This example aligns with an important theme when analyzing gang entry and one’s decision to remain in a gang and that is the perception that joining a gang is a form of problem-solving based on one’s current emotional, financial, and social situation. Campbell (1995) highlighted this variable by indicating that the gang provides girls with a way to surmount the abject poverty they would otherwise face.

Rossmann (2013) is one of the only researchers that examined the reasons girls get out of gangs. The majority of researchers focus solely on the risk factors associated with gang entry. When analyzing desistance from gangs, Rossmann (2013) indicated that for all of the females she interviewed, time served in custody influenced their move away from a criminal lifestyle, if not the gang itself (p. 141) because it provided physical separation. Moreover, the realization that the gang was only looking out for themselves and wasn’t there when you needed them most was a major contributing factor to desistance (Rossmann, 2013). Feelings of betrayal from gang members can influence a girl’s decision to desist, in conjunction with other factors.

2.4 Research on females in gangs in Canada

Nimmo (2001) conducted research in Winnipeg on women in gangs and used their self-reports as the basis for her analysis. The estimates of the number of female gang members in the mixed gang varied widely (10 to 50 percent of gang members) from one respondent to another, as did the estimates of the proportion of Aboriginal women among them (varying from 60 to 98
percent). The age of the female gang members ranged from 11 to late 30s, with those younger than 16 making up the fastest growing segment. For the most part, women in gangs were categorized as “going out” with male gang members and thus Nimmo labeled this category of women as invisible members. This is notable because some gang researchers, like Nimmo (2001), still perceive female gang members as “invisible members” whereas other researchers, like Valdez (2007), perceive them as “equal members.” Therefore, how researchers perceive their role is pivotal because it will direct the type of research one decides to conduct on girls in gangs. For my research, girls in gangs are seen as “invisible” members and this study hopes to make them more visible by providing a space for their voice and experiences to be represented.

Most of the risk factors for gang entry reported by other researchers were replicated in Nimmo’s study: poverty, helplessness, growing up in a violent and dysfunctional environment, poor academic achievement, emotional, physical and sexual abuse by family members with severe alcohol or drug addictions, and family member(s) who are gang-involved (Nimmo, 2001). Regarding status in gangs, females in biker gangs had the lowest status and those in the least-organized gang, the Indian Posse, had the highest status according to self-reports.

According to the Criminal Intelligence Service Saskatchewan (2005), the estimated number of youth gangs in Canada based on a 2002 police survey was 434 with a total of 7,071 members. The highest concentration of gang members, including males and females, reside in Ontario, followed by Saskatchewan (CISS, 2005). Considering this, it is important to note that the highest concentration of female gang members is reported to be in British Columbia with the lowest percentage residing in Ontario (MacDonald, 2009). According to these statistics, Ontario has a large number of gang members but they are predominantly male. Approximately 70 percent of gang members in Saskatoon were 18 years or older, and the average age of gang
members in Regina was 24 years old (CISS, 2005). In Ottawa, the average age of gang members is 24.5 years old (Patterson, 2013).

Chatterjee (2006) noted that many gang members come from socially marginalized and disadvantaged ethnic minority groups. Chatterjee indicated that socio-economic, psychological, family-related and personal factors contribute to youths’ decision to join gangs. Chatterjee (2006) explained that females’ membership in gangs was categorized into three types: membership in an independent gang, regular membership in a male gang as co-eds and membership as auxiliaries in male gangs. Therefore, Chatterjee acknowledges that females can be “regular members” and not solely auxiliary or peripheral members.

Chatterjee (2006) reaffirmed that research on gangs in the Canadian context is sparse compared to research in the United States, and calls for more research on girls in gangs in Canada. Totten (2008), Dorais and Corriveau (2009), and Chatterjee (2006) are the four main researchers who have explored girls in gangs in a Canadian context. All agree that girls’ gang involvement within Canada can lead to their sexual exploitation (Abbottsford Youth Committee, 2010). A gendered hierarchy enables the success of the gang and sexual exploitation is used as a means to achieve monetary success, by providing a service in high demand, while preserving male power and control. Moreover, research suggested that the position a female holds in the gang hierarchy will depend largely on the position of her male partner in the gang (Rosengren et al., 2008) which again highlights the privileged status of males in mixed gangs.

The book Gangs and Girls, published in 2009, is one of the first major pieces of qualitative research analyzing girls’ experiences in gangs in Canada. Written by Michel Dorais and Patrice Corriveau, this three year study focused primarily on understanding and preventing gang-organized juvenile prostitution. The results are based on accounts and interviews primarily
with social workers, community and street workers, educators, and police officers. Therefore, their methodology replicated other research that focused on the opinions of professionals in the field. Thus, there is still a need for the girls’ voices to be represented. My research intends to fill this gap by focusing on the accounts and interviews with girls who are directly and peripherally involved in gangs, giving voice to those on the ground.

However, recruiting gang-involved girls can be difficult. For example, in 2010, the Abbotsford Youth Committee (AYC) conducted a study on girls in gangs in the Lower Mainland of British Colombia (Hoogland et al., 2010). AYC conducted a literature review and community consultation to explore why and how girls become involved in gangs in British Columbia, what their roles are, and the potential links to sexual exploitation. AYC had intended to interview gang-involved girls but they were unable to find participants willing to voice their experiences. Instead, they conducted focus groups with 35 service providers and 4 at-risk and experiential youth, and held three workshops with professionals. In addition, they conducted ten interviews: eight interviews with professionals working in the Lower Mainland and two interviews with experiential youth. AYC (2010) concluded that girls who are vulnerable to sexual exploitation are similarly vulnerable to gang involvement. They highlighted that girls in gangs have shifted from tertiary roles to more active roles where they are directly involved in drug dealing, recruiting and violent crime (enforcing, calling in drug debts). They stressed that gang-related violence against girls and women is no longer off limits, especially with girls’ changing roles in gangs. Girls and women are intentionally sexually exploited via a profit producing gang enterprise (ibid). These conclusions reflect how gangs implicate women.
2.5 Males and females in gangs: similarities and differences

This section reviews the differences noted in the literature between males and females in gangs. In 1999, Esbensen, Deschenes, and Winfree conducted a multisite evaluation to explore the extent to which female gang members are similar to or different from male gang members. Three specific traits were examined: attitudes, perceptions of their gangs, and their involvement in illegal gang-related activities (Esbensen et al., 1999). They found that similarities do exist in behavioural activities and in reasons for joining a gang (Esbensen et al., 1999). However, female gang members reported greater social isolation from family and friends than male gang members. In addition, female gang members reported lower levels of self-esteem than males. These were two risk factors that were more likely to impact females and influence their decision to join a gang. The results also indicated that female gang members are involved in an array of illegal gang activities, but not as frequently as male gang members.

Ebsensen et al. noted that male gang members dictated directives to female gang members. This highlights another gender difference: males give orders and females are the recipients of these directives which influences what is expected of females in gangs. J. Miller (2000) concurred; he noted that the combination of three variables influence females to join gangs: the presence of gangs in their neighbourhood, family problems, and the influence of family members who were involved in gangs. He found that even though females were no longer in supportive roles but instead inhabited more active independent roles, it was still the males who dictated orders. Male members often used female gang members for the purchase and sale of illegal substances. In fact, drug-related offences were one of the most common crimes committed by female gang members, along with violent crimes (Delaney, 2006). Therefore, research
indicates that males dictate and determine the roles and responsibilities of females in mixed
gangs.

Moore and Hagedorn (2001) contended that girls and young women suffer much more
pervasively from the effects of gang membership than boys and young men do. This suffering,
often labeled “social injury”, marginalizes gang-involved females from the mainstream and their
own neighbourhoods. Moore and Hagedorn (2001) stressed that the sexual exploitation of female
gang members both at home and within their gangs is an important reason to consider female
gang membership a serious social concern that requires comprehensive solutions and supports.

Other scholars (Harris, 1988; Chesney Lind, 1993; Miranda, 2003 and Mendoza-Denton,
2008) argue that gang involvement is potentially liberating for females. It is not specified
whether this sense of liberation is strictly in relation to females in all girl gangs, mixed gangs or
both. The studies cited above are based on girls in mixed gangs. The main argument is that
females in gangs find or create spaces in which they can create alternative notions of community
and femininity outside the control of males where they feel liberated. This finding is noteworthy
as it is paradoxical to the normative assumptions of gang membership. It focuses on one of the
positive aspects associated with gang membership for females, and calls out for empirical
testing. Accordingly, this research was taken into consideration when designing the methodology
for this thesis.

More recent research conducted a comparative analysis of male and female risk factors
for gang entry. According to Lauderdale & Burman (2009), females and males form gangs for
similar reasons and in large part as a result of human interaction. When faced with new
situations, persons interact to create norms, roles, and statuses. Street gangs share many
attributes with legitimate associations such as fraternities and sororities (Lauderdale & Burman,
There are activities that set members apart, provide some sense of identity, and fill time with what respective members consider worthwhile activities. However, because of poverty and marginalization, gangs often serve to secure resources and provide protection for their members. If faced with physical or verbal threats, gangs will often respond with violence to neutralize those threats (ibid). If legitimate avenues for income do not exist or are unavailable, dealing in illegal drugs, extortion, and resorting to prostitution may become means of support. This directly relates to Merton’s strain theory: what institutional means are perceived as available and accessible to individuals and how this will influence their decisions. Qualitative data researchers have found “considerable evidence that youth in gangs will avoid delinquent and violent behaviours when acceptable alternatives are available and unlikely to call their honor into question” (Hughes, 2005: 107). This evidence should encourage community-based organizations and social service agencies to prioritize sound and safe alternatives for at-risk youth.

Kerryn Bell conducted a study in July 2009 examining whether the risk factors associated with gang membership differ for males and females. Some of the prominent variables considered were community characteristics, parent-child relationships, and associations with deviant friends (Bell, 2009). Her results indicated that there were few differences found between males and females in terms of risk factors associated with gang membership and outcomes associated with gang involvement. The findings illustrated that school safety, peer fighting, age, race, and particularly parental social control, attachment, and involvement similarly influence boys’ and girls’ likelihood of gang involvement (ibid).

Accordingly, males and females become involved in gangs to fulfill similar needs. For example, both males and females are in search of belonging, kinship and community and this influences their decision to seek out gangs to satisfy these needs. What differs between the
genders is the strategies employed to attain these needs. Males will more commonly join and gain status within a gang by demonstrating that they are powerful, confident, strong and intimidating. Females typically join a gang by dating a male gang member. Moreover, once females are in a gang, their status will be determined in large part by their male partner and their ability to meet the demands dictated by male gang members.

2.6 Factors that influence gang members’ decision to join, persist and desist

Individuals join gangs—either in confinement or in the free world—for myriad reasons, including status, fame, family influence and legacy (Lauderdale & Burman, 2009). Lauderdale & Burman (2009) suggest that the gang is a family structure; one joins for social support and protection. Other variables identified in the literature include community-level, individual-level, and situational-level factors (Sampson and Lauritsen, 1994). However, the majority of the research focuses on the risk factors associated with gang entry and neglects to analyze the reasons for staying in and getting out of gangs.

Identity transformation can also influence the decision to join, persist and desist from gangs. Identity, or self-concept, has no fixed shape. It is fluid and can change across time and space. As Demo (1992) illustrates, self-concept is a structural product of reflexive activity, but it is also susceptible to change as an individual encounters new situations, roles and life transitions. According to Rosenberg (1979), our self-concept has three different regions, each with several specific components. These regions include the extant, desired and presenting self. Our extant self is comprised of social identity elements, role-sets and dispositions. The desired self is composed of an idealized image, a moral image and a committed image. Rosenberg’s (1979) description of self-concept suggests that self-reflection can influence which region of our self-concept we try to embody. It also illustrates how our identity is multi-faceted and labile. There is
evidence which indicates people selectively interact with others who see them as they see themselves (Backman & Secord, 1962), and actively choose roles (Backman & Secord, 1968) and social environments (Pervin 1967) that are consistent with their self-conceptions. Thus, a female’s self-concept can influence who she decides to associate with and what roles she will inhabit in a particular community. When looking at reasons girls enter into gangs and the roles they have in gangs, the notion of identity and self-concept may help to elucidate these experiences.

Moreover, all social organizations have norms that dictate roles, responsibilities and expectations of both male and female members. Goffman (1974) highlights that failure or success at maintaining such norms has a very direct effect on the psychological integrity of an individual, impacting his or her identity. Girls’ inability to conform to norms in society may encourage them to inhabit an alternative or resistive identity. In this sense, identity norms can be associated with deviant social groupings as well as conformity (Goffman, 1974: 129). The response from others can also influence our identity. Snyder & Gangsted (1982) posit that people monitor their feedback from others and pursue different strategies to verify and sustain their perception of themselves. In the context of this research, girls involved in gangs may monitor feedback from their boyfriends in the gang as well as other gang members. These opinions can influence their sense of self and encourage them to alter or mold their self-concept.

Desistance is a process that can lead to potential discontinuance(s) or end(s). In the context of a gang, this can mean discontinuing any contact with other gang-involved individuals, illegal acts, substance use and/or a romantic relationship with a gang member. There is very little literature to date on desistance (Laub and Sampson, 2001), and even less on desistance from gangs. There is, however, some research on desistance from crime which facilitates the
conceptualization of the term for this project. For example, Laub and Simpson (2001) suggests that desistance usually involves a reorientation of the costs and benefits of crime. They also distinguish desistance from merely leaving a criminal lifestyle, arguing that the point where an individual ceases criminal activity is termination and desistance is the underlying causal process. They also suggest that factors that encourage desistance are age dependent, with desistance occurring most frequently during and after adolescence.

Some criminologists make the faulty assumption that desistance occurs solely on a voluntary basis. For example, Shover (1996) defined desistance as the “voluntary termination of serious criminal participation” (p. 121). However, many individuals are forced out of crime by some external factor. In the context of gangs, some members may be kicked out of the gang for betrayal, substance abuse, a failure to generate adequate income, or another reason. For females, it may be a pregnancy that forces them to desist. Laub and Sampson (2001) report that having a child had the greatest influence on desistance from crime for women based on interview data. Therefore, the process of desistance can be shaped by other non-voluntary factors.

Several researchers, including Farrington and Hawkins (1991), define desistance as the absence of convictions, for a specified period of time. It is very difficult to determine how long (two years, five years, ten years) an individual must be “crime free” to confirm that they have fully desisted. The criminal career literature defines the end of a criminal career as the age at which the last crime has been committed (Blumstein et al., 1986). Similarly, it can be difficult to determine or define the point at which a former gang member has fully desisted.

When desisting, an individual can go through stages of behavioural change. Prochaska and Velicer (1997) posit that behaviour change has six stages: precontemplation; contemplation; preparation; action; maintenance; and termination. When looking at desistance as a process and
facilitating desistance for women from gangs, it is necessary for interventions to be mindful of these stages and try to determine which stage their clients are at. These stages can require re-evaluations of self in order to heal, understand and desist. In addition, shame has been linked to desistance and this is another factor that intervention strategies should account for. Leibrich (1996) researched shame and how it is connected to desistance from crime. He reported three kinds of shame: public humiliation, personal disgrace and private remorse. Leibrich (1996) stated that “shame was the thing which most often dissuaded people from offending and the growth of self-respect was the thing which most often persuaded them go straight” (p. 297). It is essential to remember that there are a multitude of inter-connecting factors that can influence one’s decision to desist, from crime or a gang. Offenders desist as a result of a combination of individual actions (choice) in conjunction with situational contexts and structural influences linked to important institutions (Laub and Sampson, 2001). Therefore, interventions should be multi-faceted in order to be comprehensive and effective.

The literature on desistance from crime also indicates that “turning points”, shifts that re-direct a process, influence desistance (Abbott, 1997). Turning points and epiphanies are implicated in the desistance process. These reveal the interactive nature of human agency and life events (such as marriage or work) that impact desistance (Laub and Sampson, 2001). Curry and Decker (1998: 72) reported that desistance for gang members is due to experiencing or witnessing violence, life course events like employment, marriage, and becoming a parent. The literature on desistance has a lack of longitudinal studies. “Short term snapshots” are unable to investigate the dynamic interplay between behaviour and temporal variables that long-term patterns convey (ibid). A combination of qualitative and quantitative studies on desistance could aid our understanding. Compared with the literature on joining gangs, the literature on leaving
gangs is sparse (Spergel, 1990). Change is possible and it is critical that individuals are given the opportunity to reconnect to institutions like the family, school, and work after a period of incarceration, criminal justice contact, or gang-involvement.

For this research, desistance is seen as a process (not a discrete event) with potential periods of re-entry into the gang (relapses), but with eventual tangible indicators illustrating separation and disassociation from the gang, including the adoption of a more conventional lifestyle across a variety of domains. From this perspective, the process of desistance from a gang continues after the termination of offending.

This perspective also can encompass a view that posits females are agents of their own change because it suggests that desistance is a social process that necessarily involves identity formation. This opens up multiple pathways for desistance from crime, including attachment to a conventional other (such as a spouse), stable employment, and transformation of identity (Laub and Sampson, 2001). For example, Knight, Osborn and West (1977) found that having a significant other who was not criminally involved reduced antisocial behaviour and drug use. Osborn (1980) found that subjects who re-located to a different city had a lower risk of reoffending when compared with a similar group who stayed in the same city. Parental involvement and commitment to school was also positively associated with desistance from crime (Laub and Sampson, 2001). A particularly interesting study conducted by Horney, Osgood, and Marshall (1995) indicated that “Moving in with one’s wife doubles the odds of stopping offending (compared to moving away), and moving away from one’s wife doubles the odds of starting to offend (compared to moving in)” (p. 665).

Age can also have an impact on desistance (Laub and Sampson, 2001). Uggen (2000) found that individuals who were 27 years or older were more likely to desist when provided with
marginal employment. Placing younger participants in the same experimental job program was found to have no effect on desistance. In like vein, the effect of work on facilitating desistance appears to be age graded; that is, marginal work (minimum wage jobs) leads to desistance from crime among those offenders over the age of 26.

Uggen and Kruttschnitt (1998) are among the few researchers to study the impact of gender differences on desistance from crime. They found that while women were more likely to desist than men (using both self-report and arrest data), the factors of desistance were the same for men and women. However, there were too few female offenders in this study to disaggregate by crime type, and more research is needed to provide insight into the underlying mechanisms of desistance by gender. Although the current literature on desistance indicates that a “relationship with a woman” can influence desistance, there is no literature which tests whether a “relationship with a man” or a “relationship with another woman” has an effect on gang-involved girls. This illustrates that the majority of the literature focuses on the process of desistance from crime for men.

Another gender difference noted in the literature involves maturity. For young women, desistance seemed to occur abruptly as they moved into adulthood. For male offenders, desistance was a more gradual, intermittent process (Laub and Sampson, 2001). Baskin and Sommers (1998) list the following as women’s reasons for desistance: criminal justice sanctions; the pains of imprisonment; isolation from family and friends; and physical and mental “wear and tear” of crime and “living the life”.

### 2.7 Roles of females in gangs

From the 1920s until the 1990s, findings suggested that there were exceedingly few female gangs and that those who were associated with gangs were only auxiliaries to male gang
members (Mann, 1984; Miller, 1975, 2001; Short & Strodbeck, 1965). Thrasher’s study, conducted in Chicago in 1927 on more than 1,000 gangs, reported only six gangs with female members and perhaps only two as true all-girl gangs (Lauderdale & Burman, 2009). Girls were seen in gangs but only in specific roles (Thrasher, 1927). The concept of ‘female gang members’ remained unexplored as females were not categorized as ‘gang members’ but instead as auxiliaries or peripheral members.

The typical roles for females included carrying weapons for male gang members, driving a vehicle, and providing sexual favours (Lauderdale et al., 2009). More recent research from the United States suggested that female gang members engage in a full array of illegal activities, but at a lower frequency than their male counterparts (Brotherton, 1996; Deschenes & Esbenson, 1999; Miller, 1998; Miller, 2001). Females continued in specialized roles in male-directed gangs (Miller, 2001). This research was completed to better clarify and understand what these ‘specialized’ roles involved and how they impacted the experiences of girls in gangs. Female gang members assume a variety of roles within the gang, all largely dependent upon and inextricably linked to their status as females in the broader culture. Respondents identified several roles that exist on a continuum of the level of permitted involvement in the gang, including the female as gang “property”: she may “be removed [by] a male member and become property of the group and used as needed,” perhaps for prostitution, narcotics trafficking, or transportation; as an associate through family or other personal relationships, such as a wife or girlfriend; or as an “equal participating member” (Lauderdale & Burman, 2009). The female’s role is malleable and is usually “dictated by the leaders of the gang” who are predominantly male (ibid).
2.8 Research questions

The impact of gang activity on males versus females is inconclusive (Rossmann, 2013). These questions illustrate a need to develop research methodologies geared toward specific gang populations and focus on gender. This is qualitative research; I looked at the lived experiences of gang-involved females in Canada. Each location differs based on the number of groups of gangs in a particular area, number of gang members, level of violence, and seriousness of illegal acts. I explored relationships, experiences, roles, pressures, and power dynamics within gangs from the perspective of gang-involved females. Most importantly, I wanted to give a voice to those girls who are gang-involved because a large part of the research on gangs has been based on the voice of professionals providing their opinion on the experiences of gang-involved girls.

The research question for this thesis is:

How do girls and women involved in gangs experience their lives as gang members?

The three sub questions are:

What attracted them as girls to gang life?

What factors encouraged or discouraged them, as girls, to stay in the gang?

What factors contributed to them, as girls, leaving the gang?

These three sub sections will attempt to capture the experience of females involved in gangs based on the narratives of women who have been directly or peripherally involved.

2.9 Concluding Comments

In concluding this chapter, I would like to draw attention to the limitations of the previous studies which have informed the present study. As indicated, the majority of research on gangs has been conducted in the United States and focused primarily on males. This is evident in the absence of any data pertaining to female gang involvement in the 1995 National
Youth Gang Survey which was the first attempt in the United States to collect data on youth gang membership nationwide (Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001: 304). We cannot necessarily relate American research to a Canadian context given the differences in demographics, social structure and political structure. Thus, these empirical questions warrant scholarly investigation in a Canadian context. Moreover, how males and females experience the world differs and therefore, it is imperative to investigate the reasons pertaining to gang involvement for both. The majority of the research that has looked at females in gangs relied upon the opinions and experiences of professionals including lawyers, counselors, law enforcement personnel and doctors as oppose to gang-involved females themselves. This research, however, gives a voice to gang-involved girls by drawing on direct interviews with women who were gang members or who knew and associated with women and men who were gang members. Therefore, this thesis seeks to add a contemporary account of gang-involved females in Canada, giving voice to their lived experiences to explore how girls in gangs manage and negotiate their lives and identities while in the gang, and after they have left the gang.

The bulk of research on girls in gangs focuses on why girls get into gangs but fails to explore why girls persist and desist from gangs. This research will investigate the process of desistance to provide insight into this under-studied area. Understanding the reasons why females join gangs is very important when tailoring prevention programs for vulnerable female youth who are at risk of gang-involvement. It is equally important to consider the reasons that lead girls to desist from gangs and how we can help girls get out successfully and safely. It is imperative that legitimate options are available to these females and, in turn, that these females perceive these options as accessible, secure and sustainable. Another goal of this research is to provide insight and clarity on whether females are involved in gangs in Canada and if so, what
type and level of involvement they have. In addition, I hope that identifying the reasons why females get in and get out of gangs will help inform what type of interventions would be most suitable to support females who are gang involved. Finally, this research intends to shed light on what life is like for gang-involved girls by providing a space for them to share their stories of these lived experiences so that their voices can be represented.
Chapter Three: 
Theory and Methodology

Thus far, I have presented a literature review of relevant research pertaining to gangs and more specifically gang-involved girls. The following chapter will explicate the methodology chosen for this research project. First the epistemological lens that will define the parameters and scope of the study will be outlined. In addition, the assumptions of the qualitative research method will be addressed. Following this, I will explain how the data was collected and discuss the ethical considerations and how they were attended to. Proceeding this is a description of the method of analysis, explaining why this method is compatible with the study. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of the strengths and limitations of this study. By the end of this chapter I will have laid the foundation, outlining the theoretical framework, which supports the structure of this study.

3.1) Epistemological Orientation

The epistemological framework driving this research is social constructivism. The constructivism lens views identity as fluid and labile. This recognizes that girls have multiple identities both inside and outside of the gang. Some girls in gangs are mothers, sisters, employees, gang members and volunteers. It is important to appreciate this when analyzing girls in gangs, particularly when assessing how identity transformation can influence girls’ decision to get in, persist and desist from gangs. Moreover, social constructivism enables me to focus on the individual meaning making of former female gang members (i.e. directly involved in gang life) and women who knew and associated with females and males in gangs (i.e. peripherally involved with gang life through their interactions with gang members). This framework places the individual at the center of meaning making (Schwandt, 2001), and enables me to focus on how
participants make sense of their experiences as gang-involved girls in a mixed gang environment in the social context of Canada.

My theoretical position that meaning is constructed through our interactions is congruent with both the qualitative method and my thematic content analysis. Social constructionists posit that understanding, significance and meaning are developed through interaction with other human beings, as opposed to separately within the individual. Social constructionists share assumptions about language, knowledge and reality (Burr, 1995); language is the main medium through which humans construct reality (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009) and human judgment influences our perception of reality. This complements qualitative analysis because it identifies the basic story being told and then it explores how it is constructed, examining the intention and the meaning of each story (Reissman, 1993).

Gender is an important concept in this research; social constructionists understand that gender is not an inevitable result of biology but the result of social, cultural and historical processes. Although there is a legitimate biological basis for gender, I posit that the notion of gender is socially constructed by the way a society defines specific roles and creates particular expectations for boys and girls (Hacking, 1999). This perspective enabled me to examine my participants’ understandings and perceptions of gang life, starting from the theoretical position that reality is socially constructed and therefore the meaning of gang life is something that emerges through the inter-subjective communications of real social actors. Thus, I did not measure an objective “gang life” that exists separate and apart from people. Instead I examined the narratives that my participants created to explain their perceptions of gang life which provides a fuller, more in depth picture of the lived experiences of my participants. A qualitative analysis allows for an interpretive study of participant narratives, facilitating the identification of
hidden connotations and multiple meanings which are not obvious from simply reading particular words or phrases (Creswell, 2003: 184). This requires a mindfulness of personal bias when interpreting meaning(s).

The social constructionist model stresses that objects, for example money, are given meaning through social and cultural norms. Our experiences based on social interactions shape how we perceive the world (Albrecht, 2002; Louhiala, 2004; Rapley 2004; Smith, 2010). In line with this perspective, prevention and intervention mechanisms will be more effective if they take the perceptions and experiences of gang-involved girls into account. Social constructionism posits that people and policymakers continually create - or co-construct - fresh understandings about the world around them because it sees understanding as a social process (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This approach provides an opportunity to examine those lived experiences, not as a source of fact, but as a moment in the social construction of the meaning of gang membership. This can contribute to the constitution of social reality by making meaning (Philips & Brown, 1993).

The narratives of my participants were neither understood as transparent nor reflective but rather as a space where meanings are created and changed (Taylor, 2001: 6). Therefore, this research is “attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000: 3). More specifically I, as a critical social scientist, am committed to making sense of the experiences of gang-involved girls based on the meaning constructed in their narratives. Critical social scientists maintain that we construct what we take to be reality from our subjective experiences, social interactions and cultural beliefs (Neuman, 2006). Social constructionism accordingly provides a framework to critically analyze the ways in which gender, power, status and roles in gangs are understood by gang-involved individuals and
how these constructions are validated and tied to girls’ experiences in a gang (Lancaster, 2014). This framework acknowledges the social, cultural and historical influences impacting how girls perceive their experiences in gangs.

In addition, one of the goals of social constructionists is to raise consciousness. This is integral to this research because it intends to raise awareness about the impact the gang experience can have on girls. Most importantly, I sought to give gang-involved females, who are often marginalized both in general society and within gangs themselves, a voice through which they could articulate their perceptions and beliefs about their own lives. Beck (2006) elucidates that “we as human beings must find the meaning of life in our exchange with others and no longer in the encounter with like” (331). For gang-involved girls, the opportunity to reflect on and articulate their own experiences is a transformative experience (Beck, 2006).

There are limitations to the social constructionist framework. It is criticized for ignoring or trivializing biological influences on behaviour and culture (Sokal & Bricmont, 1999). Social construction is also criticized for its inability or resistance to absolute judgments about what is “true” (Boghossain, 2006). However, my goal was not to draw conclusions about what is “true” about girls in gangs or to establish causal relationships about why girls get in or out of gangs. Instead, this project seeks to explore girls’ lived experiences and perspectives, recognizing them as social actors in their own right. Thus, the limitations of social construction do not impede the objectives of this research.

3.2 Qualitative Methodology

I used a qualitative content analysis methodology. This method is based on a social constructivism epistemological perspective, i.e. that meaning is not inherent; instead it is co-constructed by social actors through their interaction with each other. The qualitative method is
distinctive as it is inductive: it has no prior hypotheses (Silverman, 1993). This was integral to this research because I did not want to assume what my participants would relay. I wanted to represent the perspectives of my participants through informal conversations during semi-structured interviews. This exploratory research was committed to explicating the subject’s interpretation of their social reality within gangs, directly or peripherally (Silverman, 1993); not only their understanding of the reasons girls get in, stay in and get out of gangs but also the meanings that they attribute to their experiences within gang life as a whole. Thus, the qualitative method meets both objectives.

Qualitative thematic content analysis aims to identify themes across narratives. This enabled me to identify themes within my participants’ stories and make sense of the narratives. Qualitative findings cannot be generalized, and accordingly my findings cannot provide insight into the experiences of all gang-involved girls. However, the goal of exploratory studies is to indicate rather than conclude (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006: 492). An inductive approach has been adopted for this research allowing each girl’s story to be analysed in depth and detail. When peering through a kaleidoscope, my chosen lens of inquiry prioritizes the human subject as opposed to the quantification of participants (Platt, 1992: 24; Crouch & McKenzie, 2006: 493). I present the point of view of the gang-involved girls being studied and relay how they see the world, define their situations and what it means for them. This is how the data has been interpreted in this research. Social constructivism focuses on how the individual makes sense of and gives meaning to their experiences.

As researchers, it is necessary to consider the various methodological approaches available and choose one that will best facilitate our ability to answer our specific research questions. Schutz (1962) reminds us that once we find the scheme of reference adequate for the
problem we are interested in exploring, we must acknowledge its limits and possibilities. Maintaining diligence throughout by staying within the boundaries of the theoretical framework chosen is essential to ensure consistency and facilitate future replication. Therefore this methodological approach provides the tools to make sense of the material that will be examined, but more importantly, explains to others how conclusions were formed (Blumer, 1954).

In this study, I strived to understand and share the lived experiences of girls in gangs, from the perspective of women who had been peripherally or directly involved. Qualitative methodology seeks to make sense of people’s narratives (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992: xii). I analyzed the gendered hierarchy and power dynamics within gangs and how this impacted the experiences of my participants. With this objective, using quantitative analysis to assess the numbers of girls in gangs, the number of criminal charges for female gang members or types of crimes committed by girls in gangs would have been insufficient; it would not provide the data or understanding required for the in-depth analysis needed to meet the goals of this research. The quantitative method that emphasizes the collection of numerical data for the purpose of establishing cause and effect would not be beneficial because this research intends to explore, describe, analyze and understand the complex social process of gang life for a girl. Qualitative methodology values the detailing, deconstructing, and interpretation of “the meaning not the frequency of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomenon in the social world” (Van Maanen, 1983: 9). Thus qualitative inquiry enables flexibility distinct from other methods such as surveys or questionnaires, permitting researchers to capture the details of social experiences (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992: 7). In order to provide an understanding of the behaviour and decision making processes of girls within gangs, I needed to understand the framework within which they interpret their thoughts, feelings and actions (Harris, 1988). I understood that a qualitative
exploratory technique would be more useful for gathering this type of data, and that it would be more difficult to obtain and capture with quantitative methods.

Qualitative research tools are more malleable and better adapted to the study of actors in the social realm making it a good fit for in-depth exploratory research (Neuman, 2006). I have chosen the qualitative approach for my methodology for numerous reasons. First, the qualitative approach aims to uncover the significance of social problems and is not necessarily interested in establishing causal links (ibid). Therefore, this research method facilitated my understanding of the underlying meanings and themes in the discourses of gang research as well as in the narratives of my participants. Secondly, the chief purpose is to “understand some social phenomena from the perspectives of those involved, [and] to contextualize issues in their particular socio-cultural-political milieu...” (Glesne, 2006: 4). I wanted to provide a space for gang-involved females to tell their story and use the perspectives of those involved to analyze gang life, gang membership, relationships within gangs, and the interactions between males and females in mixed gangs. Thus, the qualitative method aligned with my goals and enabled me to meet the objective of providing a snapshot of the lived realities of a specific population (Selltiz, Jahoda, Deutsch, & Cook, 1962).

The qualitative approach also allows the researcher to form new interpretations and perspectives on social phenomena (Silverman, 2006) which was integral for my research. For example, some researchers - notably Chesney-Lind - indicated that females perceived gang-involvement as liberating and empowering. However, my participants stressed that this sense of liberation is merely an illusion that often lures females into gangs but once in the gang, the reality of suppression, disempowerment and objectification dissolved this impression. Therefore, speaking with women from mixed gangs who have successfully desisted adds a new perspective
because these women have had the time to reflect and process their experience. As such, this scheme allowed me to form a new interpretation and perspective that female gang-involvement was not perceived as liberating and, in contrast, felt oppressive for my participants who had been directly involved in gangs. In addition, my peripheral participants also noted that they did not perceive gang membership as liberating for women. As highlighted in Chapter One, since traditional criminological research has focused primarily on males in gangs and has tended to exclude girls in gangs, an exploratory study was selected to facilitate rich, detailed data from an under-represented and marginalized segment of society. Moreover, the adoption of this inquiry ameliorates the research because it allows for depth and context when exploring the stories of my participants.

3.3 Data Collection Method

This research is exploratory in nature and intends to bring the voice of gang-involved women to the forefront to enhance our understanding of deep-seeded cultural, social, racial and gender-based issues that influence the decision-making processes of gang-involved females and how they perceive their situations. The project was granted ethical approval by the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board (see Appendix A). In addition, a formal permission letter was obtained from the Director of the Elizabeth Fry Society (EFS) indicating that I would use EFS as the primary space for recruitment for this research. Initially, I had hoped to recruit eight to ten women who had been directly involved in gangs and all identified as former female gang members. However, given the difficulty in accessing this populating and the limited number of individuals willing to participate coupled with time restrictions, I adapted my target population to include women who had been peripherally or directly involved in a gang in the past. Therefore, in order to increase my sample size, recruitment was opened up to include women with
peripheral involvement which required them to know and associate with female and male gang members for at least six months. In addition, I focused on the depth of interviews by interviewing some participants multiple times.

The age of recruitments was left open to include any females over the age of eighteen. No persons under the age of 18 were interviewed for this study. Girls directly involved with gangs self-identified as former female gang members. Girls peripherally involved with gangs knew and associated with other female and male gang members for a minimum of six months but did not identify as gang members themselves. Each participant was given a $10.00 gift certificate for Tim Hortons as a way to express gratitude for their contribution and courage to share intimate details of their lives. Participants interviewed multiple times were given a gift certificate for each interview.

Thomas (1993) highlights the advantages of flexibility when collecting data and he reminds researchers that “our study can be no better than the data we collect” (p. 41). Therefore, I chose semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to give my participants a more adaptable space to share the details they considered pertinent while maintaining sufficient structure to keep responses guided and more specific in nature (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1990: 5). Also, I asked each participant if there was any other information they would like to add to their responses when they finished speaking. Participants generally took advantage of this opportunity and shared more insights as a result, garnering more data. These steps were taken to achieve a principal objective when structuring interviews: “to ensure that the results are deep, detailed, vivid and nuanced” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995: 76).

A semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix E) was employed to explore the respondents’ experiences with, understanding of and responses to girls in gangs. These first-hand
accounts from this marginalized group, who are understood to be the experts of their own lives, contribute to the task of making the social and material circumstances of female gang members more visible. Interviews provide a space where the researcher and participant can collectively examine the “meaning of the questions and answers involved” and negotiate understanding (Brenner, Brown, & Canter, 1985: 3). The narratives have been analyzed to explore the gendered power dynamics and hierarchy within gangs, which impact girls’ decision to get in, stay in and get out of gangs. All interviews were coded and pseudonyms are used at all times when discussing the narratives to preserve respondents’ confidentiality.

For this research, I employed an inductive exploratory analysis which has a primarily descriptive orientation. This type of analysis gives voice and context to the primary data generated because exploratory research is content-driven. Confirmatory qualitative research has been ruled out because it was not possible to predetermine the codes prior to interviews. Generating codes post interviews ensured that it was the participants’ voice that was heard and their stories that were coded as oppose to pre-determined parameters decided by the researcher.

3.4 Recruitment of Participants and Notification of Study

Recruitment was conducted through a variety of mediums: posters, informal presentations, emails and telephone calls relaying information regarding the study to social and professional networks. I worked closely with the Elizabeth Fry Society (EFS) to reach out to potential participants and it was through EFS that I found all of my participants for this study. Therefore, my sample of participants are all EFS clients. EFS is a United Way Member agency devoted to helping females who are in contact with the law, homeless women, women with substance abuse issues, and women who suffer from domestic violence. Women of all ages are referred to EFS by the officials working in the criminal justice system; this includes lawyers,
medical professionals, social workers, social assistance workers, and by staff of community-based organizations and agencies. Women also seek out EFS services through word-of-mouth referrals and self-referrals. This has been the mandate for EFS for over sixty years and it is the largest agency of this kind for women in Canada. In Ottawa alone, EFS provides services for 8,000 - 9,000 women annually. Thus, my participants are not drawn from the general population, but instead share a set of common experiences as women who have been clients of EFS.

I chose EFS as my main source for recruitment for several reasons. The main reason is that I wanted to recruit participants in a controlled environment that I felt was safe for both the participants and myself. Interviewing this type of population has certain risks involved that are important to minimize for the safety of both the researcher and the participants. Initially, I had wanted to speak only to gang-involved girls who had been out of the gang for ten years or more. This population proved very difficult to access; I found one participant who met this criteria. I needed to broaden my criteria if I wanted a larger sample size. Therefore, I recruited girls who had recently left the gang which increased the risk for both the researcher and participant. As a result, it was important that I chose to recruit girls in a controlled space that had a positive reputation with women in the community and that had mechanisms in place to protect both the participants and myself. Also, I had volunteered with EFS for two years prior to conducting this research so I had contacts there open and willing to assist me in recruitment. Thus, I chose EFS as my primary medium for recruitment. It is important to note that I attempted to recruit through other organizations and social networks as well but was unable to find any females willing to participate.

I created a recruitment poster (see Appendix B) that was approved by the University of Ottawa Ethic’s Board. EFS allowed me to hang the recruitment poster in their various locations
in the city of Ottawa. Moreover, I circulated the recruitment poster electronically to EFS staff and my personal networks as well. Over the phone, I would orally recite the recruitment text. The intention was that these agents would then pass on the information to other agents and/or potential participants. When recruiting, I was conscious to ensure that there was no deception and thus individuals were in a position to make an informed decision without any pressure to participate. This was pertinent during informal presentations with girls who were clients of EFS in some capacity.

EFS announced and explained my research project at various meetings with their female clients who they thought may be potential candidates for participation. I made informal presentations at EFS locations in Ottawa, explaining my research project to EFS staff and clients. Girls who were interested in participating could contact me in person after a presentation or via email. Initially, I intended to use “snowball sampling” as a form of recruitment. After my first participant stressed the need to keep our conversation a secret, I realized that “snowball sampling” may not be a viable option giving the secrecy inherent in gang culture and the resistance to speak with people who are perceived to be in a position of authority. When I asked participants if they knew of other women that I could interview, all of the participants, except for one, responded “no”.

All seven of my participants were recruited in person; none contacted me via email to participate although email was used to schedule second and/or third interviews with three participants. It was a common occurrence for participants to consent to an interview and cancel shortly before the scheduled interview or not show up. There were a total of six girls who did not show up and/or cancelled prior to their interview. This was a challenge that required patience and perseverance. EFS provided a room where I could have a private, secure and quiet space to
conduct interviews. All participants were given the option to have a counsellor present at the interview. None of my participants selected this option; all interviews consisted of the participant and researcher.

3.5 The Interview

“Interviewing is rather like marriage: everybody knows what it is, an awful lot of people do it, and yet behind each closed front door there is a world of secrets” (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003: 243). Before opening any doors, I needed to decide what questions to ask in order to receive responses containing information that provided insight into gang-involvement for girls. The interview guide was created (see Appendix E) and focused on life before, during and after gang-involvement. The questioning format was open-ended to allow participants to share their own story and elaborate on details they felt were valuable. Specific cues and sub questions were used to re-center the focus during the interview, as needed. I chose semi-structured interviews because the fluid and open-ended nature allows each participant an opportunity to address tangential topics, subjects that could later figure into the analysis and may have been overlooked otherwise. An interview is “not simply a conversation...In order to be successful, it must have all the warmth and personality exchange of a conversation with the clarity and guidelines of scientific searching” (Goode & Hatt, 1952: 191).

Three participants were interviewed more than once as a means to obtain more in depth information regarding their experiences in gangs. Multiple interviews allowed for more meaningful relationships between the participants and researcher, resulting in richer content overall. Given that some of the subject matter during the interviews was of a sensitive nature, it was crucial that I was as equally sensitive and thoughtful with both my verbal and non-verbal language as the interviewer (Shipman, 1981). This required awareness and responsiveness; when
a certain topic became too difficult to discuss or caused distress for a participant, this was acknowledged and I asked the participant if they would like to change the subject.

Each interview varied in length. On average, one interview lasted 124 minutes, ranging from 105 minutes to 140 minutes. Each interview took place at the same location: JF Norwood House, Bronson Centre, Ottawa in a room that had been assigned to me by EFS specifically to conduct the interviews for this research. For those participants who were interviewed more than once, having the same location for each interview created a familiar space where we spoke about a similar topic each time. All interviews were conducted in English. Collectively, recruitment and interviewing took a total of eight months to complete. This time period was longer than anticipated as it was difficult to find gang-involved girls willing and committed to participating. Before commencing the interview, I orally reviewed the informed consent form (see Appendix C) with my participants, explaining the objectives of the study, the participants’ role, and spoke to issues of anonymity and confidentiality. This procedure was performed consistently and consciously as informed consent is one of the most fundamental ethical considerations when conducting research (Miller & Bell, 2002). Interviewees were reminded that participation is voluntary and that they can choose not to answer a question or stop the interview at any point in time, should they feel uncomfortable and wish to do so (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992: 112). I noted that the honorarium did not have to be returned should one decide to withdraw from the study.

Each interview had five open-ended questions to guide the discussion. The questions focused on why girls get in, stay in and get out of gangs. In addition, all participants were given a short questionnaire containing seven questions (see Appendix D) at the end of the interview which focused on how participants defined a “gang”, where they lived before joining the gang and how long they stayed in the gang. During the interviews I took hand written notes and after
each interview, I would take 2-3 hours to record my recollections of the interview. After 24 hours, I reviewed my notes again and added any pertinent details. Once all of the notes from the interviews were typed and the audio recording was transcribed verbatim, the interviews were coded manually. My notes were anonymized to ensure the identity of all participants was protected. All hand written notes were typed, printed and stored in a locked cabinet in my Supervisor’s office. The original hand written notes were also stored in a locked cabinet in my Supervisor’s office. The electronic versions and audio recording have been saved on a password protected computer. All data will be conserved in a secure place for five years and the starting time of the conservation period will be following the completion of the thesis.

I initially planned to audio record all interviews. On the consent form, participants had the option to have the interview recorded. My second participant consented to audio recording. During the interview, she was significantly preoccupied and concerned about the audio recorder, despite it being very small and hidden from view. Thankfully, I was able to conduct a second interview with this participant without an audio recorder where she was visibly more comfortable and shared significantly more of her story. No other participants consented to audio recording. Although I was not able to audio record the other interviews, participants were eager to ensure their story was told adequately and thus offered to pause or repeat sentences to ensure that I was “getting it right” as one participant stated. I also requested that participants be patient with me as I write things down when they indicated that they did not want to have the interview audio recorded. As a result, the notes from each interview were detailed and extensive. In addition, the notes provided points of reference that I could use to re-direct participants to keep the subject matter focused and also as a means to ask more questions, probe for elaboration, and request clarification.
All participants were reminded of their right to review the thesis and delete or alter any quotes or information pertaining to them that they found inaccurate or problematic. Two participants agreed to review the thesis and were given two weeks to provide feedback on the thesis. Neither of them requested any changes be made to the final document. All names were anonymized and identifying details were not included in the thesis to protect participant’s confidentiality. Given the sensitive nature of the interviews, all participants were given a list of contacts (see Appendix F) to provide support in the event that they experienced discomfort prior, during, or after the interview. They were also given a copy of the consent form which indicated my contact details should they wish to follow-up with questions, ideas and/or comments.

It is important to acknowledge that interviews are restricted to one occasion or moment in time. As a result, other external factors can influence participant’s responses as well as the minimal relationship an interviewee has with the participants when only meeting once or a few times (two to three) due to a lack of trust. Thus, it is necessary to note that the narratives cannot be taken as absolute truth and participant’s insights may not be exhaustive.

3.6 Method of Analysis

The very first step of my preliminary analysis was to systematically read the notes for each participant to familiarize myself with the data. Qualitative content thematic analysis, specifically thematic network analysis, was employed to methodically explore the interview transcripts. The common aim of thematic analysis is to use qualitative methods to describe and explain phenomena as accurately and completely as conceivable with the intention that these descriptions and explanations correspond as closely as possible to the way the world operates in actuality (Patton, 2002: 267). I chose this method of analysis because content analysis attempts to determine the extent to which the identified themes may be indicative of a bigger phenomenon.
that reflect larger structural and cultural forces (Silverman, 2006). In addition, it compliments my epistemological framework and the two are able to co-exist, supplementing one another, because they share the similar goal of considering the impact of structural, cultural and social variables on girls in gangs.

Thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001: 388) was employed to systematize the extraction of: basic themes - the lowest-order premises evident in the transcripts; organizing themes - the categories of basic themes grouped together to summarize more abstract principles; global themes - the super-ordinate themes encapsulating the principal metaphors in the transcript as a whole. The global themes were gender, race, social class, and abuse. The organizing themes were power, hierarchy, and subordination. The basic themes were social attachment issues, abuse (emotional, physical and/or verbal), identity, and self-esteem. Thematic network analysis is a technique used for breaking up text and identifying explicit rationalizations and their implicit signification (Attride-Stirling, 2001). The raw data was carefully analysed to identify central themes, sub themes and patterns that were subsequently categorized. This is an “iterative” process called coding (Rossman & Rallis, 1998: 178). A total of nine (9) codes were derived (see Appendix G) and are discussed in detail in the analysis chapter.

I chose this particular type of methodology because it has several advantages: it removes any notion of hierarchy, it provides themes with fluidity, and it emphasizes the interconnectivity of themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001). The emphasis on interconnectivity compliments my epistemological framework with the goal of considering multiple interacting variables when explaining gang entry and exit. It provided me with a step-by-step guide to the analytic process which enabled me to stay focused, organized and open to the idea of intersectionality. In sum, once I had the transcripts, I devised a coding framework, identified themes, constructed thematic
networks, described and explored these thematic networks, summarized the thematic networks and interpreted the patterns. Nine themes emerged in the coding process: the boy problem; control; gangalized; gender; hierarchy; race; rollercoaster; the rules and values.

Qualitative researchers understand that social phenomenon is multi-layered and individual accounts can be copious (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992: 7). Thus, they aim to capture and deconstruct a specific phenomenon through research. However, there are instances where details of the data could potentially jeopardize the anonymity of a participant. For example, some of my participants spoke in extensive detail about specific gang-related events. There was some content that was exceptionally intricate and, as the researcher, I decided that sensitive details of this nature could place the interviewee at risk. Therefore, it is important to note that some content has been intentionally omitted from the analysis in order to prioritize and protect the confidentiality of participants.

3.7 Limitations of the research

A common challenge gang researchers run into is the reliability of data. Gang-involved individuals may embellish their stories (Rossmann, 2013: 17). This is something that as a researcher in this area I made sure I was cognizant of. Using an analysis that focuses on reoccurring themes helped to minimize the potential negative impacts of embellishment that can be associated with gang research. When multiple participants had noted the same theme, it was less likely that this idea was embellished. Reliability of data can also be impacted by a participants desire to present favourably, known as social desirability bias. In an attempt to minimize social desirability bias, I made a conscious effort to dress casually, use informal speech and characterize the semi-structured interview as a chat in a comfortable space where the girls felt safe.
As discussed, qualitative research through a constructivism lens prioritizes the interpretation of individual meaning and qualities belonging to a particular segment of the population (Silverman, 2006). Thus generalizations are beyond the purview of this research given that the sample size is small, amounting to seven participants. The scope of the study is limited in terms of representation. Another notable drawback concerns the unilingual nature of the interviews. It would be favourable to have interviews conducted in French and Spanish to include a broader array of participants and perspectives. However, the participants were racially diverse and this gave voice to women from several ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, this study achieved access to a population of women who are particularly difficult to recruit for research given that loyalty and secrecy are central tenets of gang culture in conjunction with the sensitive nature of the subject matter.
Eleven (11) interviews were conducted with a total of seven (7) participants. Three participants were interviewed more than once in an attempt to retrieve more in depth information. Four participants were directly involved and identified as gang members. Three participants were peripherally involved, meaning that they personally knew and had spent a significant amount of time (at least six months) with other female and male gang members. For ease of discussing the participants’ stories, they will be referred to as “gang-involved females”. Pseudonyms have been used to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. Some details have also been anonymized for the same reason. All participants were involved in or associated with gangs in Canada and my sample included a diverse group of women from different racial and ethnic groups. The age range of my participants was 20-48 years old, with an average age of 30 years old. The four participants who were directly involved in the gang joined the gang between 13-22 years of age, with the average age of gang entry being at 16 years old. Their respective times in the gang ranged from six months to seven years, with an average of 3.1 years spent in the gang.

It is clear that a sample of this size is not generalizable to all gang-involved women. Crouch and McKenzie (2006) highlight that the objective of exploratory studies is “to indicate rather than conclude” (p. 492). The adoption of an inductive approach prioritizes hypothesis-generating research rather than hypothesis testing (Silverman, 2006: 56) which enables me to focus on the depth and detail of each participant’s story. Thus, the lens of inquiry focuses on the distinction of each human subject as oppose to the quantification of participants (Platt, 1992: 24; Crouch & McKenzie, 2006: 493).
Table 1: Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Level of involvement</th>
<th># of interviews</th>
<th>Length of interview(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Willow (P1)</td>
<td>Directly involved</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>390 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura (P2)</td>
<td>Peripherally involved</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>220 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica (P3)</td>
<td>Directly involved</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>275 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer (P4)</td>
<td>Directly involved</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>105 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francine (P5)</td>
<td>Peripherally involved</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>135 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylvie (P6)</td>
<td>Peripherally involved</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>140 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paula (P7)</td>
<td>Directly involved</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>110 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The next section of the chapter provides an introduction to each participant and an overview of their reasons for joining the gang, remaining in the gang, and leaving the gang. The age of each participant and their specific length of gang involvement are not included in the individual descriptions set out below in order to maintain anonymity. All quotes cited in this research indicate whether the participant quoted was directly involved (DI) or peripherally involved (PI) in a gang. For example, any quotes by Willow will be cited as “Willow - DI”.

4.1 Participant Introductions and Synopsis

WILLOW

I interviewed Willow on three separate occasions, for a total of 390 minutes. Willow joined a gang when she was a teenager and was highly involved in a gang for more than five years. She talked about her experience in a very urgent matter, demonstrating an eagerness to have her story heard. Willow stressed that she first became involved in the gang because she started dating a male gang member. She also attributed the absence of her parents, a history of sexual abuse, her neighbourhood, her high school, a search for acceptance and the allure of fast money as pieces of the collective whole that led to her initial gang entry. Moreover she was sexually abused at a very young age by a family member and when she told her family, they
insisted that it be kept a secret. As a result, she sought support and a sense of kinship from the gang.

When I asked Willow why she stayed in the gang, she responded “The number one reason was for my boyfriend. The second reason was for the money. I get mixed up whether the money is number one or two” (DI). She indicated that her third reason was for a sense of kinship; “The crew was a family for me” (DI). Another more unique and unexpected reason that Willow shared when explaining why she remained in the gang was that she had a strong desire to care for the other female gang members. She explained, “I had a nurturing feeling to be a mother and take care of the girls in the gang” (DI). Willow explained that she stayed in the gang for protection and a sense of belonging. She also admitted that she had too much pride to leave and reflected that she had a lack of forethought. She concluded that she had a strong addiction to the lifestyle and the money when she discussed why she remained in the gang. She likened the gang lifestyle to drugs or alcohol, in terms of their level of addictiveness. She stated, “Being in the gang, it’s like an addiction. It’s the same fucking thing. Addicted to the money” (DI).

Willow originally left the gang when she became pregnant and explained that her baby was her principal motivation for getting out and staying out. Like other participants, she stressed the importance of leaving the city or country when leaving the gang to facilitate the process of desistance. She left the city of her gang for several months in an attempt to sever ties and stay away from what she described as a highly addictive lifestyle, filled with fast money, excitement and a sense of strong kinship.

For Willow, who is still trying to leave the gang completely, desistance has been an arduous process. Even across the time span of our three interviews, she vacillated between being still involved in the gang and completely out of that life. This equivocation illustrates a central
tenet of desistance: it is an ongoing process, lifelong for many, and it can be an extremely difficult journey where some female gang members will attempt to leave the gang only to return a couple weeks or months later (Rossmann, 2013).

Willow left the gang because she got pregnant. In our third interview, she indicated that she believed that she would still be in the gang today if she had not been pregnant. She also indicated that other female gang members leave a gang for a variety of reasons. Some girls get tired of the life and find it “too much”. Others can also be kicked out because of addiction problems or because they are not generating enough income for the gang. She also indicated that female gang members leave the gang when they go to prison, get pregnant and/or when they die. Additionally, she noted that females who “have a heart” will leave the gang. She stated, “Usually the ones who leave [a gang] are the ones with a heart. The ones who stay are so cold. So gone. Out of their body. All they want to do is cause harm on people” (DI).

**LAURA**

Laura did not identify as a gang member, but her boyfriend and a number of her female friends were involved in gangs. She also grew up in a neighbourhood with a number of active gangs. I spoke with Laura on two separate occasions, for a total of 220 minutes.

In contrast to Willow, whose boyfriend was the principal reason for gang entry, Laura broke up with her boyfriend when she realized the extent of his gang involvement. She explained that he had hidden it from her for a long time and was living a double life. Before revealing that he was deeply involved in a gang, he showed her a “big wad of cash”; she felt he was offering this somehow as a remedy for the secret that he had been hiding and the subsequent lies he had told her to conceal it. When she was talking about why she left her boyfriend she stated, “It was
judgment day for myself. Listen to myself, my soul” (PI). Laura was proud of her decision to leave her ex-boyfriend once she learned that he was gang-involved.

Based on her peripheral involvement with other gang-involved girls, she believes that girls become involved for many different reasons and that every situation is unique. She explained that many girls will join a gang because they are dating a male gang member. She also noted that girls are attracted to the money associated with gang-involvement. In addition, she said that many of the girls who join gangs have insufficient parental support; she said that many of these girls have “no love, no proper upbringing, no parents or parents who are addicted to substances” (PI). She said that girls also get into the gang for attention. She stressed that females become involved in a gang primarily because they are in a relationship with a male gang member. She characterized male gang members as manipulators who deceive women to make them comply with gang activities, including prostitution, selling drugs and carrying weapons.

She spoke about a close friend of hers who was attracted to and attracted abusive and controlling men. She recounted that her friend has now dated three different male gang members. All three relationships were unhealthy and all three men were characterized by Laura as abusive and controlling. This characterization of gang-involved males aligned with other participant’s perspectives.

Laura thinks that females stay in gangs for a multitude of reasons. She explained that many of these female gang members become segregated from the public and “normal life” making it easier to stay in than get out. She explained that they will stay in for the familiarity of their lifestyle within the gang and a sense of kinship. She said that many females have an addiction and stay in to maintain that. Furthermore, the gang often provides a source of income for these females. She explicated that many will stay in to maintain their relationship with a male
gang member and Laura perceives this as obsessive love that is unhealthy and merely an illusion. Laura said that for some females it is too difficult and dangerous to leave. Moreover, females are encouraged by other gang members to stay in. Laura stressed her belief that girls stay in gangs because they are caught in a vicious cycle. She likened gang-involved females to hamsters; “They’ve wheeled into such a hamster, in a cage. You’re just turning and turning and turning. Still at point A” (PI).

She explained that gang members, males and females, venerate the lifestyle in terms of who can be more successful, similar to any big business. She stated, “They idolize the lifestyle, the competition, who can make more money, take more leadership, do jobs that need to be done” (PI). She explained that females will stay because they want to move up in the gang hierarchy but the ability to do so is often a false promise, an illusion.

Laura explained that females get out for different reasons but she believes the principal reason is because “they hit rock bottom”. Laura believed that once females hit rock bottom, they will have a yearning for a different life and “a desire to be free from the poison of gang life” (PI). Laura felt that it was necessary for girls to hit rock bottom in order to stay out of the gang. She explicated, “If you hit rock bottom, that feeling reminds you and you never want to go there again, where that feeling takes you. Rock bottom is when you feel like you can’t breathe no more” (PI). Laura stressed how “very, very, very difficult it is to leave” and how dangerous it can be for females to get out. She stated, “To leave, it takes the hand of God, a lot of beatings” (PI).

**MONICA**

Monica identified as a gang member and was deeply involved in the gang for more than two years. Like Willow, she joined the gang because her boyfriend was a gang member. I spoke with Monica on two separate occasions, for a total of 275 minutes.
Monica is a former female gang member and has been undergoing psychological treatment to help her work through her traumatic experiences. Throughout her treatment, she had reflected extensively on her experience in the gang and this was apparent in our interviews. Like Willow, Monica was sexually abused at a young age and first became gang-involved because she was dating a male gang member. She cited her experience with sexual abuse as one of the reasons for her gang entry. She also indicated that many girls, including herself, fall for a male gang member and that’s why they become gang-involved. Like several of the participants, Monica’s former boyfriend was older, had money and provided her with housing, clothing, food and gifts. She also cited these other reasons for gang entry: attention-seeking; a function of your neighbourhood and environment; a value and obsession with money and appearance; family members in gangs; addiction and/or sexual abuse at a young age.

When I inquired why females stay in gangs, her answer was immediate and she responded in a very quiet and calm manner as if she had already thought about this question at length: “force and complete lack of self-worth” (DI). She clarified, “By force, I mean the sex trade and males forcing females to stay in” (DI). This statement contrasts sharply with Willow’s two main reasons for staying in; her love for her boyfriend and her enjoyment of the money she was able to make. Echoing Laura’s sentiment, Monica also stated that pressure from males on females to stay in the gang is one of the principal reasons females will remain in that lifestyle.

Monica also cited other reasons for staying in the gang. She said that, for her, the gang provided a sense of belonging and unity. She also said that she did not plan to stay in the gang but that one thing lead to another and it became a “revolving door” where she became more and more immersed without realizing how quickly and deeply involved she had become. She explained that she had a drug addiction and that was part of the reason that she stayed in. She
also talked about other girls who are “full feins”, full on drug addicts, who will stay in the gang to maintain this access to substances. Another factor that influenced Monica to remain in the gang was her boyfriend who was also a gang member. In addition, she could not conceive of an alternate lifestyle; “Before, I never saw life past 28 years old. By the time I am 24, I would be so tired. This is how I felt when I was in the gang” (DI). This belief was also part of her explanation of why she stayed in.

Monica explained that she was able to leave the gang because she had been accepted to a treatment centre. This coupled with the encouragement and assistance of a childhood friend facilitated her successful desistance. Her childhood friend, Joel, encouraged her to get out and provided transport so she could leave the city in secret. Two social workers from a shelter helped get Monica into a treatment centre in a different city and she was accepted into a funded treatment program. Joel again encouraged her to go and provided transport to the treatment centre.

Monica also explained that she left the gang because she realized that “the gang is not all it promises and pretends to be” (DI). Monica felt disdain towards the lifestyle. She stated, “I just wanted to be out of it. I just felt like it was disgusting” (DI). She discussed the realization she had pertaining to the negative consequences of drug distribution as a part of her reasoning for desisting; “Once I looked at it and I thought about all the roots, I realized I was contributing to horrible things. I was enabling addictions and messing up people socially and physically. I realized the harm that I was causing; the destruction to families” (DI). She also explained the necessity to let go of her tough and proud persona in order to desist successfully. She shared, “I can only be hard for so long. Any day I said I was, I was a fucking liar. Anyone who says that they are tough are just liars. I feel sad for them and their lie” (DI).
Monica also indicated that, in her opinion, the physical separation that prison provides is the most common reason for desistance. She explained, “Prison forces them to be away from that. The biggest escape, no doubt, is prison” (DI). She noted that prison is not ideal and it would be much safer and more rehabilitative to have a safe space for gang-involved women to go when desisting. Monica also explained that protection, aid from services and availability of treatment will influence females’ decision to get out. Monica was the only participant to highlight child protection as an aid for desistance. She explained, “Some girls get out through child protection. The child was removed and the woman (the mother of the child) is protected by child services. The father is restrained from seeing the children which helps the woman stay away from the gang” (DI). Monica cited pregnancy as another reason that females will desist. Monica explained that “women who are pregnant are often ostracized from the gang” (DI) and for this reason, they will generally get out. Monica also said that some women will experience “a life changing incident” while in the gang that will result in them leaving. Monica spoke in detail about her own experience of an incident, while in the gang, that was life changing for her. She noted that this traumatic incident was a major contributing factor to her decision to desist. In addition, she explained that some women will have a change in values and decide to leave; others will hit rock bottom, deciding that they cannot withstand the emotional and physical stress that gang life can bring and leave the gang as a result.

JENNIFER

Jennifer identified as a gang member and was highly involved in the gang for more than two and a half years. Like Willow and Monica, she joined the gang because her boyfriend was a male gang member. I spoke with Jennifer on one occasion, for a total of 105 minutes.
Jennifer’s father was not part of her childhood and her mother had an addiction. She experienced physical abuse at home. She explained that she felt very alone from a young age and joined the gang for money, protection and a place to live. When I asked her why she stayed in the gang, Jennifer responded “I had nowhere else to go” (DI). She elaborated, “They [the gang] become your family. It all becomes normal. It’s reality and comfort to me because it’s my life” (DI). Monica stayed in the gang because she felt that she had no other viable options; “I had no other choice. I had nowhere else to sleep. I didn’t want to have sex but felt like I had to” (DI). Jennifer explained that she would sometimes exchange sex for shelter when she did not have a place to stay.

Jennifer stayed in the gang for a sense of belonging, for status, and for money. She had also become addicted to drugs and staying in the gang ensured she would have access to this substance. Another primary reason was her boyfriend. She stated, “I felt that my boyfriend loved me. I thought that he cares about me so much. He doesn’t hit anyone else or get so bothered by anyone else. It must mean he loves me” (DI). At that point in her life, Jennifer perceived the physical abuse which was reserved solely for her as an indicator of love. When discussing why she stayed in the gang, Jennifer said “We had what people wanted. We had money, a house. Why would I leave?” (DI)

Jennifer got out of the gang because she was arrested. She also noted that she had a child after she was released from prison and this further influenced her decision to stay out of the gang. She repaired her relationship with her mother through one-on-one counselling and she indicated that this significantly impacted her successful desistance. At the time of our interviews, she was going back to school and felt that she was rebuilding her life. Memories of her life in the gang remind her why she got out and help her to stay out. For example, she relayed a story where
her boyfriend in the gang was over-dosing and highly addicted to substances and as a result she was running the “business” on her own. Two ‘clients’ broke into their home and started destroying the house, looking for money and drugs. Her boyfriend was not able to defend her because “he was high out of his mind” (DI). Looking back, she recalled that this experience was one of the tipping points for her where she started to seriously consider leaving the gang.

**FRANCINE**

Francine was a peripheral participant; she had lived with two other female gang members, Anna and Jill, for a period of time and knew other people who were members of gangs. She shared her own perspective of their stories in particular, and gang life in general. Francine was in her early 40s. I spoke with Francine on one occasion, for a total of 135 minutes.

**Anna**

Francine lived with Anna for a period of time and as a result had some insight into her life as a gang member. Francine felt that there were a myriad of reasons influencing Anna’s decision to join a gang. Unlike my participants, Anna was not dating a male gang member but instead had a close female friend who was in a gang. However, she had indicated to Francine that she joined for a sense of belonging because her home life was unstable, primarily due to sexual abuse. Francine thought that Anna had abandonment issues and a high susceptibility to peer pressure and cited these as part of the reason that she got into a gang. Anna explained to Francine that she stayed in the gang because she felt her needs were being taken care of. Anna highlighted that she had food and clothes, whatever she needed. Once the gang provided these items, Anna told Francine that she felt obligated to stay and provide for other new girls; she felt obliged to repay her debts. She said that she felt committed to the gang. Francine recounted that Anna often said: “They are the only people that have ever been there for me” (PI). Anna told Francine that
another reason that she stayed in the gang was due to the lack of resources to get out safely and successfully. Francine stated, “She wants to do something with herself but I’m afraid for her because she doesn’t know anything else and the resources aren’t there. It’s all survival” (PI).

Anna explained to Francine that she wanted to get out so she intentionally got arrested as she saw this as the most viable route to exit the gang safely and without suspicion.

Jill

Francine also lived with Jill for a period of time and as a result had some insight into her life as a gang member. Unlike other participants who had a boyfriend or friend in the gang, Jill told Francine that she got into a gang because of her drug addiction. Jill explained that she had no stable home environment, grew up in foster homes and had a history of sexual abuse. In addition, Jill indicated that she was vulnerable to manipulation and was seeking attention. These were all factors that influenced her entry into a gang. Jill told Francine that she stayed in the gang for the adrenaline rush, a sense of control and power, and to pay her debts. Francine noted that Jill was still in the gang at the time of our interview; therefore there are no explanations pertaining to her reasons for desistance.

Because Francine knew several females who were gang members, she shared her thoughts on why females get in, stay in and get out. Francine believed that females who are vulnerable to gang involvement are females with some, or all, of the following characteristics: unstable home environment; dysfunctional family; addiction to substances; low self-esteem; lack of attention and/or love; spiritually and emotionally broken; in search of an identity; perceive gang members as role models; search for security, stability and structure; girls that are lost, and girls who thrive on power and control. Francine thought females stay in the gang for the following reasons: nowhere else to go; peer pressure; sense of belonging; fear; access to material
goods; love for a girl or guy; don’t know anything else (“gangalized”), and adaptation to the fast money and pace. Many of these reasons coincide with those given by participants directly involved in gangs.

Francine thought that females desist for the following reasons: tired of the rat race; desire for something better; desire for a family; fall in ‘real’ love; age out; takes a toll on them; arrested, and the realization that the gang lifestyle has no future. Francine noted how incredibly challenging desistance can be: “Some of them come to the realization that this is not going anywhere. I commend any girl that can get out of that lifestyle. It’s not easy. It takes strength to do it and a commitment to yourself” (PI).

SYLVIE

Sylvie is particularly memorable because another participant identified her as a gang member and recommended I recruit her but, in our interview, she indicated that she knew people in a gang but was not in a gang herself. Therefore, I have categorized her as a peripheral participant. However, it is important to note that during our interview there were multiple instances that it appeared that she was discussing personal experiences rather than recounting the experiences of others. I spoke with Sylvie on one occasion, for a total of 140 minutes.

Sylvie was an exotic dancer. She started dancing when she was under age, using a fake ID to do so. She explained that she enjoyed the fast money of this lifestyle. Sylvie believed that girls join gangs for the following reasons: unstable home environments; history of verbal and/or physical abuse; come from single parent homes; have poor families; have parent(s) who abuse substances; male gang members manipulate and convince females to join, and absence of a father figure.
Sylvie believed that females stay in the gang for security; “If they eat, you eat” (PI). She also noted that girls will stay in gangs because they provide a sense of family and belonging. Moreover, some of these girls find shelter and security within the gang and Sylvie explains that those two variables also influence their decision to stay in. She said that other girls stay in because of their love for a male gang member. Other girls will stay in because they feel trapped and are too afraid of the consequences of leaving, according to Sylvie. Another reason girls stay in is to supply their drug addiction. When I asked Sylvie why she left exotic dancing and her criminal lifestyle, she said “I had a baby, went to jail” (PI). Sylvie noted that she wanted to be a good role model for her child and believes that she was able to successfully leave dancing and a criminal lifestyle because of the treatment programs that she received in prison; “I learned new skills in the programming in prison. I feel like I’ve upgraded. I’ve upgraded my life skills, my own behaviour” (PI). Sylvie noted that females get out of gangs for a variety of reasons. She explained, “They realize nothing belongs to them” (PI); they grow up and grow out of it; they go to prison because they took charges to protect a male gang member; and/or they experience a life changing event.

**PAULA**

Paula identified as a former female gang member and was highly involved in a gang for less than a year when she was younger. Although she left the gang after that year, she was still involved in criminal activities for many years after that. I spoke with Paula on one occasion, for a total of 110 minutes.

Like Francine, Paula was in her late 40’s. Similar to Jill, Paula grew up in group homes. She was taken from her own home by Children’s Aid. Paula experienced sexual abuse in both her own home and in the group home. Paula explained that she could not stand this type of abuse
any longer and ran away from the group home. Shortly after running away, Paula joined a gang. Paula explained that both her maternal and step Father abused a substance. She felt that she did not have a stable home environment and thus sought to find a home elsewhere: in a gang. She was in her teens when she joined a gang. Her principal reason for getting into the gang was a relationship with a male gang member. She also cited her addiction to drugs and search for belonging as reasons for joining a gang.

Paula stayed in the gang because of her boyfriend and her addiction. Paula explained that she left the gang because “women were treated badly and passed around to all of the men” (DI). Both her and her boyfriend at the time would not stand for that. Like Monica, she got out of the gang by relocating. Both Paula and her boyfriend left the gang together, moving to a different city in secret. They were both still involved in crime but no longer in the gang. She said that she got out of the criminal lifestyle because she was arrested and was fed up. She noted that she now suffers from PTSD because of the stress and memories of gang life and is currently taking medication to manage this.

4.2 Participant's definition of a “gang"

For the purposes of this research, each of my participants were given a questionnaire with seven questions (see Appendix D) and the first question was “How would you define a ‘gang’?” Given this unique opportunity to access a population of gang-involved girls, I wanted to include their definition of a ‘gang’ in this research. This opens up the definition of a “gang” to gang-involved individuals, as oppose to focusing solely on the opinion and direction of professionals. The definitions from my participants characterize the gang as a surrogate family and focus on the attributes that a gang can provide such as loyalty, protection, and security. The fact that the gang partakes in illegal activity is an afterthought for most participants, indicated at the end of their
definition. Willow defined a gang as “Group of people who are not blood related but consider themselves family and are involved in illegal activity”. Laura defined a gang as “A group of people who share and preach about the same morals and values who conform to illegal behaviour and who vow never to mistrust or betray one another”. Monica’s definition of a gang was

I would define a “gang” as a group of people organized/alliance together in regular socialization and criminal activity. Smaller ‘gangs’ or groups of individual members of that larger ‘gang’ often join together creating serious conflicts - wishes for vengeance and black market competition. This can cause injuries, fatalities and issues within one gang. It can also break one gang into two opposing organizations. This leads to cycle of violence and competition (Monica).

Jennifer did not write a response. Francine indicated that a gang is “An illusion of an extended family that you believe has your best interest at heart but it’s not a reality”. Sylvie noted that a gang is “A sister/brother hood for people that had rough upbringings to basically accept one another as family, basically giving each other security, shelter, a sense of belonging, a source of income, etc...in a very pro criminal life style”. Finally, Paula who was a former female gang member wrote that a gang is a “Group of members together for a purpose of ?”. Paula’s definition is memorable because she questions why these individuals are together; what purpose does it serve? Paula had desisted and had a negative recollection of her time in the gang and what gang life represents. Her definition of a ‘gang’ illuminates that once she had successfully desisted, she no longer believed that the gang could fulfill any meaningful purpose. The definitions formulated by my participants are significant to consider when defining a gang because they include the perceptions of individuals who have been personally involved in gangs, either directly or peripherally. These definitions shed light on what a gang means for them. This is very different than what a gang may mean for the Ottawa Police Service and definitions constructed by other legal professionals or law enforcement personnel.
4.3 Reasons for getting in, staying in and getting out of gangs

The reasons most frequently cited by my participants for getting into a gang, staying in the gang and getting out of the gang are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Reasons cited for Gang Membership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GETTING IN</th>
<th>STAYING IN</th>
<th>GETTING OUT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boyfriend in the gang</td>
<td>Boyfriend in the gang</td>
<td>Physical separation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unstable home environment</td>
<td>Money</td>
<td>Pregnancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of sexual abuse</td>
<td>Sense of kinship</td>
<td>Treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of belonging</td>
<td>Inability to envision alternate lifestyle</td>
<td>Life changing event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fast money</td>
<td>Support drug addiction</td>
<td>Hit rock bottom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My participants\(^3\) identified many reasons that collectively influence girls’ decision to enter, stay in and get out of gangs. These reasons fall within the five categories established by Miller (2001) which are social, emotional, physical, psychological and economic. Socially, my participants reported that gang-involved girls were searching for a sense of belonging and cited this as a reason for gang entry. A fear of what life outside of the gang would be like, how others would treat them and how they could relate to “non-gang” people was a social barrier to desistance cited by my participants. Willow discussed how she found it difficult to relate to people outside of the gang; “When you leave and meet new people, you’re like ‘you don’t know shit about me’” (DI). The challenge to find others that female gang members feel they can relate to was a common reason for staying in the gang among my participants. Forming a new social circle and finding people who can understand you and relate to your past can prove trying; this

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\(^3\) For ease of reading in the following discussion, my participants will include the girls directly and peripherally involved in gangs. I will not specify each time whether they were directly or peripherally involved, except for quotes.
discourages females from leaving their current social circle within the gang. Paula explained, “I don’t consider myself a normal woman. I have a hard time relating to normal women. I want to. [Pauses] I’ve seen too much” (DI). In the narratives of my participants, Paula and Willow in particular, there was fear and doubt. There was a fear of what life outside of the gang would be like, how others would treat them and doubt that they could relate to people who are not affiliated with a gang. Laura explained, “It becomes a culture. You become categorized in a different set of values and morals. You segregate yourself from the other public that you are normally used to” (PI).

There are also social pressures within the gang to provide for new gang members because the gang provided for you when you were new. Francine spoke about the pressure that Anna felt to pay back her debts; she felt indebted to the gang because when she first entered, they gave her shelter, food, money, etc. Therefore once she was in the gang, she felt obligated to pay back the members and a responsibility to remain loyal to those who had provided for her. Francine explained, “Whatever she [Anna] needed, the gang got for her, clothes, etc. The gang was cooking for her, stealing for her. After a couple of months, it was her turn to steal, prostitute, do what they had done for her for the next new girl” (PI). A social pressure to pay your debts and be loyal to those who provided for you is one of the factors, according to my participants, that influences females’ decision to stay in a gang.

Emotionally, my participants explained that they stayed in the gang for the sense of kinship that the gang provided. According to Merton (1938), a sense of kinship is a socially accepted goal and joining a gang to meet this need is an adaptive strategy and a form of problem-solving behaviour. Moreover, a relationship with a male gang member was cited by my participants as a reason for getting in and staying in the gang, fulfilling an emotional need for
these girls. Physically, Jennifer noted that she sought out shelter and this was one of the reasons that she became gang-involved. Two physical elements that account for gang exit according to my participants are pregnancy and physical separation. Psychologically, an unstable home environment and a history of sexual abuse were cited as reasons for getting in by my participants. Another related variable, also cited by Miller (2000), which influences gang entry for women is the experience of violence in the home, often in the form of sexual abuse. Once in the gang, an inability to envision an alternate lifestyle was a psychological barrier that resulted in my participants staying in the gang. Another psychological battle was the desire to support a drug addiction; this addiction was one of the reasons my participants cited for persisting.

Treatment, a life changing event and hitting rock bottom are all psychological events that were cited as reasons for desistance by my participants. Economically, my participants explained that financial dependence on the gang was a factor for getting in and staying in.

A lack of legitimate alternatives was also cited as a reason for gang entry. When Jennifer was asked why she joined the gang, she stated in a very matter of fact way: “I had nowhere else to go” (DI). Jennifer was homeless and financially dependent on her earnings from her boyfriend via the gang. In the eyes of women like Jennifer, the gang provides a means to surmount the abject poverty they would otherwise face (Campbell, 1995). There is a deep seeded belief that is perpetuated by the gang that the gang lifestyle is the best option, given their circumstances. Again, this line of thought coincides with Merton’s strain theory because he explains that social actors will seek out culturally defined goals, either through legitimate or illegitimate means, depending on what options are viable. When Jennifer told me that she had nowhere else to go, I inquired about her home life and she explained that her Mother was an alcoholic and her Mother’s partner did not want her living there. Jennifer was kicked out of her home and
explained that she would provide sexual favours to male gang members in exchange for a place to sleep. One of the reasons young women become gang-involved is because they begin to spend more time away from home due to difficulties or dangers residing therein and as a result seek out a home elsewhere (Hoogland et al., 2010). This can result in a lack of healthy adult relationships (ibid). Jennifer reasoned,

It was the only place that I felt comfortable and accepted. They [the gang] become your family. It all becomes normal. It is reality and comfort to me because it’s my life. We had what people wanted. We had money, a house. Why would I leave? (Jennifer - DI)

This provides insight into how gang life can feel normal, comfortable and familiar for gang-involved girls encouraging them to persist. Jennifer’s quote speaks to sought-after social goods, such as money and a house. This illustrates the strain that she felt between the goals of a culture that she accepted and her inability to access the means to achieve these values (Merton, 1938). She turns to deviance (selling drugs) in the pursuit of widely accepted social values and goals, like a home and a source of income.

It is evident that Miller’s (2001) categories support and help to organize my findings, which are consistent with other studies that suggest that many youth become gang-involved to fulfill basic needs of love, opportunity, self-worth, companionship, structure, and protection (Chatterjee, 2006; McCreary Youth Foundation, 2004). Love, money, a place to live, respect, drug addiction and acceptance were the main reasons my participants cited for getting in and staying in the gang. When looking at risk factors for gang-involved girls, my research is replicating American research in a Canadian context.

However, this project provides a much deeper glimpse into the gendered aspects of gang life. The thematic analysis allows this study to go beyond existing research and look at how gender is implicated in the kinds of power, control, and authority experienced in gangs. As the
remaining sections of this chapter will demonstrate, my participants indicated that the perception of women as easy targets for manipulation and control results in a gang hierarchy that is highly gendered, influencing what women’s role is within gangs. These women felt themselves to be or were described by others as powerless, used as pawns by their boyfriends and controlled by men who monopolized positions of authority within the gang. Sylvie explained, “Women are never considered equal to men because we have feelings. [Prompt: And men don’t?] A man will get it done. What needs to get done, a man will do it. It’s just how it is. They don’t act on their feelings. You have to be a really evil person to do these types of things” (PI). Accordingly, my participants played secondary or support roles within the gang because they were women. In particular, they often served as sex workers to generate income for the gang or drug mules to protect male gang members from possible arrest because male gang members were considered more valuable than females.

My participants described women in gangs as replaceable goods on an assembly line run by male gang members who value money and status above all else. Sylvie noted, “Women are not usually involved in the gang directly. They are just associated. She can roll with the gang but she won’t ever be a part of it. That’s how it is everywhere. These women just think that they’re a part of it but they’re not really because they’re women” (PI). My participants indicated that they originally wished to associate themselves with men like this to enjoy a vicarious sense of power and status, but once within the gang, they were marginalized and forced to accept male violence and control. Once they became financially and emotionally dependent on the gang, it became harder for them to leave the gang. Exit often occurred because they were imprisoned, left the city in secret or became pregnant. This suggests that desistance interventions for women in gangs must take gender into account, and pair exit strategies with support for pregnancy and mothering.
I begin by discussing the gendered path of entry for my participants — what they call the “boy problem”. I then go on to discuss the gendered hierarchy and rules within gangs that are maintained through manipulation, power and control. I explore how the use of verbal and physical violence is employed to silence resistance in gangs. I will examine how gang involvement escalates and how girls become dependent on the gang - what my participants call “gangalized”. I will examine the social, psychological, physical and financial factors influencing their decision to stay in, serving as barriers to desistance. Finally, I will analyze how pregnancy, prison and/or a life changing event can lead to desistance and the difficulties inherent in gang exit for gang-involved girls.

4.4 The “boy problem”

As indicated in Table 2, the primary reason cited by my participants for girls entering gangs’ was because they were dating a male gang member (see also MacKenize and Johnson, 2003; Thornberry et al., 2006). When I asked Monica why girls enter gangs, she first responded, “Well some females have the boy problem”. When asked to elaborate, she explained that “They are dating a guy in the gang. They like the image of a bad guy or a thug” (DI).

All my participants found the notion of the “bad boy” exciting and attractive. A “bad boy” was defined by them as a man who was tough, fearless, powerful and had influence over others. Some participants found this type of man compelling precisely because he was involved in criminal activity. For example, Paula said she liked her boyfriend because, “He was an outlaw! I liked him because he was an outlaw” (DI). Her comment was playing on a double entendre as the “Outlaws” were an Ottawa-based gang that was mostly inactive at the time of our interview.
The characteristics that my participants found attractive reflected their belief that they could attain power and status by being the girlfriend of a particular gang members who exemplified these traits, and that consequently influenced their decision to become gang-involved. By partnering with a tough and lawless man, they sought to similarly obtain a particular standing and reputation. My participants’ experiences closely mirrors that of other young women who have an attraction to the “bad boy” and enter into romantic relationships with male gang members who use the relationship as a way to broker the girls into carrying weapons, drugs, and driving vehicles (Hoogland et al., 2010).

Although Willow agreed that girls’ involvement with gangs, “starts with a boyfriend or guy you like that brings you into it” (DI), and that “The number one reason [for joining] was for my boyfriend” (DI) she also found that “The second reason was for the money. I get mixed up whether the money is number one or number two” (DI). For Willow, the principal motivation for gang entry was not as clear cut as it was for Monica, Jennifer and Paula as she vacillated whether money or her boyfriend was the primary variable influencing her gang entry. For all other participants directly involved, they indicated with certainty that their relationship with a male gang member was the primary reason that they had entered the gang. But for all my participants, the search for status was a key element for joining a gang. Dating a male gang member was one of the ways to attain this status, for these girls, as was having more money.

My participants also felt that the “boy problem” implicated numerous women because it was common for male gang members to date multiple women simultaneously. Valdez (2007) concluded that it was common for male gang members to have multiple partners; “the girls who were sexually bound to a steady partner in the gang were still exposed to sexually transmitted diseases and infections because their boyfriend had multiple sexual relationships” (p. 178).
Jennifer indicated that, in her experience, there were more females than males implicated by gangs: “There are more girls than guys because guys are always dating multiple girls in gangs” (DI). Laura agreed: “A lot of women who are in gangs [with their boyfriends], these guys also have another woman that they are dating” (PI). This contrasts with assumptions in the literature that male gang members outnumber female gang members, and suggests that further study is needed, as the number of gang-impacted women may be under-estimated. This is a particularly important finding, because even though all girlfriends may not join the gang, they may experience negative ramifications as a result of these relationships. Therefore females who have a partner in gang are at risk of gang-involvement and/or negative impacts from gangs; this should be considered, particularly when formulating intervention initiatives.

The tie between my participants and their boyfriends was a strong one. Several participants were very protective of their boyfriends, at the time, and took steps to shield them from social censure or legal consequences. For example: Willow lied to her counsellor, telling the counsellor that her boyfriend was employed in a lawful business when in fact he was a drug dealer. She indicated that she did this because she could not stand the thought of her counsellor disapproving of her boyfriend. Willow explained, “I wanted her to support him and the idea of him and the idea of our relationship. I didn’t want her telling me to leave him or that he was bad” (DI). Despite the fact that her boyfriend was verbally abusive, controlling and unfaithful, she protected his honour and wanted others to support him the way she did. In addition, the status that women are given in the gang is in large part a factor of the status of their boyfriend in that gang. Sylvie explained, “Guys control the women. Definitely. They look up to the guys. There’s fear. The girls are afraid of the guys. He will say ‘you’re a goof, you’re this’. If he says this, everyone else will turn on you too. He determines your status” (PI). Similarly Willow noted,
“There are two different kinds of girls [in gangs]. One kind are girls who have a boyfriend in the crew and so they get respect automatically” (DI). In line with this, I asked Monica if she was ever required to prostitute while in the gang and she responded, “My boyfriend was so high up that I didn’t have to. I was just a knocker” (DI). Thus, their boyfriend’s reputation becomes a reflection for the women themselves and can, in part, determine their responsibilities within the gang. Therefore, my participants wanted to protect the image of their partner because by doing so they are also protecting their own reputation.

This level of dedication to a gang-involved boyfriend also made it challenging for participants directly involved to leave these relationships and — by extension — the gang. Because they felt a strong sense of loyalty towards these men, my participants were willing to accept emotional, physical and/or sexual abuse. Ending these relationships is particularly important for these women because, when the former female gang members I spoke with did break up with these male gang members, it was easier for them to leave the gang and stay away permanently. As indicated in Table 2, breaking up with a boyfriend or escaping the “boy problem” was seen as a life changing event and cited as a reason for gang exit.

One of the reasons my participants felt dedicated to males in gangs was because of the way they were seduced into the gang. The idea that men seduce women initially with kindness, showering them with material goods and affection is prevalent in the literature dealing with gangs (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009). This seduction process is a method used to lure females into gangs, glamorizing that lifestyle with false promises of happiness and financial security. Males are the primary seducers and females are generally the target of this ploy. Willow reflected on

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4 According to Monica, “a “knocker” stands by and if one of the girls (the prostitutes) bangs the wall from their room, it means that something is going wrong and I call the boys to come and take care of him. They usually will just rob him, beat him up and kick him out” (DI).
how she was wheeled into the gang by her boyfriend. She recalled, “Before we started dating, he gave me a $20 bill for no reason at all. He was just showing me that he had money just to give away. My parents never gave me money like that. He like bought my love” (DI). Willow’s boyfriend’s actions illustrates how the gift of material goods and/or money can strategically build a perception that financial gains and status will come with gang life (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009). Gang members will continue to build this image of achievement with stories of how much money they make or by flaunting material goods as a display of success.

Laura discussed her story of falling victim to this tactic of being “wheeled in”. As opposed to monetary means or material goods, Laura cited the illusion of love as the best tactic to lure women into these relationships and consequently into gang life. She explained, “There were instances when we were in the same room and he got violent because of a phone call and he would be throwing things and I would be like ‘Oh my god who is this person?’ This is not the way he was when I first met him, he was sweet. So, I feel like they wheel you in, you know what I mean” (PI). She continued, “Obviously, the women being lured, thinking that this is love and thinking that this person really cares for them, they will do whatever it takes” (PI).

Several participants discussed the level of commitment that these females will have towards their boyfriends. Many of the women state that they “do what it takes” to make their boyfriend happy. This adds a different dimension to the “boy problem”. Women who are in love with these men seem more willing to comply with unreasonable or unsafe requests, justified by the conviction that these men love them. But at the same time, my participants describe girls in gangs as weak and vulnerable, easy targets for men who want to control and manipulate them. This perception of themselves and women in gangs makes them open to seduction by the “bad boy” because it provides an indirect way to attain personal power and a sense of agency. My
participants, notably Willow, Monica and Jennifer, explained that the sense of agency that they originally sought out and felt they had attained while in the gang was an illusion and they only realized this after getting out of the gang. Willow described her former boyfriend as the “number one manipulator” (DI). Only Laura, a peripheral participant, maintained a sense of control or choice regarding continuing her relationship with a gang member. She was dating a male gang member but decided to end the relationship when she discovered how deeply involved he was in the gang. This was a strong act of agency. On the other hand, she spoke at length about a friend who dated several male gang members and became deeply involved in the gang as a result; she felt her friend was looking for a sense of agency through a relationship with a “bad boy”, but instead was manipulated and taken advantage of, negating her agency.

This notion of the “bad boy”, which is an integral component of the “boy problem”, is not limited to girls in gangs. Some of my participants noted that it is often perpetuated by the media. Laura discussed the concept of a “healthy relationship” and how this idea is skewed by media with notions of power dynamics and unhealthy expectations propagated through music lyrics and movies. Laura stated, “If you look at the music that’s out there, like Bonnie and Clyde and this and that and the third. It basically indicates that the more shit you put your woman through, the more she stands by you, the more that’s supposed to be which is really not a healthy relationship” (PI). She continued, “That’s definitely something is a factor, vulnerability and wanting to feel loved” (PI). The latter reasons cited explain the type of women are more likely to fall victim to this seduction tactic. This research suggests that learning what a healthy relationship looks like, how to set boundaries, and what constitutes a respectful partnership are important pillars for treatment programs for gang-involved women given the significance and layers consistent in the “boy problem”. Positive male role models in a mentoring type program
could be beneficial because many gang-involved women lack a stable, consistent positive male figure in their lives.

Laura referred to the bad boy attraction as “stigmatized love” which is another powerful conceptualization of the “boy problem”. These stigmas are often rooted in gender stereotypes disseminated by discourses portraying women as weak and vulnerable and the “bad boy” as desirable, strong and powerful. These perceptions contextualize females’ reasoning for gang entry. These unhealthy relationships directly affect one’s identity and their conception of self. Laura’s reflections on her own abusive relationship with a gang member were tied to identity: “You are going to completely identify yourself as a new person because you identify yourself as his or her girlfriend or as this gang so to take yourself away from there, you’re going to have to become a whole different person” (PI).

Laura framed the idea of the “boy problem” as an addictive love that although unhealthy is incredibly difficult to leave. Like any addiction, withdrawal can be an ongoing battle requiring stable social support systems in place as reinforcement during this type of mental combat. When asked why girls get into gangs, she stated:

I find a lot of it has to do with men. I find a lot of women enter into bad relationships and a lot of women want to maintain the relationship because it’s an addiction, it’s not a love relationship. It’s like an addiction relationship. That’s for me personally. I find it’s an addiction so the arguing and the sexual tension can be an addiction you wanna hold on to that because that person makes them feel alive and you know with a good guy, they may not feel that excitement. Good girls like bad guys, right. So, that would be one of the most contributing factors I believe of why women end up getting into these gangs (Laura - PI).

This notion of “addictive love” makes it apparent that females in gangs are seeking “love” as well as power. They are attracted to the power of the “bad boy” but also see their relationship as a way of being loved. Since the relationship is predicated on a power imbalance, this creates an
addictive gap: I want him to love me because he’s powerful, but he doesn’t love me because I’m weak, so I prove my worth to him by doing whatever he asks to show I’m worthy and tough too. Laura elaborated, “You know, they want to withhold the relationship and they want to be that bad woman for their boyfriend and they want to fulfill all of their boyfriend’s needs” (PI). Laura detailed her relationship with a male gang member:

I did fall very hard for him but it was that type of love that is not healthy for you, right. There was never any physical abuse but there was a lot of verbal abuse, a lot a lot of verbal abuse. I feel this is how these men trap these women. They verbally abuse them to the point where they feel like they are worthless, right. And, they become stigmatized by it, right. You feel like you don’t deserve it and that you can’t do better. You don’t want them out of your life because you feel like they love you and you feel like that’s just the way it’s supposed to be (Laura - PI).

Women who are in love with these men seem more willing to comply with unreasonable or unsafe requests, justified by the conviction that these men love them (Rossmann, 2013). Even though there was physical abuse, Monica stayed with her boyfriend for two years before leaving him. There was also another former female gang member, Jennifer, who detailed the physical abuse in her relationship; “I felt that my boyfriend loved me. I thought that he cares about me so much. He doesn’t hit anyone else or get so bothered by anyone else. It must mean he loves me” (DI). In this instance, physical abuse is perceived as a form of confirmation of love due to the fact that the violence is reserved solely for her. This research suggests that these types of perceptions need to be addressed in treatment when discussing models of healthy relationships.

In sum, the “boy problem” explores one of the primary reasons that girls enter into gangs: they start dating a male gang member. It also looks at some of the commonalities among participants that characterize these relationships between male and female gang members. The male is generally older, dominant, verbally and/or physically abusive and often uses money and power as a seduction ploy. The women are searching for their identity, status, a sense of agency
and love; they feel that they have attained these characteristics by association. Their primary connection to the gang is accordingly defined by unequal gender dynamics.

4.5 The Gendered Role of Girls in Gangs

Gender continues to play an important role once a girl enters a gang. Reflecting on the unequal status of girls and guys in gangs, Willow described girls as nothing but “mules” or prostitutes: “In Ottawa, female gang members end up being the ‘mule’. Girls are used for prostitution and mules. They are mules” (DI). These roles are linked to gendered perceptions which relegate girls to the lowest rung of the gang hierarchy. This hierarchy is maintained through manipulation and control. As such, gender inequalities form one of the pillars of gang structure in mixed gangs.

The way in which my participants explain the gender differences within gangs is very telling and sheds light on their conceptual framework of gender. A particularly memorable quote was expressed by Monica and it explores the issue of gender and why men possess the power and have control, dispossessing the women. Monica posited:

Women are lower in the hierarchy. [Prompt: How come?] It’s a biological and anatomical fuckery. It’s easy to take advantage of a woman. Men have a higher libido, women have a lower libido. There is a strength differential. It’s inherent in the chromosomes. Women are naturally more nurturing, caring, loving, all of those things (Monica - DI).

According to Monica, the physiological and psychological differences between men and women put women at a disadvantage making them an easy target for exploitation in gangs. This is how she made sense of the gendered hierarchy in the gang.

Gender also influences decision-making processes and the degree of value attached to each member in the gang. The value of female members is based on what a female can be ‘used’ for; how much income and what status a girl can attain. This commodification of female gang
members rests on a gendered power structure in which girls are subjected to male control. As Francine stressed, male gang members “prey on the weak ones [girls] when recruiting because they will be easier to manipulate and control” (PI). Accordingly, girls’ roles in gangs are predicated on not only their usefulness as sex workers but also on their relative lack of power and vulnerability to male control. This vulnerability is often rooted in a girl’s search for belonging and acceptance. As Willow noted, “the girls [in gangs] just want to feel accepted, like they are a part of something” (DI). Gang members seek out at-risk girls and offer them a sense of belonging as well as material goods (Hoogland et al., 2010) as a way to lure them into gang life. Males will recruit females because they see them as non-threatening (Hoogland et al., 2010). Compared to gang-involved males, females have experienced significantly higher rates of physical/sexual violence and victimization in their childhood (Hoogland et al., 2010). As a result, a girls search for belonging and way to fit in is highly gendered. Girls often experience a lack of connectedness in their childhood because of the abuse. Therefore, girls want to be loved and taken care of (Hoogland et al., 2010). For many girls in gangs, the gang and their gang-involved boyfriends provide this emotional and financial support for them according to my participants, or at least promise to provide these supports, which influences girls’ decision to enter and persist. Sylvie noted, “It’s good at the beginning, when you first get in. But then after some time it’s really hard. It’s nothing but drama and tough situations” (PI).

As mules, girls are also required to carry illegal items on their person or take the fall for charges they did not commit, providing an extra layer of protection for male gang members. Laura explicated, “Obviously, the women being lured, thinking that this is love and thinking that this person really cares for them, they will do whatever it takes [Question: Carry the drugs? Carry the weapons?] Exactly” (PI). The girls are used as pawns because they are forced to carry
out illegal tasks, at risk of violence and/or arrest in order to protect the more valuable players in the gang. This is evident in Willow’s narrative where she stated, “The majority of girls who go to jail, it is the fault of the guys. The girls take the rap for them. It’s a disaster. They walk down the lane with drugs and weapons and get caught” (DI). This makes girls more vulnerable than male gang members to criminal liability for gang-related activities. My participants all shared the expectation that females take the fall for the illegal actions of the males, normalizing gender inequalities within gangs.

The level of sexual freedom for men versus women in gangs further illustrates how gang hierarchy and rules are gendered. Rules pertaining to sexual encounters are primarily enforced through power, control and manipulation residing predominantly in the hands of the males, according to the narratives of my participants. Willow explained:

The girl’s boyfriend can cheat all the time but the girl never. If the other girls tell her that he is sleeping around that girl will get beat bad by the boys. For example, if a girl says your boyfriend slept with me to the girlfriend and ‘snitches’ on the boy for being a slut, they will beat the shit out of her [the snitch] (Willow - DI).

Willow also indicated that when her ex-boyfriend ended their relationship, he told her that she was not allowed to sleep with anyone else despite the fact that he was breaking up with her and she would now be single. This extension of control and claim to ownership of her body is gendered, as male gang members often date a number of women simultaneously without fear of repercussion. Female resistance to these rules is often silenced with male violence. For example, when Willow did sleep with someone else and her ex found out, she indicated, “…my ex showed up at the house. He was outside and I was inside. One of the girls who was there told me ‘go get your beating and come back inside’” (DI). The response of the girl in this account exemplifies the normalization of punishment, generally through physical violence, for females who do not
follow the “rules” dictated by males. In this quote, it is notable that it was another female who instructed Willow to get her beating from her ex-boyfriend. It further demonstrates how females in mixed gangs have come to expect and accept unequal treatment, including male violence and control, as inevitable.

Another participant echoes the sentiments of Willow regarding the roles of women and how they become disempowered and consequently controlled through a gendered hierarchy, negatively impacting their sense of self. Laura explained, “Women have been stomped and abused so they have no sense of self” (PI). This is part of the reason that females in gangs become “mules”; their level of self-esteem and sense of value is diminished. Monica also discussed a female’s sense of self-worth while in a gang. When asked “Why do females stay in gangs?” Monica responded, without hesitation, “Force and complete lack of self-worth. (DI)” Monica continued, “The majority of females in gangs are used and abused. They are the lowest of the low on the food chain on the streets” (DI). The overarching sentiment coursing through the narratives is that girls are perceived and treated as a means to an end; the end is for profit and/or sexual pleasure and the means is, frankly, whatever it takes. The means can include prostitution, stripping, recruiting, driving, admitting to charges for males, carrying illegal substances or weapons and/or submitting to sexual favours for other male gang members.

A number of my participants referred to feminism at various points in their interviews, in search of an alternative narrative to explain the inequality they experienced in gangs. Monica recounted moments where she demanded equality in the gang, when feminism was used as a way to marginalize her dissent. She stated,

Gangs are a good way to show how women are still ruled. You’re lower and there’s nothing you can do. People are always calling me a feminist for talking like this. I was one of the few girls that would stand up to the guys and call them on shit. But I’m not a feminist. I’m an equalist (Monica - DI).
Later in our interview, she explained “I was the minority in the gang because I was more of a feminist, more argumentative, standing-up for things. I was willing to get hit in the head to stand-up for something whereas the other girls are too afraid to do this” (DI). This part of Monica’s story illustrates how violence is used to maintain compliance and acceptance of the gendered rules within gangs. Sylvie’s story coincided with Monica’s account of violence: “Women are all put down. They get abused physically. They are not allowed to come home if they don’t make money” (PI). Again, this exemplifies how women are used for an end, that being profit. Resistance to these “rules” in gangs is generally silenced through intimidation and/or violence.

In sum, the objectification and commodification of women is evident in gangs. Similar to a “mule” that is bought, sold and used for transportation, women are a sought after commodity and used as a primary source of income for many gangs (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009). When asked why women stay in gangs, Monica linked force to the sex trade as one of the reasons. She elaborated, “Force, the sex trade. I hate to say it but there is definitely a sex trade in the Western World” (DI). Girls often accept the role of commodity within the gang because they are recruited by men who purport to love them. As Jennifer reasoned “I do what needs to be done to make him happy” (DI). The extent to which girls will go is highlighted by Sylvie’s words: “If a guy or a boyfriend wants to have sex with your friends, you have to let him. You’re not even treated as a human being” (PI). She continued, “You have to take all of the charges. If someone gets caught, especially if it’s your boyfriend, you have to take the fall for all of the charges” (PI). Sylvie saw this as a direct consequence of gender inequality in the gang:

Women are all put down. They get abused physically. They are not allowed to come home if they don’t make money. Women have to keep making money to stay in. If you ever get caught or someone who is high
up gets caught, you [the woman] have to take the charges. There is lots of politics in gangs (Sylvie - PI).

Physical resistance is limited, because of the weaker position girls inhabit in the gang. When I asked Paula if women were ever violent towards men, she responded, “No. You wouldn’t do that. [Prompt: How come?] Because you’d get killed. You just took it and kept your mouth shut” (DI). In this way, violence directed against women by men is normalized within gang life and women are constructed as compliant and powerless. This lack of power makes it even more difficult to help gang-involved women desist, especially when the gang prides itself in secrecy and loyalty, attained through fear and intimidation, which is controlled and dictated by gender.

4.6 “Gangalized”

Francine summarized the difficulties girls face leaving gangs by using the word “gangalized”, likening girls’ experiences to those who live in an institution for a period of time and have consequently become “institutionalized”. Francine explained, “Being in a gang is like being in an institution. You become institutionalized. You become gangalized. It’s so true” (PI). This is an insightful analogy that emphasizes how influential and life changing the culture of a gang can be for a female. Girls are “gangalized” in a particular way that is unique to their experiences as girls because of their subordinate position within the gang and their identity which is largely defined by who their boyfriend is in the gang. In many respects, gang life separates an individual from “normal” life. Some of the participants spoke about this in terms of the continuous high level of action and stimulation combined with irregular working hours. Willow stated, “It’s a different world, a different level, a different schedule” (DI). She explained that when the general public is awake and productive, gang members are sleeping and when many people are getting ready to retire for the day, gang members are starting their “business
“Gang members don’t know how to live a normal life because there is so much drama all of the time in a gang. It’s a different world from what everyone else does. A normal life is too boring after being in a gang with so much action and drama twenty-four seven” (DI).

The concept of “gangalized” can be summarized in a very poignant quote cited by Laura. I asked her if she ever thought her boyfriend would leave the gang and she responded, “No, I don’t think my ex will ever get out. It’s so embedded in him. It’s all he knows. There’s not much faith for him to leave that. He has it scripted all over his body” (PI). What struck me about this statement was the use of the word ‘embedded’ because it carries a very strong connotation. Generally, when something becomes a part of an individual and their character, it has been embedded in them. This is exactly what the term “gangalized” tries to capture; being in a gang becomes an essential characteristic of one’s identity and that lifestyle becomes embedded in their persona. The image of the gang being scripted on his body paints a picture of gang affiliated tattoos inked into his skin as a display of his loyalty, toughness and pride.

The main character trait associated with one who is “gangalized” is the inability or refusal to perceive another lifestyle as an option. Monica reflected on a time where she felt like gang life was her only option. She expounded, “That lifestyle was my entire life until very recently. Before, I never saw life past 28 years old. By the time I am 24, I would be so tired. This is how I felt when I was in the gang” (DI). Many of the participants discussed how gang members lack forethought; they only focus on the present and refrain from planning or thinking about the future. Monica had a major turning point in her life and no longer viewed gang life as the only option for her. She began to see the gang as a space full of empty promises and false pretenses. She disclosed,
I built up so much anger. I could do it all on my own. I was a fucking bitch. I wasn’t scared of anybody, when I was in the gang. I was scared of the reality I lived in though. There are no mutualistic relationships. People just use and abuse people. I was scared of the realization of how horrible human beings can be to one another (Monica - DI).

The transition period of desistance and how one perceives the gang can be a very challenging time for females in gangs. They feel betrayed by a group of people that they once considered family, amplified by the fact that many of these females already have trust issues due to their personal history. The narratives of Monica, among other participants, suggest many of my participants reoriented their understanding of the costs and benefits of gang involvement (Laub and Sampson, 2001), which is a key component to the process of desistance.

Laura cited money (financial), maintaining a relationship (social) and/or fulfilling an addiction (psychological) as reasons for females to stay in gangs and consequently creating barriers to successful desistance. Laura discussed the difficulty of leaving the gang and how women can become “gangalized”. She contended,

I definitely think it’s hard to leave because it would be hard to leave a Church, it would be hard to leave a cult and it’s hard to leave an abusive relationship. Okay, it’s not a bunch of women in a gang. But, it’s the tie. It’s the routine. It is all you know. It’s the only love that you think you have with someone. It’s the essence. It’s all similar, whether it’s in a relationship with one person or it’s a gang. It’s very, very similar (Laura - PI).

Willow also shared similar sentiments to the difficulties of desistance. She stated, “Hardest thing in the world is adjusting to the non-gang world. Getting out was the scariest thing. Nothing is happening. Everything is boring” (DI).

The concept of “gangalized” encapsulates a tunnel vision that many gang-involved women develop where they can only see the gang lifestyle and cannot fathom any other way of life, at that point in time. Many of the women believe that they are in the gang for life - “Por Vida” (Rossmann, 2013: 189). The gang provides a distraction of the multiple marginalities
(Vigil, 1988), a sense of belonging and a place like the home that often eludes them (Rossmann, 2013: 270). The lack of direction regarding viable alternatives (Rossmann, 2013: 197) can make it difficult to trust in an alternative lifestyle. This notion resonated strongly with the perceptions of my participants who each explained how difficult it can be to leave the gang on a multitude of levels. The reasons for the inability to concretely envision an alternate lifestyle are multifaceted. I have categorized my participants’ experiences in this regard into four types of barriers to exiting the gang: social; psychological; physical; and financial. Fear is at the heart of all four barriers.

4.7 Social barriers to gang desistance

SOCIAL

Many female gang members will become “gangalized” because the gang becomes the only world they know. It becomes a space that is familiar that they have learned how to navigate and manage and therefore feels safe. Laura discussed how difficult it can be to leave that world and what steps would be required to do so. She stated,

To untangle yourself from something that is so habitual, from something that is so prevalent in your life, from something that is all you know is by far, it’s a huge life decision, it’s a lifestyle change. It’s really a life change. You’re going to need to change your friends. You’re going to need to change where you’re living. You’re going to need to change how you talk, how you dress, your goals in life (Laura - PI).

Laura also discussed a strong resistance to creating a new social circle. There can be a deep chasm that exists between the life of an “average person” and the life of a gang member (Rossmann, 2013: 87). Laura argued that to desist from the gang successfully, it is necessary for gang-involved girls to move to a new city or a new country to successfully get away from their current social circle which is the gang. Other participants expressed the same sentiment and two
participants did leave the city secretly in order to get out of the gang. Another gang member, Anna, intentionally got arrested to get away from her gang. Laura stated,

   A lot of times your history haunts you, your past haunts you so you’re scared of your new crowd of people knowing what you used to do or even if you want to change, you want another life. It is very difficult, very, very, very, very difficult because you need to legitimate move out of the city or move out of the country. It’s so tainted (Laura - PI).

To leave one’s city or country requires resources and a new place can be very isolating. Again, these are important realities to factor into intervention initiatives to ensure that they are comprehensive. This research suggests that physical separation and safe spaces to re-locate are crucial aids for facilitating desistance.

4.8 Psychological barriers to gang desistance

   Psychologically, some of my participants believed that they did not have the required strength or courage to leave the gang. As discussed in the “boy problem”, these women’s identities are largely associated with their boyfriend who is seen as powerful, tough, and independent. By impersonating these traits themselves, validated by their boyfriends, they feel empowered within the gang. Leaving the gang generally means leaving their partner who is a male gang member. Therefore, their identity is challenged on two levels: their own personal affirmations as well as the affirmations expressed by their significant others, both of which are perceived as integral to their sense of self when in the gang. While in the gang, the narratives indicated that one’s sense of self is largely based on the approval and opinion of other gang members. As a girl desists, their internal compass has a more significant impact on the conception of their sense of self with the opinion of gang members having less of an influence.

   To desist from this lifestyle requires commitment coupled with adequate resources and sustainable alternatives. Francine noted, “Some of them [girls in gangs] come to the realization
that this is not going anywhere. I commend any girl that can get out of that lifestyle. It’s not easy. It takes strength to do it and a commitment to yourself” (PI). My participants who were directly involved in gangs are very admirable women, serving as a testimony to other females proving that it is possible to successfully get out of the gang. They were able to sustain the courage to embody another self and subsequently an alternate lifestyle. Willow is now in University and Jennifer is in College. Monica and Paula are both progressing steadily in treatment and all four feel positive and proud about their decision to desist and their success thus far.

Willow discussed some of the psychological barriers to gang desistance. Willow discussed her transition into and out of the gang: “In the beginning, when I first started dealing [drugs] in the gang I felt sick to my stomach because I was nervous, so stressed, but eventually that went away because I became so accustomed to it. When I got out, that’s when I started feeling nauseous again because it was so hard to be out of the gang” (DI). Willow explained that it was very difficult for her psychologically to leave the gang because for her, the gang was her family. The gang can serve as a surrogate extended family for adolescents like Monica, Jennifer, Paula and Willow who do not see their own families as meeting their needs for acceptance, nurturance and belonging (Miller, 2001). Laura also explained the difficulties associated with desistance and that the rush of adrenaline is why many girls stay in gangs. She argued,

You are going to completely identify yourself as a new person because you identify yourself as his or her girlfriend or as this gang so to take yourself away from there, you’re going to have to become a whole different person. That’s very scary to a lot of people so I don’t think that it’s easy for women to leave until they hit rock bottom where they feel like they can’t breathe no more, you know. This is not a fun lifestyle. Nobody wants to wake up every morning and have to watch their back to see if they are going to get jumped or shot. But a lot of people that’s what they love. They love the adrenaline (Laura - PI).
Again, this sheds light on the reasons why girls stay in and why getting out can be an intense and difficult process with numerous steps involved. Laura spoke at length about the importance of hitting “rock bottom”, indicating that it is a necessary deterrent. Laura stated, “Very few who get out [of gangs] before they hit rock bottom. If you hit rock bottom, that feeling reminds you and you never want to go there again, where that feeling takes you” (PI). She explained that this experience serves as a painful, yet pertinent, memory when girls will relapse and re-enter the gang or have a strong desire to do so. Laura continued, “If you don’t hit rock bottom, it’s easier to relapse. Your self-care for you and your own soul is so diminished. You don’t even respect yourself. Rock bottom is...when you feel like you can’t breathe no more” (PI). This memory of “rock bottom” serves as a deterrent because it reminds gang-involved girls that the gang and all it promises to be is merely an illusion.

Laura continued to discuss how a girl’s status will change when she leaves the gang. This particular quote gives credence to her perception of gang participation. Laura stated, “To be affiliated with a gang is a form of power, a form of money, a form of respect. To leave is a form of belittlement, you are worthless. Now, who are you? You have nothing. You have no respect. You have no power and you have no protection. It can be very, very, very dangerous” (PI). Laura believed that girls stay in for protection, power, money and respect. It is necessary to consider and understand how gang members perceive gangs and how this differs from public opinion when adapting prevention and intervention strategies. Laura perceived desistance as a “form of belittlement” and a “lack of protection”. Members of the public may see desistance as empowering, a commendable act and a move away from danger and violence, whereas a girl who has been “gangalized” may have a different perception of desistance. This distinction is very important in this analysis because it provides a window into the mind of gang-involved
females and how they perceive their own experiences and the experience of gang life, particularly in relation to entering, persisting and desisting. Laura stressed, “You know, she would talk with the lingo. It’s really a way of life. She would have attitude and swag or whatever they perceive it. She would come bring such an aura about her” (PI). This quote is in reference to a female gang member that Laura knew. The fact that she emphasized that it is a “way of life” gives some insight into how female gang members become “gangalized”.

Several participants indicated that one must find a new identity when desisting from the gang and that doing so can be tremendously difficult. Laura explained, “It’s very hard to stop your life and become a different person” (PI). The concept of identity is integral in this analysis because it underpins the reasoning behind gang entry, continued gang membership, and desistance. When girls enter and persist in a gang, their identity is strongly linked to that gang and often their significant other who is a male gang member. When girls decide to desist, they re-claim their own identity and it is no longer associated with the gang or their significant other who is a gang member. Reformulating your identity upon desistance can be both difficult and empowering, according to my participants.

During the interviews, participants would fluctuate between positive and negative associations with gang life. Laura compared female gang members to hamsters; “They’ve wheeled into such a hamster, in a cage. You’re just turning and turning and turning. Still at point A” (PI). She doesn’t believe that females in gangs are going anywhere; they are failing to move forward in any meaningful way. This illustrates the contradictions in the narratives where participants vacillate between the positives of gang life, glorifying all it has to offer and then condemning the gang, focusing only on the negative aspects of gang life. Laura contended, “It’s so important to remove yourself from those people, that context [context of a gang]. It’s poison”
(PI). At one point in the interview, Laura discussed all of the power, prestige and honour gang life can bring and at other points during the interview she likened gang life to poison and the members to hamsters. This sharp contrast illustrates the ongoing process of desistance and the psychological battles that gang-involved females continuously contend with. Betrayal from fellow gang members plays a large part in girls’ decision to desist (Rossmann, 2013). For Willow, betrayal was one of the reasons she stayed out.

Laura talked about how her boyfriend who was a gang member became completely engrossed by gang life. She stated, “My boyfriend was completely addicted to that lifestyle. It’s all he knows. He idolized it, the competition, who can make more money, take more leadership, do jobs that need to be done” (PI). Again this sheds light on how individuals can become “gangalized”, finding it difficult to envision life outside of the gang.

There are certain character traits associated with being “gangalized” that surface in the narratives of these lived experiences. One of the most resounding character traits is a persona of toughness. Laura reasoned, “If you don’t act tough, you can’t be part of the group. You’ll lose your ‘family’ [the gang]. It just comes with reputation” (PI). Laura explained that females successfully desisting from the gang are proud to let go of their persona of toughness; “The advantages of getting out of the gang. [Pause] They are proud to admit that they are no longer tough” (PI). This insight proved true because the participants whom I interviewed who had successfully exited the gang were very proud to explain that they no longer perceived themselves as tough. Monica revealed, “We act all tough and hard but we’re not” (DI). Later in the interview she explained, “Before I went there [to treatment], I pretended that I couldn’t shed a tear. I was always trying to act tough. You gotta snap out of that pride factor to get out of the gang. They softened me in treatment. I was a girl with a big hard shell” (DI). In her second
interview Monica admitted, “I was hurting. I am not hard. I’m not tough. In that environment, I acted tough” (DI). Monica’s ability to openly discuss this exemplifies her strength and courage, the same strength that carried her through desistance successfully. Another character trait associated with girls who have become “gangalized” which appeared in several of the narratives is pride. The females who were directly involved discuss the importance of letting go of this sense of pride in order to heal and facilitate the long, difficult journey of desistance.

4.9 Physical barriers to gang desistance

Physical barriers are created by other gang members, literally. Fear keeps them from leaving; fear of what fellow gang members will do if one tries to leave. Similar to individuals who are institutionalized in prison, gang members who are “gangalized” follow a strict code that is established by the gang. Like prison code, this gang code is taken very seriously by gang members and the repercussions for those who break the code can be fatal. Monica explained, “In gangs, the code can be serious, very, very serious” (DI). Monica categorizes girls into two types; girls who have become fully “gangalized” and cannot imagine any other life and girls “who still got the fight in them, the fight or will to change and get away from the gang” (DI). Monica left the gang secretly because she understood the potential repercussions for leaving a gang. Monica recounted, “When I wanted to get out, I knew that I had to do it secretly. That was my plan. I didn’t take any of my stuff with me, like no clothes, nothing” (DI). She explained that she had to leave the gang secretly to ensure that she did not endure physical or verbal violence as a repercussion for desisting.

4.10 Financial barriers to gang desistance

Willow used the analogy of addiction to exemplify the level of difficulty the process of desistance can be and how powerful the allure of money can be. Willow explicated, “It’s like an
addiction. It’s the same fucking thing [as addiction]. Addicted to the money” (DI). Both Willow and Laura characterized the gang lifestyle as addictive. My participants found it difficult to desist because they saw the gang as a social support network where they help one another advance financially. Willow shared a story recalling an instance when one gang member gave crack to another gang member to sell and how they were trying to support one another, “…helping him to pay rent, pay bills” (DI). At the same time, Willow also discussed many negative aspects of the gang with disdain and disgust portraying the gang as a space full of nothing but dishonesty, ruthless violence, and hatred. This internal conflict is what someone who has been “gangalized” will often experience; an individual torn between the gang world and other worlds where there is no gang and what one perceives about each space and what it has to offer. Rossmann (2013) indicates that girls who desist realize that despite the claims of loyalty and financial support, the gang members only looked after themselves. Rossmann (2013) explices, girls “recognize that the fictive kin that the gang provides is just that: a fiction” (p.201).

Laura also explained that it can be difficult to desist because of the fast money attained through gang membership. She shared,

“It’s very hard to leave because once you obtain a lot of money doing nothing, you know what I mean and I don’t mean that stripping is not nothing but in the sense that you can’t compare it to being a CEO of a company, right. So, when you can make fast money quick, it’s very hard to detach yourself from that addiction because money does become an addiction, right” (Laura - PI).

Accessibility of easy money was cited as a reason for staying in the gang. This coincides with McKee (2009) who concluded that more women are finding a gang lifestyle as a way to make money fast. Therefore, the research indicates that access to meaningful employment is imperative when considering sustainable intervention strategies.
My participants summarized the gendered effects of gang membership by relaying the idea that many girls stay in gangs so that they can maintain their relationship with a male gang member. Financially, they have become dependent upon and fond of the fast money that gang life provides. Psychologically, they find it difficult to dissociate their identity from the one the gang has given them. Socially, it is challenging to imagine finding another social circle that would meet their needs and accept or understand them. Physically, there are fears surrounding what type of abuse would occur as a repercussion for leaving. In addition, the physical proximity of being surrounded by gang members makes it easier to stay in; some participants believed that they were bound by physical proximity and could only leave the gang if they were able to leave the city or country.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

In criminological discourse, critical social scientists frequently advocate for and tend to the voices of those impacted by adversity. Through this exploratory research, I have attempted to shed light on the lived experiences of a population that is overlooked within society, and to a great extent within criminology. This study strives to raise consciousness and awareness of a marginalized population by examining how women experience their lives when they are gang-involved. Each participant presented unique stories and points of interest, serving as a testament to the complex lived realities of gang-involved women. In accordance with the principles of critical social science, singular monolithic explanations to social phenomenon were refuted in this study by emphasizing the diverse experiences of women who have been involved in gangs.

5.1 Summary of Findings

Based on interviews with gang-involved girls, this research explored the reasons why girl’s get in, stay in and get out of gangs. Furthermore, the data revealed additional themes that involved the gendered hierarchy within gangs and the power dynamics that work to sustain this hierarchical structure. The barriers that existed for gang-involved girls when attempting to desist and how they succeeded to do so was also discussed to provide insight into the intricacies of what can be, for some women, a lifelong process.

The literature to date focuses on risk factors for girls getting into gangs but very little has been published about desistance: the process of getting out of and staying out of the gang. In addition, there is very little qualitative research investigating the gendered dynamics within gangs. It is important to note that I have only included the perspective of females and their position relevant to others in gangs, including their roles and responsibilities. The bulk of
research on gangs focuses solely on males. Thus, I concentrated exclusively on females to give insight into this under-researched population.

The principal reason that my direct participants became gang-involved was due to the fact that they started dating a male who was in a gang. When first entering the gang, directly involved participants characterized their boyfriends as protective and someone who became their primary caregiver in many respects - financially, emotionally, and socially. This is a reason commonly cited in the literature: individuals join gangs because they see it as the best option given their circumstances and the alternatives they perceive as accessible and viable (Burris-Kitchen, 1997). In addition, my participants indicated that girls seek out status, via association, through their boyfriends in gangs.

The other primary reasons that my participants cited that influence girls’ decision to enter into a gang were an unstable home environment; a history of sexual abuse; a sense of belonging and fast money. A history of sexual abuse aligns with the current literature on females and gangs as indicated in the literature review. In a society driven by status defined by the attainment and display of material goods, fast money is a highly sought after means and it is not surprising that this was a common theme across the narratives. My participants expressed that there is a link between individuals who grow up in neighbourhoods or particular contexts where they feel that they are “lesser” or lower class and a heightened desire to attain fast money, status and power. The want to prove oneself and escape this feeling of being “lesser than”; this emotion can drive individuals to seek out illegal avenues to achieve the particular means that society characterizes and flaunts as desirable sought after goods (Merton, 1938). This reflection aligns with Merton’s strain theory.
Once girls get into a gang, there are a variety of factors that influence their decision to stay in the gang. Some girls stay in the gang for a couple of months whereas other girls will remain in the gang for many years. The length of involvement for the four girls I interviewed who were directly involved in gangs and identified as former female gang members varied from six months to seven years with an average of 3 years spent in the gang. These girls no longer identified as gang members but understood and acknowledged that it was, at one point, a very prominent part of their identity. This identity that the gang had a part in forming is one of the reasons that girls stay in gangs; this finding has been derived from the narratives of my participants. Both the gang and their boyfriend in the gang became a part of their identity and for some girls this meant that, by association, they felt they had more status, power, and independence as a result of their membership and their relationship. Moreover, my participants explained that girls feel they have found a place that they belong. A sense of belonging was cited as a reason for getting in and staying in gangs.

My participants stressed that this sense of belonging was “even more important” for females compared to males. The narratives of my participants suggested that a search for belonging may be more critical for girls whereas a search for power and status may be more critical for males in relation to gang-involvement. This highlights the need to examine how gender and social norms influence gang-involvement. The other reasons that my participants discussed when asked why girls stay in gangs included a boyfriend in the gang; money; a sense of kinship; an inability to envision an alternate lifestyle and as a means to support a drug addiction.

The majority of my participants felt that a girl fears that she will lose her boyfriend if she leaves the gang and therefore she stays in as a means to preserve her relationship. However, one
of my participants left her boyfriend because he was so deeply involved in the gang and she did not want him to drag her into that lifestyle. Another participant left the gang with her boyfriend, i.e. they decided to get out together at the same time. Therefore, each situation is unique but all of these various experiences played out in a context of the gendered norms around heterosexual relationships. Despite their personal circumstances, both of these participants still maintained that “most gang-involved girls will stay in for their boyfriends”. This is one reason among many that influences their decision to stay in the gang. My participants also expressed that many girls in gangs are financially dependent upon that gang and for some girls it is their only source of income. Moreover, some girls will stay in the gang because it enables them to support their drug addiction. A sense of kinship and an inability to envision a more conventional lifestyle outside of the gang can also act as barriers to desistance and influence a girl’s decision to remain in the gang. For many of my participants, the gang became a family. Willow referred to her boyfriend’s friends as “brothers” indicating the strong sense of family among gang members, many of whom joined because they were in search of a surrogate family as a result of their own biological family failing to provide basic needs for them.

However, the data illustrates that gender norms are prevalent in gangs. Willow explained that girls do not call one another “sisters” because the girls are often in competition with one another and are not really there to support one another. Willow clarified that it is more common for the girls to support their boyfriends, not other girls. She said that it was more typical for girls to speak negatively about one another in an attempt to tarnish another girl’s reputations and in turn augment their own. Again, this suggests that gender dynamics within gangs may serve a pivotal role in maintaining a gendered hierarchy that facilitates the gang’s ability to function in a
way that is male dominated. The males support the other males and the females support the males. Who supports the females?

Finally, why and how girls get out of gangs was discussed in the analysis. This was an area of particular interest because the majority of literature focuses on risk factors for gang entry and spends very little time analyzing the process and factors impacting a girl’s decision and ability to desist. This exploratory research provided preliminary insight into this difficult and sometimes dangerous process. According to my participants, the main reason girls get out of gangs is because they have been able to physically separate themselves from the gang. Most frequently, they are able to achieve this because they have been imprisoned. Francine shared a story of a girl she knew in a gang who intentionally got arrested because she wanted to get out of the gang and decided it was the safest way to do so. This physical separation from the neighbourhood and the gang is deemed necessary, according to my participants. Sylvie explained, “Jail is a way out for the women. It changes them lots. You get forgotten. They [the gang] don’t take care of you when you’re in jail. They don’t put money in your canteen. They are not doing anything for you” (PI). Sylvie believed that it is easier to leave the gang when they are no longer providing for you.

Sylvie contended that the physical separation of prison is beneficial for gang-involved girls because the gang is no longer your primary support structure. However, prison comes with its own difficulties. The importance of separation suggests that girls would be able to attain their goals of desistance more easily if there were safe, secure places for girls seeking to leave gang life to reside on a long-term basis. Therefore, intervention initiatives should focus on building safe spaces where these women can live as a way to facilitate desistance.
The majority of my participants argued that girls must move to another city or country if they truly want to get out of the gang, again creating a form of physical separation. This is exactly what Monica did to get out; she moved to another city, escaping secretly with the help of a friend who was not gang-involved. My participants cited pregnancy as the second most common reason that girls get out of gangs. Three out of the four girls that I interviewed who were directly involved in gangs had become pregnant and this influenced their decision to get out and stay out of the gang. These three girls explained that their baby was their main motivation to stay away from the gang. They did not want their child to be affected or influenced by “that negative lifestyle” and thus sought separation, both physically and emotionally. My participants explained that it is not easy to stay away from the gang life because you miss your “family”, the fast pace, the money and the sense of belonging. Willow and Paula spoke at length about the difficulties of relating to “normal people” who have not been gang-involved. My participants explained that gang-involved girls feel that people outside of the gang will not be able to understand or empathize with them on the same level that the gang can. This emotional and psychological need has to be met through programming and ongoing support services so that girls do not feel isolated upon desisting.

This data suggested that access to effective programming may convince girls who may be considering getting out to take that next step and officially leave, beginning the process of letting go of the gang lifestyle and moving on to another more conventional one. Both Monica and Jennifer attributed their ability to desist successfully to the programming that they received. Jennifer said that her programming was able to reconnect her and her Mother which significantly impacted her motivation to stay out. Monica was living in an intensive treatment centre and she explained that this had a significant impact on her successful desistance. She recounted, “the
treatment was terrible but lifesaving” (DI). Sylvie was another participant who was peripherally involved in gangs and she spoke about how treatment benefitted her. Sylvie stated, “It’s [Women Offender Moderate Intensity Program] a great program. It’s a support. It changes you” (PI). All of my participants stressed the importance of and need for effective treatment for gang-involved girls, particularly during the process of desistance.

Many of my participants discussed the program Women Offender Moderate Intensity Program (WOMIP). My participants agreed that this program was very helpful when it was accessible but stressed the need for this program to be available to women in provincial prisons and in the community. Currently, WOMIP is only available in federal prisons and my participants highlighted that this is a major limitation of the program. Sylvie believed her treatment programs were beneficial because they taught her “how to have pride, willpower and how to be strong - like feminists” (PI). Sylvie also stressed that programs need to be accessible for anyone and should not be solely on a referral basis. It is common practice that a professional must refer an individual to a program in order for them to have access to said program. Sylvie noted that this was another limitation of current programming for gang-involved women.

The availability of a treatment centre where girls can have a safe space to reside was cited as another reason girls will get out of gangs. For Monica, this enabled her to stay out of the gang. Her treatment centre facilitated her healing to a point where she felt independent and brave enough to leave the gang indefinitely and start a “new life”. Willow, Monica, Jennifer, Francine and Sylvie all spoke at length about the importance of treatment for gang-involved girls. Francine argued that there needs to be more and better services available in prisons for gang-involved girls. Sylvie detailed how treatment empowered her, providing her with skills and insights she wished she had when she was in her teens. The other two reasons cited by my
participants influencing desistance were a life changing event and/or hitting rock bottom. Laura spoke about “hitting rock bottom” in detail but it was a common theme among the narratives. Laura discussed how the memory of rock bottom serves as a reminder when girls consider rejoining the gang after leaving or are debating whether to leave. It reminds them to stay away from that lifestyle and serves as a powerful and pertinent deterrent when trying to stay away from the “addictive life of gangs”.

5.2 Future research in the domain of girls in gangs

This research has only scratched the surface of how gender roles can lead to girls having very dangerous roles in gangs, with very little control over their own body and/or their source of income. According to my participants, mixed gangs consist of a male dominated culture that uses girls as “mules” to carry out illegal acts and serve as a protective layer for the male members of the gang. For example, girls will be forced to carry illegal drugs and/or weapons, drive the vehicle for different gang-related crimes, and take the fall for charges for other male gang members. Moreover, some girls will be forced into prostitution and/or stripping with the males controlling the majority, if not all, of their income. One participant explained that a girl who is considered “higher up” in the chain of command may be delegated by the males to recruit and coerce females into stripping and/or prostitution. This female delegate uses deception and manipulation to coax other girls into sex work. According to one participant, the “top girl” will use deception and fabricate anecdotes to convince girls to strip.

My data suggested that gender inequalities exist in mixed gangs. Future research could employ feminist literature to critically examine how these inequalities are rooted in social, cultural, and gender norms in order to deconstruct how gangs function. This analysis has the potential to highlight how norms can be used by male gang members to attain profit and status
and victimize girls in gangs. It may be that victimization of specific populations is often strategic, sustaining the power of one class of individuals over another. This line of reasoning contradicts current feminist literature arguing that gangs are liberating for girls; further research is needed to explore both sides of the equation and explore the more nuanced and potentially contradictory benefits/detriments of gang life for girls.

Because of the time restrictions associated with a Master’s thesis and the difficulty of accessing this sensitive population, this research has been based on a small sample. Future research could include a larger sample in order to canvass additional perspectives on these issues. Additionally, both males and females could be interviewed in order to have the perspectives of both genders. Personally, I think this type of research is vital as it would explore the potentially disadvantaged position of girls in gangs and the need to provide mechanisms to help get girls out of gangs. Understandably, preventative action, such as assessing risk factors and diverting at-risk youth from gang life early on, is equally important. Moreover, a longitudinal study on former gang-involved girls could fully examine the process of desistance and inform policy to facilitate desistance to ensure it is accessible, sustainable and secure.

Another concept that could be examined in more detail within gangs is that of identity. My data suggests that further research is needed to explore how/if a female gang member’s identity is reconfigured and defined by their boyfriend through association is pertinent when examining why girls get in and stay in gangs. Are female gang members identities linked to male gang members who they believe possesses character traits they also would like to be perceived as possessing? If status and power in gangs is driven by perception, how is that perception shaped by gender norms? Also, it would be very interesting to examine the socialization of gang youth compared with other non-gang youths. One could even conduct studies of the socialization of
different subgroups of youths in the same gang, splitting individuals into gang members who use or sell drugs and those who do not, versus those who are violent compared to those who are not, or female versus male gang members, investigating for differences in socialization and reintegration into “conventional” life upon desisting the gang. This type of longitudinal study examining socialization post desistance would fill another gap in the literature.

As discussed above, my findings tend to suggest that literature celebrating girls’ membership in a gang as liberating may require more nuance. It would be very interesting to conduct a comparative analysis of females in mixed gangs and females in all-girl gangs regarding their perception of gang life as (not) liberating, as well as their roles, identities, reasons for getting in, staying in and getting out. Certainly, the main reason my participants got into mixed gangs was because they had a boyfriend in the gang and pregnancy was a major contributing factor of desistance. It may be that the primary motivations for females in all-girl gangs would differ. Also, the hierarchy, roles and responsibilities, and identity in all-girl gangs would be interesting concepts to explore, filling another gap in the literature.

5.3 Reflection

There are some obstacles when researching gangs. The first and most common is a lack of trust. Within gangs, there is generally an inherent illicitness and secrecy surrounding gang activities. Gangs prohibit their members from speaking to authority figures and researchers often fall into this category. Therefore, finding participants willing to take the risk and speak to me was an ongoing difficulty as I sought to recruit participants for this research. In addition, there were situations where I felt afraid for my own safety. I considered changing my research topic but, in retrospect, I am very happy that I persevered. I realized that in large part these fears stemmed from my own subconscious and assumptions as oppose to real risks. I used other
inspiring researchers like Rossmann for motivation; “Establishing trust through extensive contact with the gang members may be the best antidote to this deficit of trust and the presumption of reliability of data” (Rossmann, 2013: 17).

Navigating the first 10-15 minutes of each interview determined whether a girl would stay and relay her story or walk out and decide not to participate. Accordingly, I began each interview trying to chat about broader, impersonal topics before moving into more individual issues. Two girls decided not to participate in the first fifteen minutes of the interview. I was able to interview one of the two on another day when she was feeling in a better mood. The other girl decided that she did not want to participate. This made me realize the importance of ongoing contact, and led to my decision to conduct multiple interviews with participants who were willing to meet with me more than once. With each interview, I felt that the participant became more comfortable and familiar with me and was willing to share more of their story. This served as motivation that proved essential during the arduous process of recruiting.

In keeping with the spirit and aim of this study, I would like to conclude this thesis with two quotes from two different participants, Sylvie and Monica, pertaining to desistance. Sylvie was peripherally involved and Monica was directly involved in gangs. By ending with these quotes, I seek to remind us that it is the voices of gang-involved women who are at the crux of this study. Also, these quotes are intended to provide hope and inspiration for girls currently in gangs who want to get out. It is possible to desist successfully. All of my participants have left that lifestyle behind and noted that they were very glad that they made the decision to do so. Sylvie reflects,

I feel like I’ve upgraded. I’ve upgraded my life skills, my own behaviour. I’ve learned how to reduce arousal when mad, how to put up healthy boundaries, how to be communicative. It’s really great. It’s really important. I would have loved to learn those skills in high school. I’ve accomplished to
regain my freedom. I advocated for myself. It was hard but I was successful and I am proud. I did it. Before, I wasn’t able to communicate as effectively. Now I can (Sylvie - PI).

Monica shared her feelings after desisting from gang life:

I had a big change in values. I saw the gang as something that I no longer needed in my life. I started to understand that line, ‘No glamour in the gutter. Glitter isn’t always gold.’ I realized that [the gang] it’s not all it promises and pretends to be. You’re young and you’re stupid and you just want to self-destruct. You really don’t know how bad it is until you’re in over your eyeballs. I just wanted to be out of it. I just felt like it was disgusting. You look at a tree and you see a tree but you don’t know where those roots go and what they are tied to and what ecosystems rely on that tree. You don’t know what those roots hold on to and what they wrap around. Once I looked at it and I thought about all the roots, I realized I was contributing to horrible things. I was enabling addictions and messing up people socially and physically. I realized the harm that I was causing to people, the destruction to families... One of the older girls had told me ‘Don’t do it. The profit you gain will never be worth the toll it takes on your soul.’ I started to realize what she meant (Monica - DI).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Appendix A: Research of Ethic’s Board Certificate

File Number: 05-13-15
Date (mm/dd/yyyy): 10/30/2013

Université d’Ottawa  University of Ottawa
Bureau d’éthique et d’intégrité de la recherche  Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

Ethics Approval Notice
Social Science and Humanities REB

Principal Investigator / Supervisor / Co-investigator(s) / Student(s)

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<th>First Name</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ross</td>
<td>Hastings</td>
<td>Social Sciences / Criminology</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ashlin</td>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>Social Sciences / Criminology</td>
<td>Student Researcher</td>
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File Number: 05-13-15

Type of Project: Master's Thesis

Title: Females and Gangs

Approval Date (mm/dd/yyyy)  Expiry Date (mm/dd/yyyy)  Approval Type
10/30/2013                 10/29/2014               Ia

(Ia: Approval, Ib: Approval for initial stage only)

Special Conditions / Comments: N/A
This is to confirm that the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board identified above, which operates in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and other applicable laws and regulations in Ontario, has examined and approved the application for ethical approval for the above named research project as of the Ethics Approval Date indicated for the period above and subject to the conditions listed the section above entitled “Special Conditions / Comments”.

During the course of the study the protocol may not be modified without prior written approval from the REB except when necessary to remove participants from immediate endangerment or when the modification(s) pertain to only administrative or logistical components of the study (e.g. change of telephone number). Investigators must also promptly alert the REB of any changes which increase the risk to participant(s), any changes which considerably affect the conduct of the project, all unanticipated and harmful events that occur, and new information that may negatively affect the conduct of the project and safety of the participant(s). Modifications to the project, information/consent documentation, and/or recruitment documentation, should be submitted to this office for approval using the “Modification to research project” form available at:

Please submit an annual status report to the Protocol Officer four weeks before the above-referenced expiry date to either close the file or request a renewal of ethics approval. This document can be found at:

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the Ethics Office at extension 5387 or by e-mail at: ethics@uOttawa.ca.

Signature:

Riana Marcotte
Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research
For Barbara Graves, Chair of the Social Sciences and Humanities REB
Université d’Ottawa  University of Ottawa
Bureau d’éthique et d’intégrité de la recherche  Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

Ethics Approval Notice
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Principal Investigator / Supervisor / Co-investigator(s) / Student(s)

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<tr>
<td>Valerie</td>
<td>Steeves</td>
<td>Social Sciences / Criminology</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ashlin</td>
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Signature:

Riana Marcotte
Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research
For Barbara Graves, Chair of the Social Sciences and Humanities REB
Appendix B: Recruitment Text

*A chance to tell your story... And a free $10 gift certificate for Tim Hortons!*

**Project title:** Females and Gangs

As a student in Criminology from the University of Ottawa, I am doing research on females and gangs. I am hoping to do interviews with former female gang members to explore the reasons why females enter and exit gangs. This research intends to inform prevention and intervention strategies for gang-involved females.

The interviews will provide former female gang members with an opportunity to tell their story and share their thoughts, ideas and perspective. The interviews will be done in an office at the JF Norwood House on Bronson Street, Ottawa, Ontario. Each participant will receive one $10 gift certificate for Tim Hortons to thank them for their participation. Participants can have a support worker present during the interview if they would like to do so. Interviews will be carried out in English only.

*If you would like to participate in this research or if you have any questions, please contact me at: females.research@gmail.com*

If you do not have access to email, you can ask one of the staff members at the JF Norwood House to send me an email on your behalf indicating that you would like to participate in this research project.

It is important to note that this research is being carried out independently from the JF Norwood House and the Elizabeth Fry Society. The information that you share with the researcher will be confidential and only the researcher and the supervisor at the University of Ottawa will have access to this information. In addition, each participant will have access to the research paper and will be allowed to read the final product. Each participant will have two weeks to provide feedback on the research paper and have the opportunity to request to delete any information from their interview in the research paper that they feel uncomfortable with. This request will be respected by the researcher and any information from a participant’s interview that makes them feel uncomfortable will be deleted from the research paper.
Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Consent Form

Title of the study: Females and Gangs

Supervisor: Dr. Ross Hastings
Dean of Criminology
School of
University of Ottawa
Ottawa, ON

Co-investigator(s) (Student(s)): Ashlin Kelly (MA in Criminology)
University of Ottawa

It is important to note that research participants can ask the researcher, Ashlin Kelly, any question about any part of the research being conducted. Information requests or complaints about the ethical conduct of the project can be addressed to the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research.

Invitation to Participate: All former female gang members are invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Ashlin Kelly (MA candidate) and her supervisor, Dr. Ross Hastings. This research is funded by the University of Ottawa.

2. Purpose of the study

The title of the project is “Females and Gangs”. The purpose of this project is to investigate the reasons that females enter and exit gangs. This research is being done to inform prevention and intervention strategies for gang-involved females. The research hopes to investigate current strategies and analyze whether or not current interventions and strategies address the needs of gang-involved females. The benefit of this study is that it will inform prevention and intervention strategies for gang-involved females. In addition, it will give former female gang members a voice and a chance to tell their story.

Participation: My participation will consist essentially of attending one interview session that will last approximately 60 minutes during which participants will be asked a series of open ended questions. For example, “Why did you enter/exit the gang?” The interviews will be scheduled at a time that is convenient for participants and they will take place at JF Norwood House on Bronson Avenue, Ottawa. The researcher will coordinate with participants to find a date and time that suits the participant. I will also be asked to fill out a short questionnaire consisting of 7 questions at the beginning of the interview. The questionnaire should take 5-10 minutes, at most. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes.
Risks: My participation in this study will entail that I volunteer information about my experience before entering a gang, during my time in the gang, and what my life was like after I left the gang. Some of this may be personal information, and this may cause me to feel uncomfortable or upset. I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these risks. To minimize these risks, I have the option to have my counselor or social worker present during the interview session. In addition, I will be given a list of individuals I can contact after the interview to discuss how I am feeling and debrief.

Benefits: My participation in this study will give me a chance to share my story. I hope that this story will help other females who feel or have felt like me at some point in their lives. Also, I hope that this information will help inform gang prevention and intervention strategies. In addition, my participation in this study may help to educate the general public about females and their involvement in gangs.

Confidentiality and anonymity: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for research purposes pertaining to the thesis project “Females and Gangs” and that my confidentiality will be protected. There will no identifying information presented in the final research paper. Interview transcripts and consent forms will be stored separately to ensure that there is no name attached to the interview transcript. Only pseudonyms will be used in interview transcripts. If a participant poses a threat to themselves or others, the researcher is required by law to advise the appropriate authority of this threat to ensure the safety of both participants and the public. Anonymity will be protected. As indicated, there will be no identifying information in the final research paper. All interview transcripts will contain pseudonyms and consent forms and transcripts will be stored separately. These documents will be locked up at all times and only the primary researcher, Ashlin, and her supervisor, Dr. Ross Hastings, will have access.

Conservation of data: The data collected, including hard copies of consent forms, interview transcripts, questionnaires, and tape recordings of interviews (if permission is granted to record the interview) will be kept in a secure manner. The data will be stored in a locked cabinet in my Supervisor’s office which is located at Hagen Hall, University of Ottawa. Only the researcher, Ashlin, and her supervisor, Professor Hastings, will have access to it. It will be conserved for five years in total at which point all paper copies will be shredded and tape recordings destroyed. It is important to note that the data will be kept at the University of Ottawa for the full retention period.

Compensation: Each participant will receive one $10 gift certificate for Tim Horton’s. In no way is this compensation coercive. It is merely to show gratitude for individual’s participation. Participants who choose to withdraw from the project will still be eligible to receive the compensation.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering
any negative consequences. My participation will have no effect on any services I receive from the JF Norwood House or the Elizabeth Fry Society. They will not have any access to the data. The researcher has no authority or influence on social workers, lawyers, police or any other organization. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will only be kept if the participant grants permission to keep it.

Acceptance: I, (Name of participant), agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Ashlin Kelly of the Criminology Department, Social Sciences, University of Ottawa, which research is under the supervision of Dr. Ross Hastings.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or her supervisor.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5
Tel.: (613) 562-5387
Email: ethics@uottawa.ca

Signature of the participant and researchers
There are two identical copies of the form. One will be for the researcher to keep and the other will be for the participant to keep.

Would you like to have your counselor or social worker present during the interview?
   Yes □   No □

Do you agree to have the interview audio recorded?
   Yes □   No □

Participant Signature: ___________________________   Date: __________________

Research Signature: _____________________________   Date: __________________
Appendix D: Questionnaire for Participants

Questionnaire

This questionnaire will be provided to participants at the end of the interview. Participants will ask to be filled out the questionnaire and will be reminded that the questionnaire is anonymous.

1) How would you define a ‘gang’?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

2) Before joining the gang, who did you live with?
   Single parent □   Both parents □   Alone □   Friends □   Other: __________

3) How old were you when you first became involved with a gang? ______

4) How long did you stay in the gang? ______

5) How old were you when you left the gang? ______

6) Have you ever been arrested? Yes □ No □

7) Have you ever had a family member involved in crime? Yes □ No □
Appendix E: Interview Guide

Preamble: What I am researching is how the lives of women who are gang-involved are affected by this experience. I am interested in how your life has been impacted from being gang involved, either peripherally or directly. Also, I am interested in the reasons girls get in, stay in and get out of gangs. Some of the questions will focus on life before and after gang involvement and what steps were taken to get out of the gang. At the end of the interview, I will be asking you a few questions regarding your personal background and demographics. If it any point you feel uncomfortable, please let me know. If there is a question that you do not want to answer, that’s no problem at all. We can move on to another question.

Interview Questions:

1) Tell me a little bit about your life before you entered the gang?
   a) What was your life like at home?
   b) Who did you live with?
   c) How did you feel about your school?
   d) Where did you spend most of your time?
   e) What did you spend your time doing?

2) How did you enter the gang?
   a) Did you know someone else in the gang?
   b) What did the gang have to offer?
   c) Did you enter the gang voluntarily?
   d) How come you decided to get involved in a gang?
   e) How did you feel when you entered the gang?

3) What was your life like when you were in the gang?
   a) Was it scary/fun/difficult/violent?
   b) Was it what you expected? How so? What aspects were unexpected?
   c) What kind of things did you do together?
   d) How did you feel when you were in the gang?
   e) How come you decided to stay in the gang?

4) How did you exit the gang?
   a) Was it hard to leave the gang?
   b) Can it be dangerous?
   c) Did others help you get out?
   d) How come you decided to get out of the gang?
   e) How did you feel after you left?

5) Did you have anything else that you wanted to add or speak about?
   a) Anything that you might think is important for others to know about who may be in similar situations? Any other details you feel are important for this research?
Personal Background and Demographics

1) How would you describe your family of origin?
   a) Class?
   b) Ethnicity?
   c) Composition?
   d) Religion?
   e) Where did you grow up?

2) Can you give me a bit of your personal background?
   a) Your education?
   b) Work experience?
   c) Interests?
   d) Pivotal events in life?

3) Can you describe your relationship with the gang?
   a) Level of involvement?
   b) Age when you got in and got out?
   c) Roles and responsibilities within the gang?
   d) Position within the gang hierarchy?
   e) Advantages and disadvantages of being gang-involved?

4) Can you describe your life now?
   a) How old are you?
   b) Leisure activities?
   c) Work?
   d) Living arrangements?
   e) Status of intimate relationship?
   f) Relationship with your family/friends?
   g) Relationship with children, if applicable?

Research Questions

1) Why did you choose to participate in this research?

2) Were there any important areas regarding girls in gangs that you feel were not addressed?

3) Would you like a copy of your transcript? If so, please write down the email or regular mailing address where I can send this on the consent form.

4) Can I contact you if I need clarification on anything?

5) Can you refer me to other gang-involved women who may be interested in participating in this research?

Thank you very much for taking the time to share your story and provide perspective and insight into this area. I am very grateful and admire your courage to share this information.
Appendix F: List of Resources

Should you find that you need to talk to someone at any point during this research, the following list of resources should assist you.

• The Elizabeth Fry Society of Ottawa: (613) 237-7427
• Nepean Osgoode Rideau Community Resources Centre: (613) 596-5626
• Boys and Girls Club of Ottawa: (613) 232-0925
• Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health: (613) 748-0657
• Britannia Woods Community House: (613) 820-0853
• Lowertown Community Resource Centre: (613) 789-3930
• Somerset West Community Health Centre: (613) 238-8210 or (613) 688-1177
• Catholic Family Service Ottawa: (613) 233-8478
• YMCA-YWCA National Capital Region: (613) 727-7070
• Family Services Ottawa: (613) 725-3601
• Christian Counselling Ottawa: (613) 729-8454
Appendix G: List of Codes

1. Boy Problem
   a. Dating a male gang member is the main gateway to gang entry for females
   b. The boyfriend dictates the status of the female in the gang hierarchy
   c. Status influences the role of this female gang member
   d. “Addictive”, unhealthy love
   e. Dependent upon male
   f. Male as father figure, in some respects (provides financial and emotional support)
   g. Boyfriend required to “share” his girlfriend with other gang members
   h. Physically abusive relationship between male and female

2. Control
   a. Control is gendered; males have more control
   b. Control used as a means to attain obedience of gang members
   c. Control used to manipulate and coerce
   d. Control used to maintain the gang hierarchy
   e. Physical and psychological control to obtain gang objectives
   f. Control through substances – using addiction to gain compliance

3. Gangalized
   a. Inability to envision any other way of life (tunnel vision)
   b. It becomes the space where you feel most comfortable; it’s familiar
   c. Gang becomes your surrogate family
   d. Feeling that only other gang members can understand and relate to you
   e. Just like one can become institutionalized, one becomes ‘gangalized’

4. Gender
   a. Gendered hierarchy, gendered roles
   b. Men control and have power over women
   c. Women are used as pawns, seen as less valuable

5. Hierarchy
   a. Gangs use hierarchies to maintain control
   b. A hierarchy provides a rank where the lowest members in the gang are trying to move up and obtain what higher members flaunt (material goods, access to women, etc.)
   c. The hierarchy determines who carries out which tasks and what level of danger one has to risk
   d. If a gang member becomes addicted to substances, their position in the gang hierarchy will be affected, even more so for females

6. Mules
   a. In gangs, girls are often referred to as the “mules”
   b. “Mules” have to take the fall for charges that are not their own
   c. “Mules” have to carry the drugs, drive the vehicles
d. “Mules” are forced to put themselves at the most risk for the gang

e. “Mules” are generally lowest on the gang hierarchy in mixed gangs

f. “Mules” are always women. A male would never be called a “mule”.

7. Race

a. Membership for many gangs is based on race. To be accepted into the gang, you must be the same race as that gang.

b. Many gang fights are race based disputes

c. If a male gang member has a child with a women from another race, it is likely that the gang will protect only the baby but not the Mother of the child because the baby is of the same race, but not the Mother

8. Rollercoaster

a. Being in a gang is a rollercoaster of emotions – one day you can feel very happy, successful and a part of a family. The next day you can feel lonely, betrayed, helpless, etc.

b. Living such a fast paced, high intensity life can be like an addictive high

c. Find gang life thrilling and exciting

9. The rules

a. All gangs have rules that are unspoken

b. Punishment can be severe if someone breaks the rules

c. Over time, you learn the rules and the punishments associated with each one

d. The rules and punishment vary depending on where one sits on the gang hierarchy

10. Values

a. Many girls who get out indicate that their values have changed

b. How girls perceive what the gangs value changes over time

c. Gang values have changed over time – older participants spoke about this

d. Addiction can alter values and implicate gang-involved women