

**From 'Joining the Game' to 'Laying Down the Flag':  
Exploring Perspectives on Gang Involvement and Desistance  
Among Justice-Involved Youth**

Laura Kristen Dunbar

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Doctorate in Philosophy degree in Criminology

Department of Criminology  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
University of Ottawa

© Laura Kristen Dunbar, Ottawa, Canada, 2018

*This doctoral dissertation is dedicated to Ross Hastings.  
From the very beginning you had an unwavering belief in my abilities, all along the way  
you supported and guided me, and while you are no longer here in person,  
you continue to be the voice of encouragement inside my head.*

## ABSTRACT

Youth gangs are a pervasive problem of contemporary society. Since the first recorded work on this topic in Canada more than 70 years ago, many theoretical and empirical research studies have been added to this field of inquiry and efforts continue with the goal of better understanding and responding to this social issue. Over the past 20 years, research into desistance from gang involvement has gained popularity and, while we are gaining a better grasp of the area, additional work is needed to examine the processes associated with leaving gangs among justice-involved youth in the Canadian context.

Drawing from focus groups and individual interviews with 30 justice-involved youth and 23 youth justice practitioners in the city of Ottawa, this doctoral dissertation sought to explore the subjective understandings and experiences of justice-involved youth with gang affiliations. Given the focus on the youth justice system, there was also interest in how the perspectives of justice-involved youth aligned with those of youth justice practitioners. The way in which these two groups define and attribute meaning to issues related to gang involvement and desistance and their views on the role of the youth justice system in supporting the latter should be taken into consideration in the development of future strategies to address youth gangs.

The knowledge and insights gained through the findings from this research project can be used to inform policy and practice to prevent gang involvement among at-risk youth, to intervene with gang members, and to support desistance by helping motivated individuals to pursue alternatives to gang life. The recommendations provided in this doctoral dissertation contribute to the overall body of empirical research on youth gangs and highlight potential areas of future investigation for innovation and change on how we understand and address this social issue.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank the 30 young men who participated in this research project and who shared parts of their lives and their stories with me. Thank you for the trust and respect that you had for my work. Listening to your experiences has led to my own growth and learning, both personally and professionally. I would also like to thank the 23 youth justice practitioners who took the time to speak with me and to share their professional experiences. The passion that you have for your work and for your youth justice clients is inspiring.

I would like to thank my original supervisor and mentor, Ross Hastings. It is because of your confidence in my abilities and your encouragement that I began doctoral studies in the first place. You saw me through the majority of my graduate career and I am a stronger researcher for it. I would also like to thank my committee members Patrice Corriveau and Bastien Quirion for your guidance during the early stages of this research project and then for taking over as my co-supervisors for the last two years. You made the transition as smooth as possible for me and you supported me through to the end. Thank you to Irvin Waller for joining the committee without hesitation during the final stages of this research project. Thank you to my internal and external examiners, Jean-François Cauchie, Christine Gervais, and Scot Wortley for lending your time and expertise to the dissertation defense and for enhancing my learning through your feedback.

This research project was supported by the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services, Youth Justice Services Division and the Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa who provided me access to the research participants. In particular, I would like to thank Gord Boyd, Director of Youth Justice Services at the Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa for his enthusiastic interest in and support of this research project and for his mentorship over the last number of years.

I would also like to acknowledge the following sources for their generous financial support:

- The Government of Canada and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for a Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship-Doctoral;
- The Province of Ontario for an Ontario Graduate Scholarship; and
- The University of Ottawa for an Admission Scholarship and Excellence Scholarship.

To the other PhD colleagues in my life, you understand this process like no others. Thank you for commiserating with me, sharing words of wisdom, offering helpful feedback, and often for just being there for me when I needed a break or a push to keep going.

To my friends and family, thank you for listening to me talk about gangs for the past seven years, for letting me vent about the challenges of the research process, for the pep talks, words of support, celebrations along the way, and most of all for (almost) never asking ‘are you done yet?’

To Steve, thank you for coming along on this ‘ride’ with me. You shared in my enthusiasm for this work and you supported me through all the bumps and pit stops along the way. I owe the completion of this doctoral dissertation to you – for listening to my ideas, working through my arguments with me, proofreading and formatting various versions of this document, and ultimately for being by my side throughout the whole process. I am incredibly grateful to have had you as my partner for this endeavour and for all of life’s other journeys.

## LIST OF ACRONYMS

CISC	Criminal Intelligence Service of Canada
DART	Direct Action Response Team of the Ottawa Police Service
JY	Justice-involved youth
MCYS	Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services
<i>OSVGS</i>	<i>Ottawa Street Violence &amp; Gang Strategy</i>
<i>YCJA</i>	<i>Youth Criminal Justice Act</i>
YJP	Youth justice practitioner
YSB	Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Studying Youth Gangs .....	5
Research Questions .....	9
Exploratory Research Study in the City of Ottawa .....	10
Overview and Organization of this Doctoral Dissertation .....	13
<b>CHAPTER 2 – WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT ‘THE GAME’: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .....</b>	<b>16</b>
Defining and Identifying ‘Gang’, ‘Gang Member’ & ‘Gang-Related Activity’ .....	17
Gang Membership – Focusing on Motivations for Involvement .....	28
Defining and Examining Desistance from the Gang .....	35
Methods of Desistance .....	38
Motivations for Desistance .....	41
Barriers to Desistance .....	46
The Role of the Youth Justice System in the Desistance Process .....	50
Approach and Contributions of Youth Justice Practitioners .....	52
Research and Evaluation on Prevention, Intervention & Suppression Approaches .....	54
Need for an In-Depth Examination of Gang Desistance Among Justice-Involved Youth .....	62
<b>CHAPTER 3 – GETTING ON WITH ‘REAL LIFE’: APPLYING THE LIFE-COURSE PERSPECTIVE TO UNDERSTAND GANG INVOLVEMENT AND DESISTANCE .....</b>	<b>67</b>
Overview of the Life-Course Perspective .....	68
Application of the Life-Course Perspective to Issues in Criminology .....	70
Understanding Desistance Within the Life-Course Perspective .....	74
Prosocial Bonds .....	76
Agency .....	78
Social Structure .....	82
Social Context .....	89
Interplay Between Factors in the Process of Desistance .....	91
Conclusion .....	95
<b>CHAPTER 4 – ENGAGING WITH ‘THE PLAYERS’: METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH .....</b>	<b>96</b>
A Note on Epistemology and Methodology .....	96
Inclusion Criteria .....	98

Overview of the Research Approach .....	101
Data Sources.....	103
Ethics Approval.....	104
Data Collection Methods.....	104
Focus Groups.....	105
Individual Interviews.....	110
Ethical Considerations.....	118
Data Coding and Data Analysis .....	123
Methodological Rigour or ‘Trustworthiness’ .....	128
A Note on the Dissemination of Research Findings .....	134
Limitations .....	135
Conclusion.....	140
<b>CHAPTER 5 – UNDERSTANDING ‘THE GAME’: WHAT IS THE GANG REALLY ALL ABOUT?.....</b>	<b>141</b>
Youth Justice Practitioner Perspective.....	142
Focus on ‘Criminality’ Criterion.....	142
Distinctions Between the ‘Hardcore’ and the ‘Wannabe’ Member .....	144
Gangs Are Multifunctional.....	147
Justice-Involved Youth Perspective.....	149
Focus on ‘Relationship’ Criterion .....	150
Rep’ing the ‘Hood, Claiming Territory, and Using Symbols.....	154
It’s All About the ‘Shmoney’ and ‘Having Each Other’s Backs’ .....	159
Conclusion.....	163
<b>CHAPTER 6 – JUMPING IN: REASONS WHY YOUNG PEOPLE JOIN THE GANG</b>	<b>166</b>
Precursors to Gang Involvement.....	167
The Role of Family Relations.....	168
The Role of Experiences of Disadvantage .....	172
The Gang as a Means for Survival, Safety, and Belonging .....	176
The Gang as a Vehicle for Achieving ‘Manhood’ .....	183
Generating Income .....	184
Garnering Respect .....	186
A Note on Instances of ‘Gang-Related’ Crime and Violence.....	190
Conclusion.....	193

<b>CHAPTER 7 – GETTING OUT: METHODS &amp; MOTIVATIONS FOR LEAVING THE GANG.....</b>	<b>197</b>
What Does It Mean to ‘Leave’ the Gang?.....	198
How Does One Go About Leaving the Gang?.....	207
What Are the Motivations for Leaving the Gang?.....	216
‘It’s Not Worth It’ .....	216
‘It’s Not What It Was Supposed to Be’ .....	224
Getting On with ‘Real Life’ .....	231
A Combination of Motivation Factors to Leave the Gang .....	235
Conclusion.....	236
<b>CHAPTER 8 – BARRIERS TO ‘LAYING DOWN THE FLAG’ .....</b>	<b>239</b>
Loyalty to the Gang and Its Members or Fear of Repercussions from Betrayal.....	240
Missing Out on Gang Benefits .....	243
Sense of Belonging.....	243
Protection.....	245
Luxurious Lifestyle.....	246
Limited Opportunities Outside the Gang .....	249
The Lingering Gang Label .....	254
Conclusion.....	259
A Final Note on the Desistance Process.....	260
<b>CHAPTER 9 – ‘ON THE INSIDE’: THE ROLE OF THE YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEM.....</b>	<b>267</b>
The Youth Justice System as Distinct from the Adult Criminal Justice System .....	268
Experience in the Youth Justice Facility – ‘Marking Time’ or ‘Turning Point’ .....	272
Negative Interpretation of Confinement in a Youth Justice Facility .....	273
Positive Interpretation of Confinement in a Youth Justice Facility .....	275
Different Perspectives on the Role of Youth Justice Practitioners in the Desistance Process .....	280
Justice-Involved Youth Perspective .....	280
Youth Justice Practitioner Perspective .....	285
Conclusion.....	300
<b>CHAPTER 10 – WHAT’S NEXT: IMPLICATIONS FOR PREVENTION, INTERVENTION &amp; DESISTANCE .....</b>	<b>306</b>
Recommended Areas of Focus for Prevention, Intervention, and Desistance Initiatives .....	307
Acknowledge and Address Trauma.....	307



Provide Family-Focused Supports.....	309
Offer Informal Supports through Mentoring and Recreational Activities .....	313
Provide Support for Housing and Meaningful Employment.....	318
Investigate the Role for Support from Individuals with Gang-Related Experiences .....	325
Identify Key Moments for Intervention.....	330
Promote De-Labeling and Inclusionary Practices .....	334
Shifting Our Current Policy and Practice Orientation to Address Gang Desistance .....	337
Acknowledge the Need to Address Structural Barriers.....	337
Clarify the Operationalization of ‘Success’ .....	338
Toward a Comprehensive Approach to Address Desistance from Gang Involvement.....	341
Conclusion.....	345
<b>CHAPTER 11 – CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>347</b>
Review of Research Approach and Findings .....	347
Contributions of this Research Project.....	354
Future Directions for Research .....	357
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>361</b>
<b>APPENDIX A – EXAMPLES OF CURRENT INITIATIVES .....</b>	<b>420</b>
<b>APPENDIX B – ETHICS APPROVAL NOTICES.....</b>	<b>429</b>
<b>APPENDIX C – RECRUITMENT MATERIALS FOR FOCUS GROUPS.....</b>	<b>434</b>
<b>APPENDIX D – FOCUS GROUP GUIDES.....</b>	<b>438</b>
<b>APPENDIX E – RECRUITMENT MATERIALS FOR INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS ..</b>	<b>445</b>
<b>APPENDIX F – INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW GUIDES.....</b>	<b>449</b>
<b>APPENDIX G – CONSENT FORMS FOR FOCUS GROUPS .....</b>	<b>460</b>
<b>APPENDIX H – CONSENT FORMS FOR INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS.....</b>	<b>467</b>
<b>APPENDIX I – RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE.....</b>	<b>474</b>

## LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

<i>Table 1.</i> Summary of Information and Issues Presented in the Literature Review.....	65
<i>Table 2.</i> Demographic Data from Justice-Involved Youth Individual Interview Sample .....	115
<i>Table 3.</i> Summary of Perspectives on Gang-Related Concepts.....	165
<i>Table 4.</i> Summary of Perspectives on Gang Involvement .....	195
<i>Table 5.</i> Summary of Perspectives on the Gang Desistance Process.....	264
<i>Table 6.</i> Summary of Perspectives on the Role of the Youth Justice System.....	304
<i>Figure 1.</i> Integrated Model of the Process of Desistance from Gang Involvement.....	94
<i>Figure 2.</i> Comprehensive Approach to Address Desistance from Gang Involvement.....	354

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The youth gang phenomenon<sup>1</sup> has become an important and sensitive public issue and is of continuous concern in Canadian society. Media headlines and official crime reports in this country demonstrate the seriousness of the gang problem. In November 2017, the Honourable Ralph Goodale, Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, called the gang situation in Canada ‘deeply troubling’ (Ghoussoub, 2017) and Public Safety Canada (2017) reported that communities across the country are experiencing the devastating effects of gang activity. Other media headlines reporting the prevalence of gang-related shootings and homicides in several Canadian cities have also drawn increasing attention to the problem.<sup>2</sup>

In general, as a group, gang members account for a disproportionate amount of criminal behaviour and commit a variety of offences, including: property offences, drug trafficking and importation, fraud, robberies, assaults with weapons, homicides, and the trafficking of women and girls (Boyce & Cotter, 2013; Gilman, Hill, Hawkins, Howell, & Kosterman, 2014). However, the true extent of the youth gang problem in Canada is unknown. A precise measure of youth gang involvement and the occurrence of youth gang activity, meaning all youth gang activity and not just criminal incidents substantiated and reported by Canadian police services through the annual Uniform Crime Reporting Survey, are not currently available. This is in part based on the lack of national data collection processes, a general reluctance on the part of individuals to voluntarily reveal gang membership, and a result of the difficulty of establishing an agreed upon operational definition of the ‘gang’ and ‘gang member’ (Dunbar, 2017).

---

<sup>1</sup> In this doctoral dissertation, I often refer to gang-related concepts and issues using the definite article ‘the’ (the youth gang phenomenon, the gang lifestyle, joining the gang, leaving the gang, etc.). This is not to imply that I believe that there is one objective understanding of the issue or one gang entity. Rather, this phrasing is widely used in the research literature, and the use of ‘the’ should be considered as interchangeable with the indefinite article ‘a’.

<sup>2</sup> For examples, see: Crawford (2016); Hixt (2017); and The Canadian Press (2015, 2018).

An indication of the nature of the crime and violence perpetrated by youth in Canada, and youth gang members by extension, is reflected in recent national statistics. Based on an examination of police-reported data on violent crime, property crime, and other *Criminal Code* (R.S.C., 1985, c. C-46) violations, Statistics Canada reported that together youth aged 12 to 17 and young adults aged 18 to 24 accounted for over a third of individuals accused in criminal incidents in Canada in 2014 (Allen, 2016). The majority of youth and a large percentage of young adults accused in some of the most serious offences were co-offenders.<sup>3</sup> In particular, 75% of youth and 63% of young adults accused in robberies, 62% of youth and 38% of young adults accused in incidents of serious sexual assault, and 57% of youth and 43% of young adults accused in incidents of aggravated assault were co-offenders (Allen & Superle, 2016). It should be noted that given the limited data on the nature of criminal activities perpetrated by gang-involved individuals, these statistics refer to police-recorded incidents for all youth and young adults in Canada, and not just those who are identified as gang members. Further, between 2005 and 2014, 10% of individuals accused of homicide were youth and 29% of those homicides were identified as gang related<sup>4</sup>, a much larger proportion than was found among homicides involving an adult accused (14%) (Allen & Superle, 2016).

These criminal offences perpetrated by youth gang members have damaging impacts for victims that are both tangible and intangible. Direct economic losses include: medical costs related to injuries, mental health care costs related to trauma, property loss and damage, and productivity losses or lost wages. Intangible costs include: pain and suffering, and a diminished

---

<sup>3</sup> Co-offenders refer to individuals who are believed to have worked together in the commission of a crime, either in pairs (incidents committed by two offenders) or in groups (incidents committed by three or more offenders) (Carrington, Brennan, Matarazzo, & Radulescu, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> A homicide is classified as gang related when police confirm or suspect that the accused person and/or victim involved in the homicide was either a member, or a prospective member, of an organized crime group or street gang or was somehow associated with an organized crime group or street gang, and the homicide was carried out as a result of this association (Miladinovic & Mulligan, 2015).

quality of life (Gabor, 2016; Waller, 2014). To give an indication of the magnitude of these victim-related costs, I relied on Gabor's (2016) synthesis study showing the different costs of crimes in Canada: a robbery equates to approximately \$6,000 in tangible and \$12,000 in intangible costs to victims; a sexual assault is \$25,000 in tangible and \$86,000 in intangible costs; an aggravated assault is \$10,000 in tangible and \$73,000 in intangible costs; and a homicide is \$1 million in tangible and \$3 million in intangible costs.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond the immediate injuries to individuals, gang-related activities have an enormous, yet sometimes unrecognized, impact on the community and on larger social systems. For example, gangs may adversely affect the quality of life in neighbourhoods. Members of communities affected by gangs often report fear of gangs and of becoming victims of gang-related crimes, which can inhibit their regular activities (Howell, 2006). In an assessment of residents' perceptions of crime and safety problems in several Saskatoon neighbourhoods, study participants raised the issue of personal safety and the impact on their quality of life when discussing gang activity in their neighbourhoods (Kitchen & Williams, 2010). In Ottawa, the issue of home takeovers<sup>6</sup> of vulnerable tenants or home owners by gang members was identified as a concern for residents in several neighbourhoods (Butera, 2013). These issues can impact the ability of community members to move freely throughout their neighbourhoods, avoiding certain areas, and in some cases even feeling unsafe in their own homes.

The direct and collateral costs of offences perpetrated by youth gang members to the criminal justice system and health care system are also considerable (Chatterjee, 2006; Dong, Gibson, & Krohn, 2015). For example, estimates on the per unit cost of different criminal justice

---

<sup>5</sup> These costs are based on estimates calculated in 2014 Canadian dollars.

<sup>6</sup> A home takeover is defined as "a situation in which a legitimate tenant or home owner finds themselves unsafe, physically, financially or psychologically, because of the presence of people in their home that they may or may not be able to remove" (Butera, 2013, p. 5)

processes in Canada indicate that a police warning/caution equates to \$1,400 per contact, an arrest can cost \$15,000, and court/trial proceedings can cost up to \$6,700 per case and \$44,000 per conviction (Gabor, 2016).<sup>7</sup> Further, it costs approximately \$500 a day to house a young person in an open custody facility and \$750 a day for a secure custody facility (Day, Koegl, Rossman, & Oziel, 2016).<sup>8</sup> Finally, for injuries to victims or to youth gang members themselves, it costs approximately \$930 for an emergency room visit, and if surgery is required day surgery costs start at \$3,500 (Queensway Carleton Hospital, 2015).<sup>9</sup>

In addition, involvement in the gang lifestyle can lead to problems for its members. Using data from a sample of males in the Rochester Youth Development Study, several researchers have documented both the immediate negative outcomes associated with gang involvement in adolescence and its implications over the life course, including: dropping out of school, lack of employment success, exposure to and involvement with drug and alcohol use, increased risk of victimization, family problems, teenage parenthood, and increased probability of arrest and incarceration (Augustyn, Thornberry, & Krohn, 2014; Krohn, Ward, Thornberry, Lizotte, & Chu, 2011; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003). Affiliation with a gang may also reduce gang members' connections to other mainstream social activities and networks such as family, friends, schools, and religious communities. The longer an individual is involved, the more severe the effect is likely to become. Contact with the criminal justice system may lead to arrest and pre-trial detainment and/or post-conviction placement in custodial facilities resulting in the mark of a criminal record that further limits individual growth and progress in education

---

<sup>7</sup> These costs are based on estimates calculated in 2014 Canadian dollars. Caution should be taken in the interpretation of these findings due to the small number of studies on which the information is based (Gabor, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> These per-diem correctional costs are based on estimates calculated in 2013 Canadian dollars.

<sup>9</sup> The Queensway Carleton Hospital in Ottawa lists common hospital fees for patients without Canadian provincial or federal health insurance on its website. These fees only represent an estimate of health care costs and are calculated in 2015 Canadian dollars.

and/or employment domains (Pyrooz, Sweeten, & Piquero, 2013; Thornberry et al., 2003; Young & Gonzalez, 2013).

### **Studying Youth Gangs**

Given the adverse consequences associated with gang involvement identified above<sup>10</sup>, it is no surprise that youth gangs have been the focus of investigation for more than 70 years. The first recorded work on gangs in Canada goes as far back as 1945 when Kenneth H. Rogers reported the results of a study of juveniles in street gangs in Toronto. Since that time, many theoretical and empirical studies have been added to the field with the goals of better understanding the issue and developing solutions to address youth gang involvement and gang-related activities.

Research efforts spanning many countries, academic disciplines, and methodologies have yielded a significant amount of knowledge regarding gangs and their members in a variety of contexts. Researchers have concentrated on the following: definitional and measurement issues; the history, demographics, subculture, membership patterns and group processes of gangs and their respective members; identifying risk and protective factors for gang membership; and the causal effect of gang membership on delinquency (Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Pyrooz & Decker, 2014). Overall, the preponderance of gang research has focused on issues of onset and continuity while desistance has been an understudied phenomenon. As a result, we know a great deal about the ‘front end’ of gang membership, meaning why and how young people join gangs and what happens when they are involved, but this has come at the expense of the ‘back end’ of gang membership, particularly understanding why and how young people leave gangs (Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Pyrooz & Decker, 2014).

---

<sup>10</sup> It should be acknowledged that there are also benefits associated with gang involvement and these will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

Over the past 20 years, research into desistance from gang involvement has gained popularity, particularly in the United States, and gangs and gang members have been observed, interviewed, and surveyed in a variety of contexts (Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2014). While there remains much to be learned, we are gaining a better understanding of the following: motives and methods for leaving; the pace of departure; the residual social and emotional ties that persist despite having left the gang; and changes in identities associated with the process (Klein & Maxson, 2006; Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2014; Sweeten, Pyrooz, & Piquero, 2013). Some researchers have also examined consequences associated with leaving the gang and, albeit less often, whether patterns differ by characteristics such as gender, race/ethnicity, age, or gang embeddedness.<sup>11</sup>

Research and evaluation on the effectiveness of prevention, intervention, and suppression efforts, meaning those designed to target individuals at risk of gang involvement to reduce the number who join gangs, those designed to divert gang members away from gangs and gang activity, and those designed to target gang members and their illicit activities through law enforcement initiatives, also add to the growing knowledge base on desistance from gang involvement (National Crime Prevention Centre, 2007a; Taylor, 2013). Several evidence-informed gang initiatives and comprehensive strategies have demonstrated effectiveness, measured through a variety of ways (Petersen & Howell, 2013).<sup>12</sup> This information enhances our knowledge and understanding with respect to how to respond effectively to youth gang issues.

However, additional qualitative research is needed to examine the processes associated with leaving gangs including how desistance is perceived and experienced from the perspective

---

<sup>11</sup> For examples, see: Decker & Lauritsen (2002); Decker & Pyrooz (2010); Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule (2014); Moloney, Hunt, Joe-Laidler, & MacKenzie (2010); Moloney, MacKenzie, Hunt, & Joe-Laidler (2009); Pyrooz & Decker (2011); and Pyrooz et al. (2013).

<sup>12</sup> See Howell (2012, p. 271) for a list of the evidence-informed, gang-related initiatives in systematic program-by-program reviews.



of the individual youth gang member. In identifying the meaning that gang-involved youth attribute to leaving the gang, greater insight can be gained into how and why desistance from gang involvement occurs, and what can be done to support it (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Pyrooz, 2014; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; White, 2013).

While several recent empirical research studies have employed interpretive qualitative methods to examine subjective experiences of desistance from gang involvement among youth and young adults, the majority have been conducted with American samples.<sup>13</sup> There have also been a small number of international studies (e.g., Gormally, 2015; Radak, 2016). Although there are advantages in learning from the experiences of other countries, there is a danger in assuming that gang-related issues are the same everywhere. Gangs have socio-historical roots; they develop and are located in particular spaces at particular times according to particular social contexts (Mohammed, 2007; White, 2008). The historical, geographic, and demographic differences between countries as well as the differences in politics and culture suggest the importance of examining youth gang desistance in Canada from an independent standpoint (Cassell & Weinrath, 2011; Ezeonu, 2014).

To date, a handful of empirical qualitative studies examining subjective experiences of the gang desistance process have been conducted in Canada (Bailey, 2015; Cassell & Weinrath, 2011; Chalas & Grekul, 2017; Deane, Bracken, & Morrissette, 2007; Goodwill, 2009; Kelly, 2015). Half of these studies focused on the perspectives of adult offenders in correctional centres, community corrections, or post-release rehabilitation programs, while the other half engaged specific populations in community-based settings such as Aboriginal people, women,

---

<sup>13</sup> For examples, see: Berger, Abu-Raiya, Heineberg, & Zimbardo (2017); Bolden (2013); Bubolz (2014); Decker & Pyrooz (2011b); Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule (2014); Moloney et al. (2009); and O'Neal, Decker, Moule, & Pyrooz (2016).

and Latino youth. There remains a paucity of knowledge on how desistance is perceived and experienced from the perspective of justice-involved youth in the Canadian context.

While the term ‘justice-involved youth’ can have a wide interpretation, for the purposes of this doctoral dissertation it refers to young people who have come into formal contact with the youth justice system, who have been charged with a criminal offence, and who are under institutional supervision arrangements (meaning pre-trial detention and post-trial custody) or are under formal community supervision arrangements. This includes individuals who are confined in an open or secure youth justice facility and/or who are supervised by a probation officer in the community. The lack of empirical research on this population may be explained in part by the unique strategic and operational challenges of conducting research with young people involved in the youth justice system.

To address this gap and contribute to the Canadian knowledge base, the focus of this research project is on developing a greater understanding of desistance from gang involvement among justice-involved youth. It is assumed that once a gang-involved young person comes into contact with the youth justice system, the process of leaving the gang can become more complex, can involve a greater number of people, can become progressively more public, and can require facing greater challenges in terms of dealing with the consequences of labelling and exclusion (Hastings, Dunbar, & Bania, 2011). The insights provided by justice-involved youth based on their perceptions and experiences related to leaving the gang have important implications for policy and practice. They may assist in the development of additional supports for youth justice staff working with this population and in the development of programming to address the needs of gang-involved youth justice clients.

There are several ways to determine gang involvement. Given my focus on subjective experiences from the perspective of justice-involved youth, my approach in this research project preferences self-determination over external designation or validation by others. This is based on an understanding of reality that is socially defined, referring to the subjective experience of everyday life and how the world is understood rather than to the objective reality of the natural world (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Our behaviour depends not on the objective reality of a situation as defined by others but on our subjective interpretation of reality (Meltzer, Petras, & Reynolds, 1975; Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003). Individuals are consciously and unconsciously in a continuous process of interpreting their environment while also establishing and acting out roles and identities in congruence to their interpretations (Charon, 2010). As observed by Thomas and Thomas (1928, p. 572): “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences”. This is the case for the self-defined gang member.

### **Research Questions**

In this research project, I am interested in exploring the subjective understandings and experiences of justice-involved youth as they relate to desistance from gang involvement. To provide a comprehensive understanding of this topic, it is first necessary to understand the personal context of an individual’s gang involvement. My first research question asks: *How do justice-involved youth define and attribute meaning to the ‘gang’ and why do they seek out involvement?* My second research question then focuses on desistance in the context of the youth justice system: *How do justice-involved youth define and understand ‘desistance’ from gang involvement and what factors are involved in leaving the gang?* To pursue these broad research questions, I developed several more detailed subsidiary questions:

- What constitutes the gang – how do justice-involved youth understand the concepts of ‘gang’, ‘gang member’, and ‘gang-related activity’?

- What are the motivations for joining – why do justice-involved youth become involved in the gang?
- What does desistance mean – how do justice-involved youth understand the concept of ‘desistance’, how do they go about leaving the gang, and what motivates their decisions?
- What impedes desistance – what do justice-involved youth identify as barriers to leaving the gang?
- What is the role of the youth justice system – how do justice-involved youth perceive their experiences in the youth justice system and the role of youth justice practitioners in their decision to leave the gang?

Given my focus on the youth justice system, I was also interested in how the perspectives of justice-involved youth aligned with those of youth justice practitioners. The way in which these two groups define and attribute meaning to concepts related to gang involvement and desistance and their views on the role of the youth justice system should be taken into consideration in the development of future strategies to support justice-involved youth.

Therefore, I also sought to explore the subsidiary questions listed above with youth justice practitioners. It should be noted that for the purposes of this doctoral dissertation, the term ‘youth justice practitioners’ refers to individuals who work in youth justice facilities in a variety of capacities (e.g., front-line staff member/correctional officer, supervisor, program coordinator, reintegration counsellor) as well as probation officers.

### **Exploratory Research Study in the City of Ottawa**

In 2012, an opportunity to add to the Canadian knowledge base on desistance from gang involvement among justice-involved youth was identified. At this time, the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS)<sup>14</sup> had developed a *Strategy to Support Gang-Involved Youth*. Among other things, MCYS noted that to provide additional supports to youth justice staff and to develop programming to address the needs of gang-involved youth justice clients, a better understanding of youth gangs and desistance in the context of the youth justice system was

---

<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that since the drafting of this doctoral dissertation, the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services has changed to the Ontario Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services.

needed. The *MCYS Youth Gang Project*, discussed in detail in Chapter 4, is one activity of this overall Strategy designed to contribute to this goal. The Eastern region case study, one component of the larger project, focused its data collection activities in the city of Ottawa and served as the basis for this research project. To answer the research questions identified above, I used the data obtained from focus groups with justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners conducted as part of the Eastern region case study. These preliminary data were then supplemented with additional data obtained from individual interviews I conducted with justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners in the city of Ottawa.

This research project was conducted with the support of the Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa (YSB), the transfer-payment agency responsible for administering youth justice services (meaning open and secure detention and custody) in Ottawa on behalf of MCYS, and the MCYS – Probation Services, the organization directly responsible for providing supervision and case management support to youth who are placed on a probation order and/or sentenced to a custody placement with a community supervision component by the Youth Justice Court in Ottawa.

The focus of this research project, a case study conducted in the city of Ottawa, is timely given the current situation. In 2015, the Ottawa Police Service estimated there to be eight active gangs in the city, with 435 members and known associates. The city's drug trade, weapons offences, violence, and sex trade are largely attributed to loosely connected groups, many of whom are young men between the ages of 20 and 30 (Landsdowne Technologies Inc., 2016). Additionally, Ottawa has been experiencing record-breaking years for gang-related gun violence. In 2014, 32 out of 49 shootings were confirmed to be gang related (Mussa, 2016) and in 2016 the Ottawa Police Service confirmed that a large percentage of the city's 22 homicides were considered gang related (Crawford, 2016).

There is a continued and growing focus in Ottawa on gang activity and the harmful effects of street-level violence. Since 2006, Crime Prevention Ottawa, in collaboration with several partners, has been working to address the issue from the development of the *Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative* (2007-2012), to the first articulation of the *Ottawa Gang Strategy* (2013-2016), to the newly revised *Ottawa Street Violence & Gang Strategy* (OSVGS; 2017-2020). Each of these strategies has sought to employ a holistic approach that takes into consideration the many factors that contribute to gang involvement at the individual, relational, community, and social levels. Through the holistic lens, four pillars are used to drive change simultaneously: neighbourhood cohesion, prevention, intervention, and enforcement and suppression. Over the last number of years, several initiatives have been developed and implemented under the umbrella of these strategies to address the gang issue in the city of Ottawa.<sup>15</sup> In particular, there has been a recent interest in gang desistance initiatives. For example, in early 2015 Mayor Jim Watson indicated the need to develop an exit strategy for gang members who want to leave the lifestyle behind. The City of Ottawa has since allocated \$400,000 to exit strategy interventions and employment opportunities (Laucius, 2015).

This exploratory qualitative research project, while contributing to the development of empirical knowledge on the topic of desistance from gang involvement, represents a snapshot of a particular situation at a specific point in time. My goal is not to produce a sweeping explanation of desistance from gang involvement among justice-involved youth. The aim in this research project is not to ‘prove anything’ but rather to ‘learn something’ (Flyvbjerg, 2006). I believe that an approach of this nature adds an additional layer to the current research and contributes to a more advanced understanding of the youth gang phenomenon in Canada.

---

<sup>15</sup> For more information on the development of these strategies and the initiatives implemented, see: Bania (2017); Chettleburgh (2008); Kelly (2009); and Landsdowne Technologies Inc. (2013, 2016).

## **Overview and Organization of this Doctoral Dissertation**

In Chapter 2, I situate this research project by providing a summary of some key topics related to gang involvement and desistance. The focus is on identifying the various and sometimes competing explanations of concepts and processes and how they impact on our understanding of the youth gang phenomenon. Further, given the emphasis of this research project on justice-involved youth, literature examining the role of the youth justice system in desistance from gang involvement is also presented. Finally, a brief overview of the literature on the effectiveness of prevention, intervention, and suppression efforts is provided. Based on this review, I suggest the need for an in-depth examination of gang desistance among justice-involved youth.

In Chapter 3, I argue that employing the life-course perspective is an appropriate and useful approach to understanding gang involvement and desistance. While not a novel application, as gang researchers have often drawn upon the life-course perspective to understand the pathways of gang careers, I seek to expand the discussion by examining several factors and their interactions, namely maturation, prosocial bonds, agency, social structure, and social context, as they relate to desistance. Pulling these pieces together, I propose an integrated model of the process of desistance from gang involvement. I believe that applying this perspective can allow for a nuanced understanding of gang involvement and desistance for young people involved in the youth justice system.

In Chapter 4, I provide a detailed description of the methodology deployed in this research project. I discuss the constructivist lens employed in my work and describe the research approach and process in detail. In addition to recounting how the focus groups and individual interviews took shape, I also discuss several ethical considerations raised in this research project.

I outline the two-cycle coding procedure and the ‘adaptive theory’ approach employed in my data coding and analysis process. I conclude with a discussion of methodological rigour in qualitative research, and I reflect on some of the limitations of the methodology employed in this research project.

The first two findings chapters address my first general research question: *How do justice-involved youth define and attribute meaning to the ‘gang’ and why did they seek out involvement?* In Chapter 5, I examine the gang issue from the vantage point of youth justice practitioners and justice-involved youth. The way in which these two groups define and attribute meaning to ‘gang’, ‘gang member’, and ‘gang-related activity’ illustrate the juxtaposition of perspectives on how the gang issue is constructed and understood. This variation serves as an important foundation to inform our understanding of why young people join gangs in the first place as well as desistance from gang involvement. In Chapter 6, I discuss the perspectives of the two groups on the reasons why young people may have initially sought membership in the gang and the benefits of involvement. The findings support previous work that has demonstrated that the decision to join the gang is based on a combination and accumulation of factors that are both internal and external to the individual.

The next three findings chapters address my second general research question: *How do justice-involved youth define and understand ‘desistance’ from gang involvement and what factors are involved in leaving the gang?* In Chapter 7 and Chapter 8, I examine the various dynamics involved in leaving the gang, specifically examining the nuances of the desistance process as understood from the perspective of justice-involved youth, and where possible in comparison to the perspective of youth justice practitioners. In identifying the meaning that gang-involved individuals attribute to leaving the gang, greater insight is gained into what



desistance entails, how and for what reasons individuals decide to leave the gang, and what barriers impact this process. In Chapter 9, I provide an in-depth description of how involvement in the youth justice system is understood by justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners and examine how this experience influences motivations to leave the gang. The goal is to produce a fuller understanding of desistance from gang involvement among justice-involved youth.

In Chapter 10, I demonstrate how the insights gained through the five preceding findings chapters can be used to inform policy and practice to prevent gang involvement among at-risk youth, to intervene with active gang members to minimize the time spent in the gang, and to support desistance by helping motivated individuals to pursue alternatives to gang life. With these insights, and additionally with specific suggestions from the research participants themselves, I provide recommendations on general areas of focus for prevention, intervention, and desistance initiatives for at-risk and gang-involved youth. Further, I provide some general considerations in moving forward and offer a possible framework for a comprehensive, multi-systemic, multi-modal approach to address desistance from gang involvement.

In Chapter 11, I conclude with an overview of the main findings from this research project, the contributions of this research project to various areas of inquiry, as well as considerations for future research on desistance from gang involvement.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT ‘THE GAME’<sup>16</sup>: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The objective of this chapter is to provide a summary of the literature on some key topics related to gang involvement and desistance. The focus here is first to highlight the diversity that exists in explanations of concepts and processes and to acknowledge that there are various perspectives on these topics. Second, as the literature demonstrates that the pathways to gang involvement and desistance are personal and situational, there is a need to better understand the nuances of these trajectories and what they mean from the viewpoint of individual experience. Third, given the emphasis of this research project on justice-involved youth, literature is presented that acknowledges the importance of examining the role of the youth justice system in desistance from gang involvement. Finally, key findings from research and evaluation on the effectiveness of prevention, intervention, and suppression efforts to address gang involvement and gang-related activities are discussed. Based on this review, I conclude that there is a need for an in-depth examination of gang desistance among justice-involved youth from the perspectives of the youth themselves as well as the youth justice practitioners that work with them.

While Chapter 1 emphasized the importance of examining youth gangs in Canada from an independent standpoint and that the impetus of this research project was to contribute to the Canadian knowledge base, when it comes to a review of the literature, the reality is that most theoretical and empirical work on this topic comes from other countries. To provide a comprehensive overview of the issue under study, the topics addressed in this chapter draw largely from research conducted in the United States, the United Kingdom, some other Western countries, and where at all possible Canada. I do not see this as a limitation, but rather an

---

<sup>16</sup> The chapter titles in this doctoral dissertation were created using gang-related terms as identified and discussed by the justice-involved youth participants in the focus group and individual interview sessions for this research project. These terms are highlighted through the use of quotation marks.

opportunity to see if, how, and/or where the findings from this research project align with or diverge from previous research and current perspectives.

The sources included in this chapter were identified through systematic electronic database searches, Google Scholar queries, reviewing the reference lists of useful sources, hand searching relevant journals, and from the recommendations of others. This resulted in the development of a catalogue of over 700 resources stored on Mendeley<sup>17</sup> for the purposes of this doctoral dissertation. Given limited space, the focus here is on important contributions presented by respected authorities, as well as on the latest developments in this research area.

### **Defining and Identifying ‘Gang’, ‘Gang Member’ & ‘Gang-Related Activity’**

Within and between academic, policy, criminal justice, and practitioner communities there is a lack of definitional clarity and consistency around the term ‘gang’ and its associated concepts. As stated by Esbensen, Winfree, He, and Taylor (2001, p. 106): “There is little, if any, consensus as to what constitutes a gang and who is a gang member, let alone what gangs do either inside or outside of the law.” Social science researchers have worked to develop suitable characterizations related to this social phenomenon and the literature on gangs is full of variable, and sometimes competing, definitions.<sup>18</sup> Based on an ethnographic account of hundreds of gangs in Chicago in the early part of the 20th century, Thrasher (1927, p. 57) was one of the first social science scholars to provide a detailed gang definition, stating:

A gang is an interstitial group, originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict. It is characterized by the following types of behavior: meeting face-to-face, milling, movement through space as a unit, conflict, and planning. The result of this

---

<sup>17</sup> Mendeley is a desktop and web program produced by Elsevier for managing and sharing researcher papers. For the purposes of this research project, it was used as a reference management application.

<sup>18</sup> For examples, see reviews by: Ball & Curry (1995); Bjerregaard (2002); Curry & Decker (1998); Decker & Kempf-Leonard (1991); Esbensen, Peterson, Taylor, & Freng (2010); Esbensen et al. (2001); Hemmati (2006); Horowitz (1990); Huff (2002); Jones, Roper, Stys, & Wilson (2004); Kelly & Caputo (2005); Klein & Maxson (2006); Matsuda, Esbensen, & Carson (2012); Naber, May, Decker, Minor, & Wells (2006); Peterson (2000); Short (2009); Sullivan (2005); White & Mason (2006); Wood & Alleyne (2010); and Wortley & Tanner (2006a, 2006b).

collective behavior is the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, esprit de corps, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory.

In the 90 years since, the number of distinct definitions has grown exponentially. In 2010, Wortley conducted an extensive review of the gang literature to examine how gangs have been previously defined by academic researchers, law enforcement agencies, and government policymakers. The result was the identification of hundreds of gang definitions that varied in complexity. He argued that an adequate definition of a gang must not only identify the essential elements of the gang, but also distinguish it from other social groups in which individuals might involve themselves. In building on Wortley's (2010) work, and through my own review of previous research studies that have synthesized the criteria employed for defining gangs and identifying gang members<sup>19</sup>, I have prepared a list of commonly included characteristics:

- It is a group phenomenon with a minimum number of members – most definitions require at least three (or sometimes five) persons.
- Evidence exists for the gendered nature of these groups – the gang is a male's world, one that is imagined, created, and managed by men. Although females participate in gangs, they have historically taken on secondary roles.
- It is a phenomenon related to youth – age restrictions are often identified (e.g., youth and/or young adults 8-30 years old).
- Members may share a common ethnic or racial background – gangs have historically tended to be racially exclusive, although some mixed ethnicity groups exist. It is generally agreed that the racial and ethnic composition of the gangs reflect the racial and ethnic composition of the community from which they are drawn.
- Although gangs appear to be primarily a lower-class phenomenon, there has been evidence for the existence of middle-class gangs. While gangs have increasingly moved to suburban areas and to smaller cities, they remain predominantly an urban, central city phenomenon.
- It is a self-formed association of peers bound by mutual interests – members share an identity typically linked to a name; they view themselves as a gang and they are recognized by others as a gang.
- Distinctive group symbols or defining insignia (e.g., colours, tattoos, graffiti, hand signs) are employed that are more or less noticeable to outsiders.

---

<sup>19</sup> The studies reviewed include: Ayling (2011); Bjørge (1999); Chettleburgh (2007); Densley (2013); Dorais & Corriveau (2009); Esbensen et al. (2001); Franzese, Covey, & Menard (2016); Howell (2012); Klein & Maxson (2006); Mellor, MacRae, Pauls, & Hornick (2005); Mohammed (2007); NCPC (2007b); Robert (1966); and Sánchez-Jankowski (1991).

- There is control of, or claim to, a specific neighbourhood, territory, or turf in which the group operates.
- Organization is a necessary, though not sufficient, defining feature – the gang is an organized social system governed by a leadership structure that has defined roles.
- The group has some permanence – it must exist as a social entity for a specified period.
- There is a formal or informal code of conduct – a written or unwritten set of rules or regulations to be followed by gang members (e.g., initiation rituals for new members).

In addition to the above, one consistently employed benchmark for assessing whether a given social group is a gang is the engagement by group members in criminal behaviour<sup>20</sup>, some of which may involve violence on a regular basis (Bjørgero, 1999; Esbensen et al., 2001; Houston, 1996; Mohammed, 2007; Peterson, 2000). However, there is a significant debate in the literature as to whether criminality, specifically the degree of participation in criminal and violent activities, is a necessary component in the definition of gangs.

Thrasher (1927) did not include criminality in his gang definition and subsequently argued that we must distinguish between criminal and non-criminal gangs. This position has also been supported by contemporary researchers.<sup>21</sup> Criminal behaviour takes many organizational forms; lumping it together with gang phenomena is misleading (Sullivan, 2005). James F. Short (as cited in Klein, 1995) contends that the inclusion of criminality in gang definitions is tautological and inaccurately stresses the importance of crime to gang participants. In many instances crime and violence have been shown to be only a small part of gang life (Fleisher, 1998; Hagedorn, 1988; Venkatesh, 2000).

---

<sup>20</sup> In the context of this doctoral dissertation, 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*. However, it is acknowledged that alternative definitions of these concepts exist that allow for a broader view and a more inclusive demarcation (Lindgren, 2005). For the latter, there is an emphasis on the social character of crime, as well as the constructed character of the laws, and therefore also of breaches of the law and of society’s reactions to these offences (Sutherland, Cressey, & Luckenbill, 1992). In this sense, ‘criminality’ is not fixed but is socially constructed, first in that the social world by reacting to certain social conditions produces patterns or constructs of behaviour that cause injury and offence, and second in that the disapproval and condemnation of these behaviour patterns constitute a collective unification of feelings, ideologies, and values that change over time (Sumner, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> For examples, see: Ball & Curry (1995); and Bursik & Grasmick (1993).

Other researchers have offered gang definitions that explicitly incorporate criminality as a necessary criterion.<sup>22</sup> In its most basic form then the gang is a grouping of individuals who act out in antisocial or delinquent ways based on involvement in some form of criminal activity usually to gain from it as a group, whether financially, socially, or territorially (Centre for Forensic Behavioural Science and Justice Studies, 2015). Proponents of this view maintain that the absence of criminality makes the definition of the gang too broad. Indeed, without the criminality criterion, the study of gangs, in practice, would become the study of all organized group behaviour including sports teams, church groups, and youth clubs (Klein & Maxson, 1989).

Further, there has been difficulty in coming to an agreement on a definition of a ‘gang-related crime’. Is it all instances of crime and violence committed by individuals who are believed to be gang members, regardless of the nature of the offense or the circumstances surrounding it, or is it gang-motivated crimes that are believed to have been committed for the benefit of the gang or as part of a gang function (Greene & Pranis, 2007)? It is important to distinguish between crime perpetrated by individual gang members and crime as collective behaviour of gangs (Sullivan, 2005). When illegal activities that most people associate with gangs are committed, they are sometimes done by individual members acting in their own interest and sometimes by individuals acting under the influence of the gang. In addition, not all violence labelled ‘gang violence’ is in fact gang violence; a large portion of it is violence committed by people who are members of the gang, but it is not part of the gang’s effort to achieve its objectives (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991).

Many gang researchers have turned to typologies to group together like patterned behaviours or structures exhibited by gangs, and to determine what differentiates one gang from

---

<sup>22</sup> For examples, see: Klein (1971, 1995); Klein & Maxson (2006); and Miller (1975, 1981).

another with respect to its purpose and/or goals. Some of the first gang typologies sought to highlight the point that gangs vary by the types of activities in which they are engaged. While different typologies of gangs or subcultures have been suggested by different scholars<sup>23</sup>, in their systematic review of the theoretical and empirical work of others Franzese and colleagues (2016) argue that overall four general types of gangs seem to emerge:

- Social – These gangs are primarily concerned with social activities: hanging out, partying, and having a good time. There is some structure, action in cooperation with one another, association with or control over some territory with which the gang is identified, and some involvement in illegal behaviour. Beyond these basic criteria, social gangs encompass a broad range of behaviours. This is probably the most common type of gang, and it may be reasonable to view other types of gangs as more specialized derivatives of social gangs.
- Retreatist – These gangs are characterized by heavy alcohol or illicit drug use. Although alcohol and drug use are common in other types of gangs as well, for retreatist gangs it becomes a focus of group activities, and individuals who do not participate may be excluded from the gang. A less common type of gang, retreatist gangs also appear to avoid violent conflicts and they have low patterns of illegal behaviour except for drug-related offences.
- Conflict – These gangs are much more involved in serious crime and violence, including assaults and homicides, than other types of gangs. To some extent, this may be situational. A conflict gang may be a social gang that is compelled by rival gangs to defend its turf or its honour, or risk victimization by members of rival gangs. Conflict gangs may be the most easily located gang type. This may be a result of their relatively high visibility to the police and social agencies. They are also the gang type most often portrayed in the mass media.
- Criminal – These gangs may demonstrate more variation than conflict or retreatist gangs, both in terms of typical offences (e.g., drug sales as opposed to extortion) and in terms of their success relative to one another. Criminal gangs, as opposed to other types of youth gangs, are more likely to have contact or be associated with adult criminal gangs.

Another way to use typologies is to look at the dimensions of gangs. Klein (1996, 2002) and Wortley (2010) have suggested that there are reliable dimensions that can be used to classify gangs, including: size, age range, duration/permanence, territoriality, level of organization, and level of involvement in/versatility of criminal activity. Several researchers have developed typologies based on one or more of these dimensions. Gordon's (2000) work on known gang

---

<sup>23</sup> For examples, see: Cloward & Ohlin (1960); Fagan (1989); Short & Strodtbeck (1965); Taylor (1990); and Yablonsky (1966).

members in the Greater Vancouver Area distinguished between criminal business organizations, street gangs and 'wannabe' groups. Based on the research he conducted with young males in Brooklyn, New York in the 1980s, Sullivan (2005) developed a gang typology that differentiates between action-sets, cliques, and named gangs. Based on data collected from 60 city police respondents, Maxson and Klein (1995) derived scenarios for five different types of street gang structural patterns and pre-tested them with a small number of police gang experts. In their study of Montreal youth gangs, Hamel, Fredette, Blais, and Bertot (1998) identified six types of gangs according to their levels on a continuum of violence, criminality, and organization. Mellor and colleagues (2005) developed a conceptual, five-part, multidimensional framework to depict the different types of gangs in which youth may be involved in Canada. Finally, Wortley (2010) identified a four-level classification system that might be established through a consultation process involving criminal justice officials, academics, and informed community members. It moves from the least to the most organized and stable criminal groups.

In addition to types of gangs, there are also types of gang members. Gang membership tends to be marked by different degrees of commitment, association, and embeddedness across individuals and across time (Pyrooz et al., 2013). A common model used consists of three concentric circles. In the centre are the leaders or original gangsters and the (hard)core members. They include the 'inner clique' that runs the gang and are actively involved in the everyday functioning of the gang. In the next circle, the associates, peripheral, or fringe members identify strongly with the gang, but do not devote all their time to it and have little or no control over it. There are also floaters that may exist within and across gangs. They are a special kind of associate with high status, not clearly identified as gang members, but often brokers across gangs with access to special resources. In the third circle there are the wannabes, hangers-on, or recruits



who aspire to be members of the gang but are not yet recognized as full members (Battin, Hill, Abbott, Catalano, & Hawkins, 1998; Esbensen et al., 2001; Klein, 1995; Spergel, 1995; Vigil, 1988; White, 2013; Winfree, Fuller, Vigil, & Mays, 1992). The most important distinction in the classification of gang members appears to be between the core and non-core gang members (Hagedorn, 1988; Vigil, 1988; Yablonsky, 1966).

Despite past efforts, some gang researchers have argued against the logic of creating typologies based on the prominent behaviour, criminal orientation, structure of the gang, and the level of gang involvement. Gang behaviour has typically been found to be representative of what Klein (1995) calls 'cafeteria-style offending' where most offenders' behaviour is versatile rather than indicative of any real specialized pattern. Further, gangs are rarely static entities and both gang membership and organizational structure are dynamic and undergo constant transformations (Weisel, 2002). These categorizations are fluid and may not always apply to actual group formations (White, 2013). Cloward and Ohlin (1960) suggested that gangs and gang members need not specialize in one type or mode of adaptation for their entire life course but may move from one to another over time; this evolution depends on the specific situation in which individuals find themselves. Further, gangs tend to evolve and adapt to meet the demands of environments that often become increasingly hostile to their presence (Hagedorn, 1994; Horowitz, 1990; Taylor, 1990).

Finally, there is also a debate within the gang literature concerning how to best identify gangs and gang members. A first strategy relies on law enforcement intelligence as documented through police surveys and official records, and often employing the use of classification systems. Supporters of this strategy argue that, through their work, law enforcement officials have expert knowledge of the gang situation within their jurisdictions. They believe that no one

else is in a better position to report on trends (Wortley, 2010). The basic purpose of police surveys is to ask law enforcement officials about the number of gangs and gang members in their jurisdictions. These surveys may employ different definitions and lists of criteria. For example, in Canada the *2002 Police Survey of Youth Gangs* was the first, and only, national survey with participation from more than 264 police agencies from across the country. Respondents identified 484 different youth gangs operating within Canada and an estimated 6,760 individual gang members (Chettleburgh, 2003, 2007). Several gang researchers have also relied on law enforcement records to describe gang offences and gang members.<sup>24</sup> Many police agencies employ criteria-based gang member classification systems and use computerized databases specifically designed to store information on individuals associated with gangs (Wortley, 2010). For example, the Ottawa Police Service has adopted the Criminal Intelligence Service of Canada's (CISC) six-point criteria and a seventh criterion recommended by the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police Street Gangs Committee to classify persons as gang members (Landsdowne Technologies Inc., 2013). Three of these seven criteria must be met for an individual to be considered a confirmed gang member, and the fourth criterion must be present:

1. Reliable information that a person is a gang member;
2. Police officer observes person associating with known gang members;
3. Person acknowledges gang membership;
- 4. Person is involved directly or indirectly in gang motivated crimes;**
5. Court finds the person to be a gang member;
6. Person is found to be displaying common or symbolic gang identification or paraphernalia (street name, tattoos, colours, etc.); and/or
7. Physical evidence, including photographs, documents, data, or items of evidentiary value that speak to street gang membership.

There are several criticisms of the use of law enforcement intelligence to identify gangs and gang members. In addition to uncovering 'real' gangs, these methods are likely to result in a gang designation for legitimate, noncriminal groupings of young people (Kennedy, 2009). For

---

<sup>24</sup> For examples, see: Curry, Ball, & Decker (1996); Curry, Ball, & Fox (1994); and Spergel (1990).

example, while the *2002 Police Survey of Youth Gangs* offered a useful overview of gangs in Canada, it was constrained by various methodological issues such as standards of data collection, the extent of law enforcement officials' knowledge about gang issues, politicization of responses, and subjective definitions of the term gang among the survey participants (Ngo, 2010). There are also challenges with gang member classification systems. Many of the listed criteria are rather vague, imprecise, and open to manipulation. For instance, what constitutes 'reliable information' and what is a 'gang motivated crime'? Without knowing exactly what these concepts mean and how they are measured, it is difficult to determine how gang members are identified by law enforcement officials (Wortley, 2010). Finally, the computerized databases employed by police rarely include a 'removal protocol' that elucidates when, how, and under what circumstances an individual once identified as a gang member can later be removed (Kennedy, 2009).

A second strategy for identifying gang members is with structured risk assessment instruments administered by various criminal justice practitioners. Research consistently demonstrates that gang-involved youth possess a high number of risk factors relative to non-gang youth, and that they are rated as higher risk on structured instruments, in comparison to youth who never join gangs (Chu, Daffern, Thomas, & Lim, 2012). For example, the Gang Risk Assessment Instrument (GRAI; Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2012) was developed in Canada to screen for youth gang involvement by examining risk factors in individual, peer, school, family, and community domains. The tool is then scored to derive an overall risk score and summary of the young person's criminogenic needs that, in turn, can inform an effective case plan to assist in the gang exit or reintegration process. Growing evidence also suggests that there are risk factors for gang membership which can be identified prospectively (Esbensen et al., 2010; Hill, Howell, Hawkins, & Battin-Pearson, 1999; Thornberry et al., 2003). This kind of

forward-looking risk assessment is finding increasing favour in the youth justice field (Case, 2007; Goldson & Muncie, 2006; Priday, 2006). Risk assessment instruments are not simply being used as a diagnostic tool, but they are also being used in a prognostic manner to determine which young people are most likely to become involved in gangs. A criticism of the use of these instruments is that when applied to gangs, risk analyses typically take the form of social profiling. This involves constructing a matrix of variables and matching individuals to the variables identified (White, 2008). There is also general concern regarding the validity of structured risk assessment tools. These measures vary in length and complexity. Factors included in these tools should be limited to those with a strong, significant relationship with the outcome of interest and should be administered by individuals with formal training in assessment. Further, these tools may not predict accurately for all populations. The use of actuarial instruments alone may fail to detect gang involvement where there are individual factors related to risk that are not encompassed within the actuarial scheme. This suggests the importance of also considering context in the examination of individual behaviour (Shapiro, Malone, & Gavazzi, 2018).

A third strategy for identifying gangs and gang members involves self-identification.<sup>25</sup> Many gang scholars have concluded that self-identification is a reliable and valid indicator of gang membership and an important starting point for investigating gangs. In other words, if an individual nominates himself as a gang member, all other activities (e.g., types of criminal behaviour, level of substance use), modes of expression (e.g., the use of colours, tattoos), and group characteristics (e.g., number of members, group leadership, initiation rites) may be irrelevant. Individuals who think of themselves as gang members probably are gang members (Wortley, 2010). Nonetheless, self-reports do have potential weaknesses. As Barrows and Huff

---

<sup>25</sup> Some proponents of this approach include: Bellair & McNulty (2009); Decker, Katz, & Webb (2008); Melde, Taylor, & Esbensen (2009); Wilkinson, Beaty, & Lurry (2009); and Wortley & Tanner (2006a, 2006b).

(2009, p. 687) note: “Potential exists here, too, for over-identification, either through possible intimidation by the police to obtain an admission of membership or through an individual’s desire to identify with a gang when the gang itself may not confirm that association.” As cautioned by Wortley (2010, p. 17): “Of course it is also quite possible that some individuals may admit gang membership on an anonymous survey or to an ethnographic researcher, but fail to admit gang involvement to criminal justice officials”.

Over the last century, a significant number of theoretical and empirical research studies have examined what constitutes a gang, gang member, and gang-related activity, yet definition and identification remain a complicated task. How we define the gang and its related concepts determines the composition of what it is and what we are talking about. Often definitions seem to mirror the needs of those who propose and employ them, and this highlights the relative importance of various criteria for different stakeholders (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009; Fraser & Hagedorn, 2018; Wortley, 2010). For example, Wood and Alleyne (2010) note that the argument for including criminality as a criterion for defining gangs is compelling because the parties involved in studying gangs (e.g., criminologists, agents of the criminal justice system) are mostly interested in the adverse criminal behaviour associated with gang involvement. This difference in emphasis carries over to the methodologies employed for identifying gangs and gang members and the tendency to rely on the perspective of ‘experts’. However, as noted above and supported by Klein (2012), understandings of the gang and its membership can differ between insiders and outsiders. Focusing on the perspective of those who self-identify as gang members can lead to a different characterization of the gang issue and allows an opportunity for individual biography and personal experience to play a role in the definition and identification process.

Further the various gang typologies, while useful for identifying variation in gang structure, behaviour, and overall purpose imply that the gang and its membership is a relatively fixed status. However, critics have argued that individual experience in the gang is dynamic and ever changing and involves a multitude of different relationships with different people and different institutions at different times (White, 2013). As Thrasher (1927, p. 5) noted: “No two gangs are just alike; [they take on] an endless variety of forms.” Gangs and gang members reflect their unique circumstances. While there are similarities in basic causes and processes of gang formation that characterize gangs and their members, the specific form the group takes depends in part on the local context (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008).

No single definition can account for the diversity of the gang phenomenon. As argued by Fraser and Hagedorn (2018), rather than seeking to refine definitions, there is a need to reconnect the study of gangs with the biographical, social, and cultural processes through which gang identification is constituted. When it comes to defining and identifying gang, gang member, and gang-related activity, it is important to acknowledge that there are various context-dependent perspectives on the issue from many individuals, groups, and stakeholders, and that these different perspectives will have an impact on how it is constructed and understood.

### **Gang Membership – Focusing on Motivations for Involvement**

There has been a significant focus in the gang literature on the factors or predictors associated with gang involvement.<sup>26</sup> Many systematic literature reviews and meta-analyses have examined risk factors,<sup>27</sup> and a limited number of studies have examined factors that may protect young people against gang membership.<sup>28</sup> However, there has been less emphasis in the research

---

<sup>26</sup> For examples, see: Decker, Melde, & Pyrooz (2013); Decker & Pyrooz (2011a); O'Brien, Daffern, Chu, & Thomas (2013); and Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb (2014).

<sup>27</sup> For examples, see: Howell & Egley (2005); Klein & Maxson (2006); and Raby & Jones (2016).

<sup>28</sup> For examples, see: Gilman et al. (2014); and Howell (2010).

on the reasons why young people are motivated to seek out and join gangs. The examination of risk and protective factors takes an aggregate-level predictive approach to understanding gang affiliation; gang involvement becomes more or less likely as risk factors or protective factors, respectively, accumulate in the lives of young people (Decker et al., 2013; McDaniel, 2012). Yet, even when these factors are present, gang membership is not pre-determined, and the reality is that most young people do not join gangs (Curry, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2013; Howell, 2012; Klein & Maxson, 2006). Alternatively, the examination of individual motivations for involvement in the gang incorporates an understanding of the role of agency in the process. At a personal level, the reasons why individuals join gangs are varied, situational, and sometimes unique, demonstrating different trajectories for gang membership. While the identification of risk and protective factors specific to gang membership is crucial to the development of effective gang prevention and intervention strategies, the motivations to engage and become affiliated with the gang are an important part of the overall understanding of gang involvement and should also receive focused attention.

Based on three years of ethnographic fieldwork with active gang members and their families in St. Louis, Missouri, Decker and Van Winkle (1996) provided a framework for understanding the processes involved in decisions to join gangs. They described affiliation in terms of ‘pushes’ or external forces that coerce membership, and ‘pulls’ or forces internal to gangs that attract membership. The available literature based on empirical studies of gangs in Canada also suggests that gang affiliation provides psychological, social, and/or economic benefits, and those who become involved with gangs do so to meet unfulfilled needs (Chettleburgh, 2007; Wortley & Tanner, 2006a, 2006b).

What follows are the major motivations for gang involvement that have been identified in past research. The sources referenced below employed a variety of methodological approaches in their work from systematic literature reviews and the development of theoretical frameworks, to empirical research studies employing a variety of data collection techniques. The most common methods are the secondary use of longitudinal data from the Denver, Pittsburgh, and Rochester Youth Development Studies or the Seattle Social Development Project, and other multisite samples (e.g., Gang Resistance Education and Training [G.R.E.A.T.] evaluation, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth) as well as primary data collection using surveys, in-depth qualitative interviews, and short- and long-term ethnographic fieldwork. With a few exceptions<sup>29</sup>, the study samples are drawn from American populations and include youth and young adults at risk of gang involvement or those reporting current/former gang membership, as well as adult gang members and those who have regular interaction with gang members.

**Protection.** For individuals who have concerns with personal safety and security, whether as a result of personal experiences of physical, verbal, or emotional harm or due to a fear or expectation of such harm, the gang can be perceived as having a protective quality and they believe that they will be safer as gang members (Decker & Curry, 2000; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Melde et al., 2009; Peterson, Taylor, & Esbensen, 2004; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Stinchcomb, 2002; Taylor, 2009; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, & Chard-Wierschem, 1993; Thornberry et al., 2003; Vigil, 1988). The gang can be especially attractive to young people who live in environments where they feel they need protection from other criminal entities or predatory elements active on the streets or at school (Melde et al., 2009; Padilla, 1992; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Stinchcomb, 2002; Taylor, 2009; Thornberry et al., 2003). Although research

---

<sup>29</sup> Four studies employing data collection methods with Canadian populations are included: Bouchard & Spindler (2010); Goodwill (2016); Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson (2007); and Hemmati (2006). There is one study included that relied on data collection with a population of young people in the United Kingdom (Alleyne & Wood, 2010).



has demonstrated that the potential risk of victimization is often higher for gang members than non-gang members, the 'emotional protection' members perceive decreases their fears; individuals enjoy a sense of 'peace of mind' as gang members (Melde et al., 2009).

**Lifestyle.** The sensational portrayals of gangs and their members as enjoying a glamorous and rewarding lifestyle through various media (e.g., Hollywood films, rap music) have made gangs seem very appealing to young people (Miller, 2001; Miller, 1992). Gangs provide their members with attractive opportunities for money, excitement, and entertainment. The ability to make money is commonly cited as the strongest motivational and rewarding element drawing individuals to the gang (Lafontaine, Ferguson, & Wormith, 2005). The gang can provide the means for young people to acquire high-status material possessions and resources that may not be readily available through legitimate means. In many instances, joining the gang and a turn to illegal activities is a way for individuals to increase income and achieve lofty financial goals (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Howell, 2010). The excitement and entertainment aspect of gang life is also often named as a primary reason for joining the gang (Pennell, Evans, Melton, & Hinson, 1994; Thornberry et al., 2003; Thrasher, 1927). Vigil (1988) explained that members associate the 'fun' of gangs with a sense of adventure. In many cases, the gang is also the primary social institution in the neighbourhood. It provides members with an opportunity to meet women and can be a source of drugs and alcohol (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991).

**Status & Respect.** The temptation to join the gang may be because gangs offer young people the potential to gain status and respect (Alleyne & Wood, 2010; Anderson, 1999; Blakemore & Blakemore, 1998; Decker & Curry, 2000; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Young, Fitzgibbon, & Silverstone, 2014). Individuals who join gangs feel as if they have improved their

status through membership in a group that is central to their identity (Bouchard & Spindler, 2010; Short & Strodtbeck, 1965). They strive to belong to groups that they believe have distinction and thus have status or prestige in a given context. Separate from status, the desire for respect has also been cited as a major influence in the decision to join the gang (Blakemore & Blakemore, 1998; King, Walpole, & Lamon, 2007; Sánchez-Jankowski, 2003). Respect is important for gangs; the dynamics of respect play a key role in adherence to street code and in the business of selling drugs (Anderson, 1999; Bourgois, 1995). Because of the social power associated with gangs, it is common for young people to look up to and aspire to be members (Alleyne & Wood, 2010). Respect is often fostered through the threat or actual use of force and violence (Knox, 1994). Whether ‘proving’ oneself within one’s own gang or with another gang, toughness and willingness to participate in violence are primary methods for commanding respect from gang peers (Melde et al., 2009; Stretesky & Pogrebin, 2007).

**Social Relations.** The role of social relations has also been discussed in past research as a reason for joining gangs. Young people may be motivated to join gangs when their friends and family, particularly siblings and cousins, are already members of the gang (Bourgois, 1995; Goldman, Giles, & Hogg, 2014; Hill et al., 1999; Moore, 1991). For example, some seek out membership because of loyalty to these individuals, particularly in the case of inter- and multi-generational gang membership, or that the latter are viewed as role models and encourage others to join (Decker & Curry, 2000; Klein, 1995; Miller, 2001; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Thornberry et al., 2003). Alternatively, young people may also be motivated to join the gang because they are coerced or feel pressured to join by these friends and family members. Past research also suggests perceptions and messages of marginalization, meaning people’s belief that they are not fully assimilated within or accepted by the group, also play a role in motivating youth to join

gangs. When young people do not have strong relationships at home, at school, or with their community, they may turn to gangs for companionship, emotional support, and a sense of belonging (Alleyne & Wood, 2010; Blakemore & Blakemore, 1998; Decker & Curry, 2000; Sánchez-Jankowski, 2003; Stretesky & Pogrebin, 2007; Vigil, 1988). Family-related variables have been shown to be particularly important. Several studies indicate that those who join gangs come from broken homes and/or single parent families, have a lack of parental supervision, and have encountered negative family experiences such as maltreatment, violence, parental substance use, or family criminality (Hagedorn, 1998; Moore, 1991). For these individuals, the gang becomes a 'surrogate' family, through which they can fulfill unmet needs (Hemmati, 2006; Klein, 1995; Lurigio, Flexon, & Greenleaf, 2008; Taylor, 2009; Wood & Alleyne, 2010).

**Survival.** For young people facing bleak and uncertain futures, the gang can offer an alternative to the perception of a life filled with helplessness and hopelessness. Research has shown that social structural factors such as negative school experience and low academic attainment, lack of job-related skills and legitimate employment opportunities, perceptions or experiences of institutional racism and oppression, living in socially disadvantaged and socially disorganized communities, and experiences of poverty may leave individuals feeling that there is no other alternative to a life of crime and gang involvement (Curry & Spergel, 1992; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2007; Hagedorn, 1988; Hayden, 2004; Klein & Crawford, 1967; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Spergel, 1995; Raby & Jones, 2016; Thornberry et al., 2003). The young people who are most vulnerable to joining the gang often experience many of these conditions (Del Carmen et al., 2009; Esbensen, Peterson, Taylor, & Freng, 2009). When they lack the resources to meet their basic needs, and there are few available to address these concerns, the strong motivational factor leading into gang life is survival (Goodwill, 2016).

Overall, there is consensus that the decision to join the gang is based on a multitude of factors, rather than one single decisive factor (Decker & Curry, 2000). A variety of circumstances can propel an individual with the need to affiliate with a gang and as noted above, individual, social interactive, and wider environmental factors all have the potential to influence the decision to join (Curry et al., 2013; Decker et al., 2013; Wood & Alleyne, 2010).

The risk factor research tends to portray gang members as individuals with a specific set of negative personal attributes. Those who join gangs are likely to have adverse personality traits (e.g., high levels of anxiety, low self-esteem, low IQ), experience negative life events (e.g., serious illness, school suspension, relationship disruption), display early problem behaviours (e.g., reactivity, aggression, impulsivity), have delinquent beliefs, associate with delinquent peers, and engage in criminal behaviour (Peterson & Morgan, 2014; Wood & Alleyne, 2010). This has had the effect of misrepresenting the individuals who join gangs and has led to an underestimation of the connections between the structural conditions of society and the form of collective behaviour that is the gang. To the extent that researchers start from these presumptions, individuals who join gangs are likely to be viewed as socially deviant; behaviour appears to be the result of psychological pathologies instead of reactions to a particular socio-economic environment (Sánchez-Jankowski, 2003). Often gang members are assumed to be the lowest of the lower class; individuals with psychological disorders, little intelligence, and/or no initiative to work. This view is not always accurate. While gangs are made up of a great range of individuals, many are intelligent and capable of developing and executing creative enterprises (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991).

Alternatively, by focusing on the motivations for involvement, gang members are individuals who act based on personal and contextual rationality (Padilla, 1992; Sánchez-

Jankowski, 1991; Sullivan, 1989). This addresses the functional nature of gang membership; gangs exist because they serve a purpose (Robert, 1966). The gang can serve to meet the personal needs of its members and can engage in collective behaviour that is a response to the social, economic, and cultural conditions its members confront (Ball & Curry, 1995; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991, 2003; Wood & Alleyne, 2010). In this way, the act of joining a gang can be normalized; it becomes a legitimate solution or alternative to a specific problem faced by members. The decision to join is thought out and the individual believes that this is best for their interests at the moment (Bania, 2009; Mohammed, 2007; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991, 2003). This view provides a more holistic understanding of gang membership.

There is a need to move beyond risk-focused and deficit-oriented approaches to understanding gang involvement. Instead of relying on aggregate-level predictive approaches to gang involvement, we need to focus more on the personal level and explore subjective experiences. It is important to examine individual motivations for involvement in the gang, the role of agency and rationality in the process of joining, and the functional nature of gang membership. This acknowledges that there are different pathways for gang membership, that the reasons for involvement are varied, and that the gang represents a way of dealing with individual problems and meeting personal needs.

### **Defining and Examining Desistance from the Gang**

Despite nearly a century of academic scholarship devoted to studying gangs, only recently have we begun to focus on desistance from the gang, with research advancing significantly in the last two decades.<sup>30</sup> The relative lack of research investigating gang desistance

---

<sup>30</sup> For examples of recent theoretical and empirical studies on desistance from gang involvement, see: Carson, Peterson, & Esbensen (2013); Decker & Lauritsen (2002); Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule (2014); Densley (2013); Moloney et al. (2009); Pyrooz & Decker (2011); and Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb (2014).

may be due, in part, to the difficulties associated with defining desistance and the variability in its operationalization (Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Kazemian, 2007; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011).

Desistance may be conceptualized as an outcome; a state achieved by an individual. Gang desisters are seen as those individuals who self-identified as a gang member at one time point but no longer identify as a member at a later point (Carson et al., 2013; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule, 2014; Decker, Pyrooz, Sweeten, & Moule, 2014; Melde & Esbensen, 2011, 2014; Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2014; Pyrooz et al., 2013). This operationalization focuses on the event of de-identification as a gang member (Krohn & Thornberry, 2008; Sweeten et al., 2013). Desistance may also be conceptualized as a process; a decline over time in the phenomenon of interest. Gang desistance then is the process of disengagement or the declining probability of gang membership (e.g., reduction from peak to trivial levels of gang membership, decrease in gang embeddedness) (Carson et al., 2013; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). While both conceptualizations are important to a complete understanding of desistance from gangs, several researchers have indicated a preference for examining the process of disengagement, a social transition that involves changes in individuals and how they interact with the world, as opposed to the static condition of de-identification (Bushway, Piquero, Broidy, Cauffman, & Mazerolle, 2001; Bushway, Thornberry, & Krohn, 2003; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Maruna, 2001; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). In doing so, it is possible to overcome a caveat inherent to static definitions; a focus on termination ignores the progress made by the individual along the way.

Gang desistance is realized as individuals lessen their association with group members and their participation in group activities. An issue of concern when conceptually defining desistance as a process is who can be considered an ex-gang member or when an individual can be considered a former gang member (e.g., must all emotional, social, physical, and criminal ties

be severed) (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2014). Some researchers suggest that gang desisters may continue to engage with the gang lifestyle through varying degrees of attachments and lingering ties to the gang as well as continued involvement in criminal activity. While the day-to-day involvement with the gang diminishes, connections to gangs and contact with gang members may remain. Many members of the former gang may live in the neighbourhood or may be friends or relatives. Thus, the regular course of routine activities would bring a former gang member into contact with current members of the gang.

Based on a detailed review of the literature on leaving the gang and their own field study of ex-gang members in St. Louis, Missouri, Decker and Lauritsen (2002) identified 'the gray zone' as the gradual process of desisting from gangs where ties with the gangs are still present even though the desistance decision has occurred. The authors gave the example of young people hanging out, drinking, playing sports, and watching television with a cousin who is a gang member, eating lunch in the high school cafeteria, etc. Further, Feavel and Pyrooz (2014) suggest that desistance from the gang does not necessarily mean desistance from crime. To the extent that the process of gang departure leads to breaking away from the proximate causes and the current social environment promoting delinquency, criminal involvement may decrease (Sweeten et al., 2013; Thornberry et al., 1993). However, it is not necessary. A distinction can be made between criminal behaviour as gang activity and criminal behaviour perpetrated by the individual independent of the gang. While the former may decline through the process of desistance from the gang, the latter may be unaffected (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Sullivan, 2005).

To aid understanding of the process of gang desistance, some typologies have been proposed. Decker and Lauritsen (2002) categorized former members based on the presence of

emotional ties to the gang and continued involvement in criminal activity. They argued that ex-gang members who relocated or discussed attachment to new families or jobs were among those with no lingering ties to the gang or to criminal activities and could, therefore, be most easily classified as desisters. In their study examining the process of leaving the gang based on data collected from interviews with juvenile arrestees in Arizona, all of whom left their gang, Pyrooz and Decker (2011) further differentiated between: (1) active gang members meaning individuals who have not left their gang and are still participating in crime; (2) those socially tied to the gang meaning individuals who have de-identified membership, but still participate in crime; (3) gang members who still assert status in the gang meaning they have not de-identified, but are no longer involved in criminal activity with the gang; and (4) 'true desisters' who state that they have left the gang and no longer engage in criminal behaviour with former gang peers. While these categorizations help to clarify definitions of gang desistance, they also serve to illustrate the difficulties in discerning when an individual in fact becomes an ex-gang member. It is important to remain mindful of these issues (Carson & Vecchio, 2015).

### Methods of Desistance

Researchers are interested in the methods of desistance, that is, how do gang members go about leaving the gang. Again, the sources referenced below employed a variety of methodological approaches in their work from systematic literature reviews and the development of theoretical frameworks, to empirical research studies employing a variety of data collection techniques. The most common methods are the secondary use of longitudinal data from the G.R.E.A.T. evaluation, the Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (ADAM) program, and the Pathways to Desistance Study, as well as primary data collection using in-depth qualitative interviews, and short- and long-term ethnographic fieldwork. The study samples are drawn



exclusively from American populations and include gangs as well as individuals reporting current or former gang membership, young adults involved in the criminal justice system, members of extremist groups, and those who have regular interaction with gang members. Three of these studies focused on samples of female populations<sup>31</sup>, the rest were exclusively male populations or mixed gender populations.

Contrary to the stereotypical and media-driven notion ‘once in the gang, in the gang for life’, most members do eventually leave the gang (Bolden, 2012, 2013). How individuals leave their gang has been categorized as one of two ways: hostile/active or non-hostile/passive exits (Carson et al., 2013; Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Active exit strategies are generally consistent with the sensationalized claims of ‘blood in, blood out’ and are often perpetuated through gang lore (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Klein, 1971). These involve formal or symbolic acts such as getting beaten or ‘jumped’ out of the gang, being forced to commit a crime and/or kill someone, being subject to extortion, or through death (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Fleisher, 1998; Miller, 2001; Padilla, 1992; Peterson, 2012; Quicker, 1999; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Vigil 1988). Evidence of hostile exit methods is less commonly found in research; typically, less than a third of ex-gang members are found to leave in this manner (Carson et al., 2013; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011a, 2011b; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Padilla, 1992; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Vigil, 1988). Decker and Lauritsen (2002) found that exiting members were more often the targets of verbal abuse and threats of violence rather than actual violence. Some research indicates that current gang members promote the myth that the only way to leave the gang is through some hostile leaving process (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002). Even individuals who have left the gang tend to perpetuate this belief stating that an

---

<sup>31</sup> The following studies focused on female samples in their data collection: Miller (2001); Peterson (2012); and Quicker (1999).

active exit is the typical way to leave the gang, but that it did not apply in their case, 'it happens, but just not for me' (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011b).

As opposed to active leaving processes, the literature more commonly describes passive or non-hostile methods associated with leaving the gang, typically occurring for more than half of gang desisters (Carson et al., 2013; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011a; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Quicker, 1999). Leaving is often uneventful and there are rarely adverse consequences (Bolden, 2012, 2013; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Fleisher, 1998). Leaving the gang occurs through such means as simply walking away (i.e., ceasing to associate with gang members), moving away (e.g., to a new neighbourhood, city, or school), or through the gang's dissolution (Bolden, 2012; Carson et al., 2013; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule, 2014; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Vigil 1988).

Further, two possible routes out of the gang have been identified. For some, desistance includes quitting the gang abruptly and entirely, while for others it is a gradual process of drifting away from the group (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2014). With respect to the former, Maruna and Roy (2007) described leaving as 'knifing off'<sup>32</sup> or an immediate purging of one's previous ways, including associates and activities. The second route involves 'fading out' or 'drifting away' from gang involvement (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Del Carmen et al., 2009). Sweeten and colleagues (2013) suggested that most gang members

---

<sup>32</sup> It should be acknowledged that 'knifing off' has multiple interpretations in the literature. In employing Moffitt's (1993) understanding where early problem behaviour may be a factor in 'knifing off' normative development, the term has been used in the context of the onset of gang involvement. The gang member cuts ties to other important social groups and organizations such as family, friends, schools, and religious community to focus more intensively on gang participation and identity, leading to higher levels of delinquency (Moule, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2013; Pyrooz et al., 2013). The 'knifing off' metaphor has also been employed to describe diametrically opposed processes, invoking it as a key process in both persistence (e.g., Holleran & Spohn, 2004; Stewart, Simons, Conger, & Scaramella, 2002) and desistance (e.g., Shanahan, 2000). Even more interestingly, both groups attribute the opposing versions of 'knifing off' to work by Laub and Sampson, who use the metaphor both ways in various publications (see for example Sampson & Laub, 1996, 1997).

eventually transition into other social arenas, and that the social processes of the gang diminish and are supplanted by new demands and social roles.

Finally, the individual's level of engagement and embeddedness with the gang may affect the desistance process. The literature demonstrates that it is more difficult for core members to leave than it is for peripheral members, as the former tend to be more involved in gang activities and better integrated into the group. For members on the fringe of the gang, it may be easier to drift in and out of the gang because of lower allegiance or weaker bonds to the group or other gang members and reduced dependence on the gang for social or instrumental support (Bolden, 2012; Hagedorn, 1994; Klein, 1971; Pyrooz et al., 2013; Spergel, 1995; Starbuck, Howell, & Lindquist, 2001). Individuals who are weakly embedded in gangs also tend to desist at a faster rate than those more deeply embedded in gangs (Pyrooz et al., 2013; Scott, 2014). In addition, the former are more likely to experience non-hostile exits (Carson et al., 2013; Moore, 1991; Pyrooz et al., 2013; Spergel, 1995).

### Motivations for Desistance

Another area of interest is the motivations for desistance, that is, the subjective reasoning behind why gang members decide to leave the gang. Like the motivations for involvement in the gang, prior research has classified motivations for leaving the gang as either push or pull factors. Push factors for gang desistance can be considered internal to the member or the gang and serve to push an individual out of gang life (Bjørgero, 2002; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). They have the potential to facilitate or hasten the desistance process because they paint the gang environment as unappealing and inspire gang members to seek out other alternatives in different areas (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011a; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; van Gemert & Fleisher, 2005). Pull factors, alternatively, are largely external to the member or the gang. They are conceived as

circumstances or situations that pull individuals to alternative routes (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002). Pull factors are characterized by changing social controls or factors that fracture the ‘grip of the group’ and tend to present gang members with more appealing alternatives to gang life (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; van Gemert & Fleisher, 2005). It is important to examine motivations for desistance as distinct from motivations for affiliation, as reasons for leaving the gang are not necessarily the opposite of those for joining (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011).

What follows is a series of key motivation factors that have been identified in previous research as influencing why gang members de-identify with and disengage from the gang. While both push and pull factors have been identified as important to the desistance process, the motivations will not be explicitly characterized using these terms because there is inconsistency in the research literature on their application. For example, criminal justice system involvement has been reported as both a push factor (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011b) and a pull factor (Carson & Vecchio, 2015) in previous empirical research. The sources included below employed the same methodological approaches and data collection techniques discussed previously in the sections on motivations for gang involvement and methods of desistance. New data sources in this section include the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health and the Youth Risk Behavior Survey and a new data collection technique focused on the economic analysis of gang finances. With one exception<sup>33</sup>, the study samples are drawn from American populations and, in addition to those listed previously, include members of racist groups, other ‘ex’ groups, and residents of communities and neighbourhoods inhabited by gangs.

**Costs & Consequences.** The decision to leave the gang may be based on the growing costs or consequences associated with continued membership. The role of violence in gang life is often discussed as a motivation for leaving the gang (Carson et al., 2013; Decker & Pyrooz,

---

<sup>33</sup> In a Canadian study, Ngo (2010) focused on gang-involved youth and former gang members in Calgary.

2011a; Padilla, 1992; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Research has found that gang exit is associated with violent incidents; gang members often have a strong motivation to escape violence (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Ngo, 2010). Motivations associated with violence can range from fear of future violence and vicarious victimization (e.g., victimization of a friend, family member, or fellow gang member) to direct experiences with violence (e.g., getting beaten, stabbed, or shot). For some, the accumulation of violent experiences may result in violence fatigue while others are directly motivated by traumatic events (Bjørger, 2002; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Jacques & Wright, 2008; Moore, 1991; Spergel, 1995; Vecchio, 2013; Vigil, 1988). The increased risk of victimization may lead the individual to desire a gang-free life (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Wood & Alleyne, 2010). Involvement with the criminal justice system including police contact, arrest, incarceration, and other sanctions has also been identified in prior research as a reason for leaving the gang (Carson et al., 2013; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011b; Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule, 2014; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Hagedorn, 1994; Moore, 1991; Padilla, 1992; Panuccio, Christian, Martinez, & Sullivan, 2012; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Quicker, 1999; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Spergel, 1995; Vigil, 1988).

**Disillusionment.** Disappointment with the gang lifestyle in general and the inner workings of the individual's gang in particular is also commonly cited as a motivation for leaving (Carson et al., 2013; Carson & Vecchio, 2015). Disillusionment is best understood as the realization that a consistent incongruence exists between idealized expectations and the everyday realities associated with those same expectations (Ebaugh, 1988). Some of these expectations result from broad societal representations of gang life that glamorize and glorify aspects of protection, family, and economic success (Bubolz & Simi, 2015). While gang members may look toward the gang for physical protection, research finds that gang membership compromises

physical safety. Gang members are often pressured to engage in violence, are often the targets of attacks from other gang members, and may feel that the other gang members are not protecting them from outside threats (Curry, Decker, & Egley, 2002; DeLisi, Barnes, Beaver, & Gibson, 2009; Fox, Lane, & Akers, 2010; Gover, Jennings, & Tewksbury, 2009; Miller, 2001; Peterson et al., 2004; Taylor, Freng, Esbensen, & Peterson, 2008).

Although individuals may join gangs for a sense of belonging, the gang's ability to function as a substitute family is complicated by multiple deficiencies. On the surface, gang networks may appear loyal and supportive of one another. However, members frequently turn their backs on fellow gang members when they are needed most (e.g., not visiting in jail) and individuals may feel that they are being taken advantage of by their gang peers (Anderson, 1999; Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule, 2014; Hagedorn, 1994; Padilla, 1992; Vigil, 1988). The reality is that a high level of intra-gang conflict characterizes gang membership (Levitt & Venkatesh, 2000; Moore, 1991; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Vigil 1988).

Finally, economic prosperity is another common motive for individuals who join gangs (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Levitt & Venkatesh, 2000). Individuals expect 'quick money', yet they are often poorly compensated for their efforts. Studies focused on the profits from drug dealing, for example, found that most street-level drug dealers earn close to minimum wage (Levitt & Venkatesh, 2000). Further, owing to the pressures of conspicuous consumption in gangs, quick money also 'goes quick' (Densley, 2013; Wright & Decker, 1994, 1997). It is the exposure to these daily realities that solidifies discontent within the gang (Bubolz & Simi, 2015). Individuals are likely to acquire a perpetual awareness that 'this is not what I expected when I joined' and to experience anger and resentment as they feel 'duped' by the gang (Carson et al., 2013; Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011).

**Maturation.** Other commonly found motivations for desistance underscore the maturational process experienced by gang members (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011b; Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule, 2014; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Hagedorn, 1994; Klein, 1971; Spergel, 1995; Thrasher, 1927; Vigil, 1988). Though closely related to disillusionment, the maturational process is a distinct motivation that is associated with aging-out of crime in general. Maturation processes can occur when gang members no longer feel a need for the excitement they once associated with gang life and seek a calmer existence, and when they recognize the long-term consequences of gang membership (Bjørgero, 2002; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule, 2014; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Spergel, 1995). Former gang members often describe having ‘grown out of the gang’, or simply having ‘gotten too old’ for the gang lifestyle (Battin et al., 1998; Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth, & Jang, 1994). As individuals age and assume other responsibilities in life, many appear to naturally transition away from gangs and navigate toward other social groups (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Most gang members will at some point realize that gang life is not compatible with the future life they would like to live (Bjørgero, 1999).

**Prosocial<sup>34</sup> Commitments.** Individuals may be motivated to relinquish involvement in the gang as they develop increased ties to non-deviant friends, significant others and family members, and increasing commitment to social institutions (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Esbensen et al., 2001; Vigil, 1988). The former may encourage them to leave the gang and they may take

---

<sup>34</sup> Prosocial generally refers to that which is inside the normative consensus regarding acceptable social behaviour, while antisocial refers to that which is outside this normative consensus (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996). However, such a binary approach to assessing prosociality may be overly simplistic. A given behaviour emerges out of one’s continuous efforts to manage the multifaceted constellation of social forces (i.e., the immediate group, social group, cultural group) within a given set of circumstances that could potentially influence one’s behaviour. A behaviour that might seem antisocial from one perspective or in a given situation can seem prosocial from another (Jordan & Wesselmann, 2015). In keeping this caveat in mind, the use of the terms ‘prosocial’ and ‘antisocial’ throughout this doctoral dissertation should be interpreted in the context of maintaining consistency with the terminology employed in the research literature and by the research participants themselves, and not as making normative judgments on given social behaviours.

up opportunities for prosocial integration such as spirituality and religious conversion, gainful employment, romantic relationships, or parenthood, all of which discourages continued gang involvement (Carson et al., 2013; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011b; Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule, 2014; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Hagedorn, 1994; Moloney et al., 2009; Moore, 1991; Padilla, 1992; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Spergel, 1995; Thrasher, 1927; Vigil, 1988; Wood & Alleyne, 2010).

### Barriers to Desistance

Part of the process of exiting the gang involves addressing barriers and obstacles to disengagement. Again, the sources from the literature included below employed the same methodological approaches and data collection techniques discussed previously in the sections on motivations for gang involvement, methods of desistance, and motivations for desistance. Of note is the inclusion of several Canadian data sources that examined the extent and nature of gangs in Canada (Chettleburgh, 2003; CISC, 2006; Wortley & Tanner, 2004), that reviewed programs and services for youth gangs (Mellor et al., 2005), and that used self-reported and official data gathered from the Study on Incarcerated Serious and Violent Young Offenders to analyze turning points in gang trajectories (Descormiers, 2013).

The level of difficulty, perseverance, and commitment that is required when exiting the gang cannot be overstated. Individuals may encounter a wide variety of problems when trying to leave the gang, some stemming from the gang itself and others having their origin outside the gang (Mellor et al., 2005). Individuals may maintain membership with the gang out of a fear of the perceived violence accompanying exit (Bolden, 2013; Cassell & Weinrath, 2011; Decker, 1996). As noted by Pyrooz and colleagues (2013), an aspect of gang lore is that individuals who leave the gang will suffer serious repercussions, such as harm to themselves, to their friends, or



to their family members. However, as noted previously, evidence of gang exit involving violence is rarely found in the research. This entrenched stereotype of being unable to leave the gang, often due to an underlying threat of violence or death, is likely a significant barrier to the decision to exit (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002). While some research suggests that harassment and threats of violence have a strong impact on individuals attempting to leave their gangs (Bjørger, 2009), other research indicates that these threats may not be taken seriously by former gang members (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996).

Since gangs are perceived to meet the unfulfilled needs of their members, individuals may be reluctant to leave out of a fear of the loss of these benefits. For example, the gang may provide a source of emotional support to its members. Leaving the gang may require rejecting one's friends and peers who provided the sense of belonging that was absent for many individuals prior to joining. Indeed, research in this area has demonstrated that gang exit and changes in social networks may be complicated by the persistence of strong social and emotional ties (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011b; Descormiers, 2013; Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2014). Gang members are unlikely to desist from gang involvement until and unless a suitable alternative to this support system has been found (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002). Further, relationships to other gang members and persistent ties to the gang may draw the individual back in to the lifestyle (Bolden, 2013; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2014). Neutralizing or severing these ties is often a difficult process because many of them reflect relationships that existed before the decision to join the gang (Carson et al., 2013; Densley, 2013; Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2014; Thornberry et al., 2003). Former gang members may also respond or retaliate if their gang was disrespected or if a member was attacked. These enduring ties complicate the process of desistance and should not be minimized (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011).

External barriers also present challenges to disengaging gang members, particularly the difficulties that many young people face when trying to make new lives for themselves. Bjørge (1999) suggests that membership may be sustained if individuals perceive there to be no alternative places to go outside the gang, or if they believe they will be rejected by conventional<sup>35</sup> society. Gang members come from a variety of ethnic, demographic, and socio-economic backgrounds. However, most young people involved in gangs tend to come from groups and areas that suffer from the greatest levels of economic inequality, disadvantage, and social disorganization (Chettleburgh, 2003; CISC, 2006; Wortley & Tanner, 2004). Participation in the gang may further constrain the possibilities and opportunities for alternative means of social participation (e.g., legitimate employment) leading to increasingly marginalized and imprisoning lives that constrain an individual's capacity to live differently (Weaver & Weaver, 2013). Long-term gang membership may have limited the individual's ability to acquire education and marketable skills for the workforce, thereby limiting the gang member's options for employment if he decides to leave. Many young people are left with what Ritter and Anker (2002) term 'McJobs' – unstable, low-paying service sector jobs that promise little in the way of career development or advancement – as their only option. In turn this may result in benefits of staying in the gang being perceived as outweighing consequences of being a gang member.

Further, social barriers such as the gang 'label', public perceptions of the individual as a gang member, and stigma attached to former gang membership, may limit opportunities as well as an individual's ability to leave the gang. The gang member identity often remains fixed in the public's perception well after the decision to leave the gang has been made and acted on.

---

<sup>35</sup> Like the use of the terms 'prosocial' and 'antisocial', the use of the term 'conventional' throughout this doctoral dissertation should be interpreted in the context of maintaining consistency with the terminology employed in the research literature and by the research participants themselves, and not as making normative judgments on given social behaviours.

Individuals may continue to be seen as gang members by their former gang, rival gangs, the police, and the community (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011a; Decker, Pyrooz, Sweeten, & Moule, 2014; Padilla, 1992; Peterson, 2012). This sustained identification as gang-involved may result in an individual being stopped or questioned by police, arrested, and listed in a database of gang members. Also, the individual may fear violence from rival gangs who are not likely to forgive nor to forget prior trespasses simply because he de-identified as a gang member (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Labelling and stigmatization by others may actually serve to reinforce the individual's gang values, thus pulling him back into the gang and in some cases propelling him deeper into the gang subculture (Becker, 1963; Bernburg, Krohn, & Rivera, 2006; Caspi, Bem, & Elder, 1989). It is often very difficult for young people to change their own perceived identity while they are still being treated and labelled as gang members. Further, gang insignias, criminal records, and acts committed while a gang member may hinder their ability to integrate into the prosocial world (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002).

Under these conditions, we can see why gang members may decide that leaving the gang is not worth the effort. There is little incentive to leave the gang when it is the source of income and friendships, when individuals are fearful of the potential violent consequences of their decisions, and when past activities as a gang member may cause others to continue to treat them as if they were still involved. Castel (1995) argues that those who feel the least connected to a valuable role in the economy, the lowest attachment to others, and the most pessimistic about their chances of improving their situation in the future are more likely to be chronic offenders and so may also be more likely to maintain continued gang membership.

The limited impact that the desistance literature has had on policy and practice is both surprising and problematic given that knowledge about desistance is essential to our

understanding of how and why individuals come to leave the gang (Cassell & Weinrath, 2011; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011b). Indeed, building an understanding of the human processes and social contexts in and through which desistance occurs is a necessary precursor to developing practice paradigms (McNeill, 2006a). There is a need to better understand the nuances of de-identification and disengagement, the variation in methods for leaving the gang, what different push and pull factors mean to the individual, and how certain barriers impact their decisions.

### **The Role of the Youth Justice System in the Desistance Process**

Involvement in the youth justice system is common for adolescent gang members (Howell, Braun, & Bellatty, 2017; Pyrooz et al., 2013). There are competing perspectives in the research literature on the nature of the role that incarceration plays in the lives of justice-involved youth (Schinkel, 2015; Soyer, 2014). On one hand, incarceration has been unequivocally identified as an event that disrupts normative development and diminishes future life chances (Chung, Little, & Steinberg, 2005). Involvement in the youth justice system and imprisonment can have more profound and deleterious effects for adolescents than for adults (Bala, Carrington, & Roberts, 2009). According to Altschuler and Brash (2004), young offenders returning to the community are making two different kinds of transitions: one from incarceration back into the community, and another from adolescence to adulthood. This point was also emphasized by Sullivan (2004) based on interviews with young people released from prison in New York City.

The successful transition to adulthood requires young people to develop a sense of social competence and mastery over their worlds, autonomy from parents and others, and self-direction. These building blocks of maturity are compromised when young people are cut off from the support of prosocial role models and face substantially reduced social, occupational, relationship,

and civic opportunities, resulting in ‘arrested development’ (Bonnie, Stroud, & Breiner, 2015; Dmitrieva, Monahan, Cauffman, & Steinberg, 2012; Steinberg, Chung, & Little, 2004; Sullivan, 2004). Previous research examining the effectiveness of youth justice models and systems in the United States, Canada, Scotland, and Germany has demonstrated that young people with histories of incarceration in the youth justice system have high rates of school failure, unemployment, homelessness, and criminal recidivism (Gatti, Tremblay, & Vitaro, 2009; Huizinga, Schumann, Ehret, & Elliot, 2004; McAra & McVie, 2007; Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010). Further, having been incarcerated significantly reduces the probability of finding gainful employment and long-term romantic relationships and it has negative impacts on health outcomes (Geller, Garfinkel, & Western, 2006; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Lopoo & Western, 2005; Pager, 2003; Western, 2006).

On the other hand, while much of the research on formerly incarcerated young people has drawn attention to the negative consequences associated with their confinement, a related body of scholarship has sought to uncover factors that can facilitate the process of desistance (Terry & Abrams, 2017). In recent years, researchers have become increasingly attentive to how the youth justice system may hold the potential to help young offenders and gang members change their behaviours (Deuchar, Søgaaard, Kolind, Thylstrup, & Wells, 2016). In their work with serious adolescent offenders in the United States, Mulvey and colleagues (2004) indicated that desistance can be sparked by an external shock or sanctioning experience such as incarceration, and that the youth justice system is expected to have the knowledge and insight to make individualized judgements that will promote prosocial development for young people.

In studies on criminal careers, incarceration, and desistance, there is a recurring finding that some offenders credit their imprisonment with transforming them as people and making

their desistance from crime more likely.<sup>36</sup> Narratives of current and former offenders have emphasized the deterrent effect of incarceration and described their experiences as a motivation to ‘turn your life around’ (Ashkar & Kenny, 2008; Gadd & Farrall, 2004; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001).

The bulk of the research to date on gang-involved youth in the youth justice system has been restricted to examining the impact of gang involvement on recidivism or the occurrence of violence within youth justice facilities.<sup>37</sup> Given the finding that involvement in the criminal justice system has had an impact on desistance from crime, it is important to examine the effect, if any, that involvement in the youth justice system has on desistance from gang involvement.

#### Approach and Contributions of Youth Justice Practitioners

The development of the desistance literature has led to several researchers exploring the links between the factors which assist individuals in the process of moving away from crime, and the impact of various criminal justice interventions, such as the role of incarceration as discussed above. Further to this, many authors have argued that relationships between key criminal justice workers and offenders can play a crucial role in the desistance process (Barry, 2007; Burnett, 2004; Burnett & McNeill, 2005; McNeill, Batchelor, Burnett, & Knox, 2005).

In the context of the youth justice system, it is often stated that the relationship between the youth justice practitioner and the justice-involved youth is at the heart of youth justice practice (Burnett & McNeill, 2005; Drake, Fergusson, & Briggs, 2014; Inderbitzin, 2006). Butts, Bazemore, and Meroe (2010) believe that these relationships must always be partly affective and

---

<sup>36</sup> For examples, see: Aresti, Eatough, & Brooks-Gordon (2010); Ashkar & Kenny (2008); Barry (2006); Farrall & Calverley (2006); and Giordano, Cernovich, & Rudolph (2002).

<sup>37</sup> For examples of examinations of the impact of gang involvement on recidivism, see: Benda & Tollett (1999); Caudill (2010); Huebner, Varano, & Bynum (2007); Lattimore, MacDonald, Piquero, Linster, & Visher (2004); and Lattimore, Visher, & Linster (1995). For examples of examinations of the occurrence of violence within youth justice facilities, see: Tasca, Griffin, & Rodriguez (2010); Trulson (2007); and Wood, Alleyne, Mozova, & James (2014).

emotional, but partly pragmatic as well. This perspective was reiterated by Martinez and Abrams (2013) who suggest that individuals may receive important benefits from the intangible or expressive and/or tangible or instrumental resources exchanged with significant others including informal supports such as families, friends, mentors, and neighbours, and formal supports such as youth justice professionals.

Past research using narrative methodology and employing the life-stories of ex-offenders suggests that expressive support, including expressions of encouragement and acceptance, has the potential to foster the internal motivation that is important to desistance (Maruna, 2001; Maruna & LeBel, 2003). Vaughan (2007) suggests that perceptions of judgements of others play an important role in whether an individual can conceive of alternatives to their current lifestyle. The acknowledgement by others of an individual's desire to leave the gang may act as a foundation to begin the process of desistance. Further, a means of encouraging continued desistance can reside in the testimony offered by others that the individual is desisting successfully, and the championing of a young person to others (Farrall, Hunter, Sharpe, & Caverley, 2014; Maruna, 2001; Vaughan, 2007). Instrumental support involves providing tangible resources such as material aid, programming, and opportunities to individuals seeking to desist from gang involvement. Instrumental support can take a variety of forms, including: providing individuals with a stable place to live; individual counselling or peer mentoring; cognitive-behavioural development supports; remedial education, life skills, job training services and employment opportunities; health and mental health interventions and substance abuse treatment; and recreational programming (Hastings et al., 2011).

Therefore, there are various ways in which the relationships between youth justice practitioners and justice-involved youth may influence the process of desistance from gang

involvement. McNeill (2009) argues that there are three necessary roles that criminal justice workers need to fulfil for desistance to be facilitated. In their work with justice-involved youth: (1) they must foster motivation and increase capacities (e.g., decision-making and reasoning skills, education and vocational skills); (2) provide practical support and opportunities (e.g., referrals to external agencies, placements); and (3) support the development of alternative identities (Burnett & McNeill, 2005; McNeill, 2009). All three features need to be present for change to occur; all three are necessary conditions of change. These supports provided by youth justice practitioners may be considered as possible ‘tools’ to promote desistance efforts and may assist justice-involved youth in maintaining desistance from gang involvement over time.

In general, there has been a limited focus in the youth justice research on the mechanisms of helping relationships between youth justice practitioners and the youth justice clients with whom they work<sup>38</sup>, and almost no research has specifically examined gang-involved youth justice clients (Gebo & Campos, 2016; Sharkey, Stifel, & Mayworm, 2015). The research that does exist primarily explores the perspectives of adults on their relationships with delinquent youth (see Gordon, 1999; Umamaheswar, 2012). Helping relationships are dyadic in nature, however, and seeking information from just one partner of such relationships provides an incomplete picture (Abrams, 2006; Abrams, Kim, & Anderson-Nathe, 2005). By incorporating the perspectives of justice-involved youth with that of youth justice practitioners, a more complete and compelling picture of the practitioner-client relationship can be developed.

### **Research and Evaluation on Prevention, Intervention & Suppression Approaches**

Research and evaluation on the effectiveness of prevention, intervention, and suppression efforts, meaning those designed to target individuals at risk of gang involvement, those designed

---

<sup>38</sup> For examples, see: Barry (2000, 2007); Drake et al. (2014); Marsh & Evans (2009); and Marsh, Evans, & Williams (2010).



to divert gang members away from gangs and gang activity, and those designed to target gang members and their criminal activities, can also help to inform our understanding of desistance from gang involvement. This section provides an overview of the current state of knowledge in these areas. Some specific examples of the types of initiatives discussed below can be found in Appendix A.

Prevention approaches target at-risk populations. As was demonstrated earlier in the review of motivations for gang involvement, there are different pathways for gang membership and the factors that lead individuals to join gangs vary. A one-size-fits-all approach will not work, rather a continuum of initiatives is needed to prevent gang involvement. They need to target risk and protective factors at the individual level and in family, peer, school, and community contexts (Gilman et al., 2014; Hill et al., 1999; Howell, 2012). The most effective and well-evidenced approaches tend to employ ‘therapeutic principles’ (O’Connor & Wadell, 2015). They include skills-based, parent/family-focused, and therapy-based initiatives, which aim to foster positive changes as well as prevent negative outcomes.<sup>39</sup> Skills-based initiatives focus on increasing problem solving, self-control, anger management, conflict resolution, social and emotional competencies, and other life skills. Family-focused initiatives include developing positive parenting skills and strengthening parent/child relationships. Therapy-based initiatives include individual, group-based, and family counselling (Bellis, Hughes, Perkins, & Bennett, 2012; Ross, Duckworth, Smith, Wyness, & Schoon, 2011).

Other approaches that appear promising but have limited evidence include community-based initiatives. These include community engagement and partnership building opportunities

---

<sup>39</sup> Like the use of the terms ‘prosocial’, ‘antisocial’, and ‘conventional’, the use of the terms ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ throughout this doctoral dissertation should be interpreted in the context of maintaining consistency with the terminology employed in the research literature and by the research participants themselves, and not as making normative judgments on given social behaviours.

between young people, families, schools, community, and public services (Howell, 1998; Spergel, 1995, 2007). Examples include mentoring as well as recreation and/or sports-based programs (Howell, 2010, 2012; O'Connor & Waddell, 2015). These initiatives emphasize rewarding and self-affirming activities for young people (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009). Finally, preventative awareness strategies are targeted at a more general population and their primary objective is to increase knowledge by educating young people, and others, about the consequences of gang involvement (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009). Examples include school-based curricula and information sessions/materials (Wong, Gravel, Bouchard, Morselli, & Descormiers, 2012).

Intervention approaches target populations already involved in gangs. These strategies focus on existing gang members to help them get out of gangs and/or provide them with legitimate options outside of gang membership (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009). The various methods and motivations for desistance identified previously support the need for a variety of intervention initiatives. The most common of the approaches, individual development initiatives seek to increase basic capacities, skills, and individual propensities to help youth shift their life trajectories from gang-associated behaviours and affiliations to more prosocial lifestyles (Hastings et al., 2011; Linden, 2010). Most initiatives are targeted at individual behaviour and offer content focusing on perspective taking, moral reasoning, increasing self-esteem, developing a stronger self-identity, promoting the acquisition of conflict resolution skills, better managing actions and feelings, and making positive choices (Di Placido, Simon, Witte, Gu, & Wong, 2006; Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2007).

Relationship and community-based approaches serve to facilitate new sources of support, including working with the family, identifying new peer groups, and establishing a support

network for the gang-involved individual at school, at work, and in the community. When the social structure that the gang provides is no longer present in the young person's life, it is crucial to teach them how to seek out and gain support that can help sustain prosocial efforts. For individuals to disengage from the gang, membership, with its heavy reliance on a collective identity, must be replaced by an equally meaningful identity (Kassel, 2003).

Some initiatives focus on strengthening family bonds: reducing/mediating family conflicts, building positive relationships, family management skills, parenting skills, and providing opportunities for families to spend positive time together. Others focus on the development of healthy positive peer relationships: gaining access to more positive peer groups to meet the need for belonging and socialization including recreational, educational, social, mentoring, and faith-based programs. Finally, peer-mentoring programs allow young people to share similar experiences, validate each other's reality, and gain a greater sense of self-esteem, as individuals feel useful to other group members. It also gives gang members the opportunity to learn from those who have chosen to leave the gang lifestyle behind (Hastings et al., 2011; Young & Gonzalez, 2013).

Helping gang members to improve their education and offering them training opportunities may also play an important role in the desistance process. Some gang exit initiatives provide gang-involved youth with access to educational, training, and employment programs. Other initiatives offer remedial education, life skills and job training services, and mentoring opportunities to encourage youth to develop supportive relationships with employers. However, only a few programs go on to provide youth with actual employment opportunities (Hastings et al., 2011). Offering socially rewarding and financially remunerative employment

opportunities requires increasingly imaginative initiatives in a labour market that tends to exclude this population (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009).

Finally, initiatives for reducing gang involvement may also focus on the importance of addressing young peoples' delinquent lifestyles, particularly their involvement in violent activities. Gang members must be removed from high-risk situations for real change to occur (Taylor et al., 2008). A critical intervention point is when gang members themselves, or their friends and family members, have just been victimized by gang-related violence. If interventions are enacted when fear among individual gang members is high (i.e., directly after a violent incident), then the potential for gang members to view membership as posing an unacceptably high risk to their safety is more likely. Similarly, interventions aimed at older gang members may also focus on their fear of victimization, as this may ultimately lead to members disassociating with their respective gangs (Melde et al., 2009). An approach commonly employed is referred to as 'street work' meaning the use of outreach workers to work directly with gangs, gang members, and troubled youth in their own environment to provide services and mediate disputes so that they do not become violent (Klein, 1995; Thornberry, 2002). More recently, this type of work is being promoted through hospital-based violence intervention programs (HVIPs), which identify patients most at risk for re-injury and then connect them with trained, culturally competent case managers who provide intense oversight and assistance both in the hospital and in the months following release (Cooper, Eslinger, & Stolley, 2006; Johnson et al., 2007; Roman, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2017; Snider, Jiang, Logsetty, Strome, & Klassen, 2015).

Most of the knowledge about 'what works' to prevent and intervene in youth gang involvement comes from the United States, and to a lesser extent the United Kingdom (O'Connor & Wadell, 2015; Wong, Gravel, Bouchard, Descormiers, & Morselli, 2016; Wong et

al., 2012). While rigorous evaluations of gang initiatives are limited in Canada<sup>40</sup>, a review of several youth gang prevention and intervention initiatives implemented by Public Safety Canada between 2007 and 2012 has identified program activities that have shown some success in reducing behavioural outcomes related to police contact, violent and non-violent offending, and gang involvement. They include counselling, case management, sporting activities that are combined with core case management, employment training and support, healthy relationships with peers, parenting skills, education on gang risks and recruitment, drugs, alcohol and addictions education, and cultural or community-based components (Smith-Moncrieffe, 2013).

Another common approach to address gangs is suppression by the criminal justice system (Chettleburgh, 2007). Strategies focus on the criminal behaviour of gang members, and usually employ a coordinated justice response emphasizing arrest, prosecution, and incarceration (Bania, 2009; Jones et al., 2004; Westmacott, Stys, & Brown, 2005). The activities and provisions included within these strategies involve intelligence gathering, police activities aimed at disorganizing gang activities by making arrests, special prosecution provisions for gang members, community policing, and peacemaking negotiations (Hastings et al., 2011; Wong et al., 2012). Although somewhat effective in decreasing gang-related crime in the short term, most suppression tactics have not been able to produce lasting decreases in gang-related violence and victimization. In some instances, these tactics have also led to counterproductive impacts on individuals and communities (Bania, 2009; Chettleburgh, 2007; Wortley & Tanner, 2004).

On their own, suppression initiatives fail to recognize core properties of gang dynamics and they are not likely to have a lasting impact without interventions that, at the same time,

---

<sup>40</sup> Rigorous outcome evaluations of gang prevention and intervention programs are infrequently conducted. Existing evaluations vary widely in terms of methodology and findings and have yet to be integrated into a common framework amenable for systematic analysis of the effectiveness of gang prevention and intervention strategies (Wong et al., 2013, 2016).

ameliorate the larger structural-level conditions that give rise to and maintain gangs (Stinchcomb, 2002; Westmacott et al., 2005). When they are employed as part of a larger systematic approach, focused deterrence initiatives have shown more promising results on gang-related crime and violence reduction (Braga & Weisburd, 2012). The latter include problem-oriented policing approaches using ‘pulling levers’ strategies where the police use whatever laws they can to intervene to prevent gang violence and manage the behaviour of chronic offenders; removing individuals from the gang who have a higher probability of impacting crime and violence levels (McGloin, 2005).

To have a lasting impact on gangs, a comprehensive approach is needed that involves a combination of prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies (Chatterjee, 2006; Linden, 2010). Based on an analysis and understanding of the gang problem, specific initiatives in each of these three areas are organized and integrated into a community-wide planning and implementation structure. There is also a focus on fostering community mobilization and encouraging organizational change and development, meaning the implementation of policies and procedures that result in the most effective use of available potential resources within and across agencies (Spergel, 1995). This requires encouraging the coordinated action of criminal justice officials, residents, youth, community groups, civic leaders, and a range of agencies to create or strengthen linkages with and opportunities for at-risk and gang-involved youth, and to coordinate programs and services within and across agencies (Fritsch, Caeti, & Taylor, 1999). As noted by Hastings (2010, p. 11), with respect to effectively addressing the youth gang issue through comprehensive initiatives:

Success ultimately depended on starting with the problem, and on organizing agents and institutions around what is required to solve that problem. This sounds obvious, but it is quite different from our usual tendency to start with what is already in place and limit our

responses to those aspects of the problem that are relevant to the mandate and within the resource constraints of the organizations or agencies involved.

Finally, the focus of a comprehensive approach includes addressing structural level barriers. Strategies that minimize the importance of structural factors on individual life choices are likely to fail in the medium and long term. Gangs are only a symptom of social problems; they cannot be minimized or eliminated without society-wide action (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009). Emphasis is placed on the importance of addressing issues related to social context especially those with a clear orientation toward community integration, and on the development of opportunity structures that provide young people with a 'sense of hope' for the future. This includes initiatives and services that seek to increase social determinants of health and to help youth exit gangs safely and live successfully in the larger community (Hastings et al., 2011; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Van Acker & Wehby, 2000). Given the complexity of comprehensive approaches and the inherent difficulties of their implementation, continued investigation is needed to evaluate their effectiveness (Hodgkinson et al., 2009).

The existing body of literature on gang prevention, intervention, and suppression approaches enhances our knowledge and understanding with respect to how to respond effectively to youth gang issues and offers insights for future policies and practices to support desistance from gang involvement. As demonstrated in this chapter, the process of gang affiliation and involvement is multidimensional as is the process of desistance, meaning that efforts to address these issues must incorporate these findings. Given the needs fulfilled by the gang, initiatives to prevent, intervene, and suppress gang involvement must counteract the benefits it offers. They must address the root causes of gang membership, including: identifying risk and protective factors in the individual, family, peer, school, and community domains; acknowledging the individual motivations for gang involvement; understanding the different

methods of desistance and the factors that impact these methods; recognizing the motivations for desistance; and addressing the barriers and obstacles to disengagement.

Approaches should incorporate therapeutic principles and seek to increase basic capacities, skills, and individual propensities to help individuals shift their life trajectories from gang-associated behaviours and affiliations to more prosocial lifestyles. Sources of prosocial support should be promoted including working with the family, identifying new peer groups, and establishing a support network for the individual at school, at work, and in the community. Structural barriers to prosocial activities must be addressed and prosocial opportunities must be provided. Initiatives should focus on addressing an individual's delinquent lifestyle and promote their removal from high-risk situations, supplementing the desire to leave the gang with concrete resources to achieve this goal. Finally, suppression efforts should be contained within more comprehensive approaches to address gang involvement that seek to foster community mobilization and organizational change and development through coordinated efforts.

### **Need for an In-Depth Examination of Gang Desistance Among Justice-Involved Youth**

The purpose of this chapter was to provide an overview of the literature on some key topics related to gang involvement and desistance. *Table 1* at the end of this section encapsulates the information and issues presented. In turn, this has helped to identify some of the gaps in the current state of the literature, which are threefold. First, to better understand the gang issue, it is important to examine it from the vantage point of justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners. In general, justice-involved youth have often been referred to as an 'invisible population' (Inderbitzin, 2006). This is not only a result of issues of access to this group for research purposes, but also because relatively few people have taken the time to understand their experiences, and many ignore or dismiss their opinions because of skepticism about the



truthfulness or value of their viewpoint (Walters, 2006). Given that involvement in the youth justice system was identified as common for gang members, and that there continue to be calls in the academic literature to give greater voice to young people in the research process (Case, 2006; Prior & Mason, 2010), there is a need to seriously examine the views of this population. Justice-involved youth with gang affiliations have a wealth of knowledge and expertise when it comes to issues related to gang involvement and desistance. Further, they are well-situated to provide an important perspective on the effect, if any, that involvement in the youth justice system has on desistance from gang involvement and the role of the youth justice practitioner-client relationship in the process.

The youth justice practitioners who work with this population of gang-involved youth justice clients also have a significant viewpoint to offer. It is important to explore how their role as agents of the youth justice system may influence their understanding of gang-related issues and how they approach their work with gang-involved youth justice clients. Further, their perspective offers crucial reference points for identifying areas of convergence and divergence in interpreting young people's accounts of gang involvement and desistance, and vice versa (Drake et al., 2014). The personal forms of information and expertise that come from the life experiences of justice-involved youth and the professional experience of youth justice practitioners are critical to the production of knowledge (Weaver, 2011) and important for understanding desistance from gang involvement in the context of the youth justice system.

Second, as discussed in Chapter 1 and included as the first general research question guiding this project, before undertaking an investigation of desistance it is important to explore the complex nature of gang involvement by identifying and examining the diverse reasons why young people may have initially sought membership in the gang. As noted previously, compared

to the risk and protective factor research, there has been less emphasis in the literature on examining the motivations for gang involvement. Through additional empirical research, we may be able to contribute to the development of meaningful conclusions regarding the motivations for gang membership (Alleyne & Wood, 2010, 2014), and how the emphasis on motivations may vary based on individual circumstances.

Finally, identifying and understanding the variability in the gang desistance trajectory is an important task for researchers (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011b). Additional qualitative research is needed to continue to uncover the pathways and mechanisms promoting desistance from gang involvement and how the latter may differ across gang members and circumstances. As noted in Chapter 1, this can be accomplished by examining the subjective experiences of desistance from gang involvement among youth and young adults. Given the lack of empirical research to date, the focus of this research project is on developing a greater understanding of desistance from gang involvement among justice-involved youth in the Canadian context.

Overall, by employing the perspectives of justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners, it will be possible to explore the following: alternate definitions and the divergent functions of gangs; variations in beliefs as to the reasons why youth join and stay in gangs; and different views on desistance from gang involvement and the role of the youth justice system. These subjective understandings and experiences provided in the context of a qualitative exploratory research study will serve to address some of the gaps identified in the current research literature and will contribute to a more in-depth understanding of the youth gang phenomenon in Canada. The findings from this research project will also have implications for the development of an array of policy and practice initiatives targeting gang prevention, intervention, and the process of desistance from gang involvement in the Canadian context.

Table 1. Summary of Information and Issues Presented in the Literature Review

<i>Defining and Identifying 'Gang', 'Gang Member' &amp; 'Gang-Related Activity'</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Definition: Key issues include the necessity of a 'criminality' criterion; whether incidents of crime and/or violence are perpetrated for individual or group interests; the utility of the employment of typologies and the use of dimensions to characterize gangs; and the utility of the designation of membership type based on commitment, association, and embeddedness.</li> <li>• Identification: Key issues include the benefits and limitations of various methods employed for identifying gang and their members, namely law enforcement intelligence, structured risk assessment instruments, and self-identification.</li> </ul>
<i>Gang Membership – Focusing on Motivations for Involvement</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motivations for affiliation or involvement with the gang are characterized based on push and pull factors. There is recognition of the functional nature of gang membership and the importance of individual agency in the process of joining the gang.</li> <li>• Identified motivations include seeking protection based on concerns with personal safety and security; portrayals of a glamorous and rewarding lifestyle that includes money, excitement, and entertainment; the improvement of status and importance of respect often fostered through threat and/or use of force and violence; improved social relations that offer companionship, support, and a sense of belonging; survival where there is a perceived lack of resources to meet basic needs; and assumptions of helplessness and hopelessness as a result of a variety of social structural factors.</li> </ul>
<i>Defining and Examining Desistance from the Gang</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Definition: Key issues include a focus on desistance as an outcome (de-identification) or a process (disengagement over time); the varying degrees of attachments and ties to the gang and continued engagement in criminal activities; and the use of typologies to designate persisters and desisters.</li> <li>• Methods include hostile/active or non-hostile/passive exits; and possible routes involve quitting abruptly and entirely (knifing off) or a gradual process of drifting away from the gang.</li> <li>• Identified motivations include the costs and consequences associated with continued membership such as incidents of violence and involvement in the criminal justice system; disillusionment and disappointment with the gang lifestyle in general and the inner workings of the gang in particular; maturation associated with developmental and aging-out processes; and prosocial commitments involving increasing ties to non-deviant friends, significant others, and family members, and increasing ties to prosocial institutions.</li> <li>• Identified barriers include internal obstacles such as fear of perceived violence accompanying exit and/or fear of loss of benefits (e.g., social support system and means of income); and external obstacles such as viable opportunities for alternative means of social participation and/or stigma of the gang label.</li> </ul>
<i>The Role of the Youth Justice System in the Desistance Process</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role of incarceration: Conflicting views as an event that disrupts normative development and diminishes future life chances or an event that facilitates the process of desistance by sparking an external shock or sanctioning experience that through deterrence helps change behaviour and encourages transformation.</li> </ul>

- Approach and contribution of youth justice practitioners: Acknowledgement that relationships between key criminal justice workers and offenders can play a role in the desistance process. Youth justice practitioners can offer intangible (expressive) and/or tangible (instrumental) resources to justice-involved youth.
- Youth justice practitioners must foster motivation and increase capacities; provide practical support and opportunities; and support the development of alternative identities for justice-involved youth.

*Research and Evaluation on Prevention, Intervention & Suppression Approaches*

- Prevention approaches target at-risk populations with risk and protective factors in multiple ecological domains. A continuum of initiatives is needed which incorporate therapeutic principles.
- Intervention approaches target individuals already involved in gangs. Areas of focus include individual development, relationship development, community-based approaches, and addressing delinquent lifestyles, particularly involvement in crime and violence, at key points in time.
- Suppression approaches focus exclusively on criminal behaviour and employ coordinated criminal justice responses. On their own, these tactics are not successful in reducing gang involvement.
- Comprehensive approaches combine prevention, intervention, and suppression activities. They employ a coordinated method and link various organizations and services to address structural barriers and generate opportunities.

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **GETTING ON WITH ‘REAL LIFE’: APPLYING THE LIFE-COURSE PERSPECTIVE TO UNDERSTAND GANG INVOLVEMENT AND DESISTANCE**

In his 2010 Sutherland Address to the American Society of Criminology, Francis Cullen (2011, p.301) stated: “Life-course criminology now is criminology”. In doing so he argued that the life-course perspective is a privileged framework used to structure criminological problems. As discussed in Chapter 1, youth gangs have been identified as one such problem. There is little doubt among criminologists that gang membership increases serious criminal behaviour (Thornberry et al., 2003) and can have short- and long-term health, relational, educational, employment, and economic consequences. From entrance to exit, a better understanding of youth gang membership is an important issue for gang researchers, policymakers, and gang prevention and intervention specialists (Dong et al., 2015).

In this chapter, I argue that employing the life-course perspective is an appropriate and useful approach to understanding gang involvement and desistance. First, I offer a brief overview of this perspective providing a backdrop and context for its use in criminology. Second, I discuss the life-course perspective as it relates to the study of ‘criminal careers’ and more recently its application to the study of gangs. I acknowledge that the latter is not a novel idea, as gang researchers have often drawn upon the life-course perspective to understand the pathways of gang careers. Third, I expand my discussion of the life-course perspective by examining several factors and their interactions, namely maturation, prosocial bonds, agency, social structure and social context, as they relate to desistance from crime and gang involvement. Pulling these pieces together, I propose an integrated model of the process of desistance from gang involvement. Overall, I believe that applying this perspective can allow for a nuanced understanding of gang involvement and desistance for young people involved in the youth justice system.

## **Overview of the Life-Course Perspective**

The life course has been defined as ‘pathways through the age-differentiated life span’ established through expectations and options that impact on decision-making processes and the course of events that give shape to life stages, transitions, and turning points (Elder, 1985). It is a framework for examining human experience, which views human development across the entire life span, and focuses on individual progress according to age-graded and culturally defined roles and social transitions (Baltes, 1987; Elder, 1985). This perspective emphasizes the importance of treating behaviour as constantly evolving as various demands, opportunities, interests, and events impact individuals as they age (Baltes, 1987; Baltes & Brim, 1982). Human development is not completed in childhood or even in adolescence; behaviour that is initiated in adolescence can have important consequences for transitions to adulthood, and these transitions, in turn, can shape the course of adult development. Thus, within the life-course perspective, emphasis shifts from a focus on early socialization to the entire life span (Elder, 1994).

Two concepts central to the life-course perspective are ‘trajectory’ and ‘transition’ (Elder, 1985, 1994). The first concept refers to a pathway of development over the life span, meaning long-term patterns of specific types of behaviour (Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2003). For example, in most Western societies, young people are expected to complete their education, begin their careers, then get married and start families. The second concept is used to refer to specific life events or short-term changes in social roles within long-term trajectories which break, either positively or negatively, a trajectory (e.g., graduating from high school, a first job, marriage, a first child or dropping out of school, divorce, being arrested) (Borg & Dalla, 2005; Le Blanc & Loeber, 1990, 1998; Moule et al., 2013; Piquero et al., 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Human development is viewed as explicitly multidimensional because people simultaneously move along different trajectories (e.g., family, school) as they age. Not everyone enters all developmental trajectories, however, and people can be characterized in terms of the pattern of trajectories they do and do not enter. Trajectories also become interlinked over the course of human development (Elder, 1985, 1994), and entrance into some trajectories can impact movement along other trajectories. Both the timing of transitions and the interlocking nature of trajectories can create ‘turning points’, which are situations or events that have an impact on trajectories and the life course itself (Elder, 1985). According to Sampson and Laub (2005), turning points typically change the life course by: (1) allowing for a break from the past; (2) creating new relationships and altering social supports; (3) changing routine activities; and (4) providing opportunities for identity transformation.

An early or precocious transition in one trajectory that has a ripple effect into others can alter the long-term prospects of successful adjustment into adulthood. There is increasing recognition that behaviours initiated during adolescence can have important consequences regarding the transitions into adult roles and responsibilities (Arnett, 2000; Krohn, Gibson, & Thornberry, 2013). Off-age transitions can create disorder in the developmental sequence and lead to later problems of adjustment because the individual is less likely to be prepared for the transition. As indicated previously, our culturally normative age-graded stages suggest that an individual completes school before starting a career and marries before parenting. Becoming a teenage parent can cause stress because of having to navigate the parenting role before the individual is psychologically or economically ready (Buzi, Saleh, Weinman, & Smith, 2004; Marsiglio & Pleck, 2004). This also affects other life-course trajectories by reducing the chances of completing high school and of establishing a stable employment history. This demonstrates

that the life course is never fully determined. It is always possible for new conditions and events to coincide to deflect even well-established pathways (Thornberry et al., 2003). As such, the life-course perspective recognizes both stability and change in human behaviour.

### **Application of the Life-Course Perspective to Issues in Criminology**

Within criminology, the life-course perspective has been offered as a comprehensive approach to the study of ‘criminal careers’<sup>41</sup> because it considers the multitude of influences that shape offending across different time periods and contexts (Piquero & Mazerolle, 2001; Thornberry, 1997). In the 1980s, criminologists became concerned with explaining how participation in offending varies across an individual’s life span, bringing increased attention to three key processes in criminal involvement: (1) why and when people start offending – onset; (2) why and how they continue offending – continuity; and (3) why and when people stop offending – desistance (Blokland & Nieuwbeerta, 2010; Piquero et al., 2003; Pyrooz & Decker, 2014; Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Applying the life-course perspective to research on criminal careers has generated a wealth of information regarding the longitudinal patterning of criminal activity. Offending participation, career duration, and desistance can be understood in relation to developmental life stages<sup>42</sup> and researchers have been able to isolate important life circumstances and events that lead to within-individual changes in criminal activity (Le Blanc & Loeber, 1990, 1998; Piquero

---

<sup>41</sup> At its most basic level, a criminal career is the “characterization of the longitudinal sequence of crimes committed by an individual offender” (Blumstein, Cohen, Roth, & Visher, 1986, p. 12). The study of criminal careers does not imply that offenders derive their livelihood exclusively or even predominantly from crime; instead, the concept is intended only as a means of structuring the longitudinal sequence of criminal events associated with an individual in a systematic way (Blumstein, Cohen, & Hsieh, 1982). However, I do acknowledge that there are external forces at work that impact the development and maintenance of criminal careers. As argued by Howard Becker (1963), a deviant career is a stable pattern of deviant behaviour that is an outcome of the labelling process. He believed in many instances that an individual offender may have no choice but to enter into and continue with the various types of pursuits expected of such a person, namely deviant or criminal activities.

<sup>42</sup> For examples, see: Blokland, Nagin, & Nieuwbeerta (2005); DeLisi & Piquero (2011); Piquero, Brame, Mazerolle, & Haapanen (2002); Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein (2003, 2007); and Sampson & Laub (2005).



et al., 2003). Overall, the life-course perspective leads to a focus on continuity and change in criminal behaviour over time (Laub & Sampson, 2001). There is also an assumption that “delinquent careers are not pre-determined but are malleable, changing as the person’s life unfolds” (Thornberry et al., 2003, p. 2).

Criminal careers are embedded in reciprocal causal relationships with other life-course trajectories (Thornberry, 1987; Thornberry & Krohn, 2005). To illustrate, failure in the educational trajectory increases the likelihood of delinquent careers but involvement in delinquent behaviour is also likely to lead to school disengagement and failure. In addition, participation in antisocial behaviour discourages friendships with conventional others and encourages involvement in deviant social networks. Interaction with deviant groups can further embed young people in delinquent behavioural styles and isolate them from prosocial arenas (Krohn et al., 2011). Because prosocial friends, teachers, and family can play an important role in assisting the individual in getting through school, obtaining a job, and selecting a significant other, the loss of these sources of support can have deleterious effects on later life chances (Thornberry et al., 2003). Overall, a great deal of research has demonstrated the interplay between criminal behaviour and other general life-course trajectories (Blokland & Nieuwbeerta, 2006; Piquero & Mazerolle, 2001).

Like the criminal career, gang membership can also be conceptualized and understood using the life-course perspective. Gang membership follows patterns comparable to crime in the life course: individuals join (onset), persist (continuity), and leave (desistance) gangs. Gang researchers have drawn extensively on a life-course framework to understand the impact of gang joining as well as to understand leaving the gang.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> For examples, see: Curry et al. (2013); Dong et al. (2015); Peterson et al. (2004); Pyrooz & Decker (2011); Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb (2014); Pyrooz et al. (2013); and Thornberry et al. (2003).

Gang membership can be better understood by mobilizing the life-course concepts of trajectories and transitions. Because gang membership is marked by onset and termination and involves at least some degree of persistence across time, it qualifies as a trajectory (Krohn & Thornberry, 2008; Pyrooz et al., 2013). In his identification of some of the advantages of the life-course perspective for the study of crime and delinquency, Thornberry (1997) elaborated on several important dimensions of a trajectory that can be applied to gang membership. First, entrance refers to the fact that not all at-risk individuals enter the gang membership trajectory. Second, people attain a varying degree of success in accomplishing the developmental tasks embedded in a trajectory. Those who do enter the gang trajectory, for instance, join at different ages, stay for varying periods of time, and become more or less involved in the gang lifestyle. While trajectories refer to long-term patterns of development, transitions maintain or alter individual trajectories. A gang career, for instance, is comprised of numerous group-gathering and solidifying events. These incidents bring special meaning to gang members and can be influential in characterizing a gang trajectory. Research suggests that investment in the gang is reinforced through both implicit and explicit expectations for commitment and loyalty to the group. This is often reinforced through initiation rituals and frequent use of gang signs and symbols (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Felson, 2006). Furthermore, the social status of gang-involved youth is often elevated based on their willingness to be involved in dangerous activities for the gang's benefit, including confronting rival gang members (Miller & Decker, 2001).

The life-course perspective also suggests that joining the gang itself may act as a turning point that may redirect other life-course pathways (Melde & Esbensen, 2011; Thornberry et al., 2003). Given that trajectories are interlinked, we can anticipate that gang membership will have an impact not only on the probability of delinquent behaviour but also on other prosocial life-

course trajectories (Krohn et al., 2011). In brief, these processes stem from the somewhat more formal structure and the highly deviant nature of the gang. Gangs are social networks that embed their members in deviant routines and isolate them from prosocial arenas. Although adolescence is a period during which most youth spend more time away from the watchful gaze of parents and other authority figures (Warr, 2002), involvement in the gang exacerbates this situation, exposing these individuals to high-risk situations including social forums where alcohol, drugs, and delinquent peers such as rival gang members, are present (Taylor, Peterson, Esbensen, & Freng, 2007; Thornberry et al., 2003).

Joining a gang disrupts a standard course of adolescent development with respect to other interwoven life domains that can include family, school, employment, and peers (Dong et al., 2015). As demonstrated in Chapter 2, evidence of this comes from mostly American qualitative and quantitative studies examining the consequences of gang membership among adolescents and young adults.<sup>44</sup> Periods of active gang involvement likely are associated with a weakening of one's bond to conventional society. Social bonds vary over the life course and are always responsive to environmental changes (Dannefer, 1984; Na & Paternoster, 2012). Joining a gang is an environmental change that can evoke changes in the bond to conventional institutions.

Although turning points can result in abrupt shifts in life trajectories which may disconnect one's past from one's future, for most people, turning points are conceptualized as "part of a process over time and not as a dramatic lasting change that takes place at any one time" (Pickles & Rutter, 1991, p. 134). This gradual, process-oriented understanding of turning points focuses attention on new initiation points and incremental changes, which set in motion dynamic processes that shape future outcomes (Rutter & Rutter, 1993). In the case of gang

---

<sup>44</sup> For examples, see: Krohn et al. (2011); Levitt & Venkatesh (2001a, 2001b); Moore (1991); Pyrooz (2014b); Pyrooz, Fox, Katz, & Decker (2012); and Thornberry et al. (2003).

joining, the immediate impact of this turning point may not be apparent. Changes in other life domains accumulate over time and are realized in later life, but this may depend on the amount of time or years individuals spend in the gang, the age at which they join and leave the gang, and their commitment to the gang lifestyle (Dong et al., 2015).

According to several studies, including those listed previously, prolonged gang membership in early adolescence can lead to deleterious outcomes in late adolescence and early adulthood. For example, Krohn and colleagues (2011) examined male adolescents aged 14-18 involved in the Rochester Youth Development Study and followed them up to age 31, engaging them and their parents in interviews at regular intervals. They found that the number of years in the gang in early adolescence increased the probability of precocious transitions in late adolescence, including leaving home early, cohabitation, teen parenthood, and dropping out of school. These off-age transitions then impacted both financial and familial problems in early adulthood, which ultimately increased the probability of involvement in street crime and/or arrest in early adulthood. Overall, they found: “The longer the adolescent stayed in the gang, the more disruption he or she experienced during emerging adulthood and in adulthood itself” (p. 1016).

### **Understanding Desistance Within the Life-Course Perspective**

Among the many myths about gangs is that membership is permanent. While there are individuals who maintain their gang involvement for extended periods or for life, there are many more who leave the gang after one or two years (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Hagedorn, 1998; Krohn & Thornberry, 2008; Melde & Esbensen, 2011; Moore, 1991; Peterson et al., 2004; Pyrooz et al., 2012; Thornberry et al., 2003). While the gang may serve a variety of functions for individuals at points in their lives, for most, the situation is temporary (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Hagedorn, 1998; Thornberry et al., 2003). According to Pyrooz and colleagues (2013),

longitudinal studies based on community samples have indicated that actual membership in a gang is often fluid and transitory. The reorientation of individual-level research on gangs into a life-course framework demonstrates that gang membership is not fixed, and individuals cycle into and out of gangs throughout the course of their lives (Melde & Esbensen, 2011; Pyrooz, 2014b; Thornberry et al., 2003).

In criminology, a core aspect of the life-course perspective involves the recognition of the maturation hypothesis. The latter suggests that official and self-reported criminal activity decreases with age, often during late adolescence and early adulthood. For most individuals, participation in crime generally begins in the early teenage years, peaks in late adolescence or young adulthood, and ends by middle adulthood (Blumstein et al., 1986; Piquero et al., 2003). This lays the groundwork for the desistance argument generally, and can be applied to desistance from gang involvement specifically. Aging and ‘maturational reform’ are purported to explain most desistance.<sup>45</sup> The general belief is that developmental change in late adolescence and early adulthood facilitates the acquisition or refinement of competencies and values that make criminal behaviour less attractive and less acceptable. As individuals become more engaged and attached socially, emotionally, and intellectually, changes in their moral reasoning, future orientation, impulse control, or susceptibility to peer influence may help steer them away from antisocial behaviour and toward more socially desirable activities (Gardner, 1993; Keating, 1990; Steinberg & Cauffman, 1996). Applied to the gang context, Venkatesh (2003) argues that individuals’ motivations for, and investments of time and energy into the gang, may change over time, especially over the life course as youth mature.

---

<sup>45</sup> Maturational reform, a term first coined by David Matza (1964, p. 22), is a common process observed in criminology. Individuals essentially ‘grow up’ and move out of crime associated with the ‘storm and stress’ of adolescence and into more conventional pursuits associated with the stability of adulthood, such as education, employment, marriage, and families (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Thornberry et al., 2003).

However, there is also a need to explain desistance that is not accounted for through age and maturation; in other words, identifying the other variable factors that facilitate reductions in offending and gang involvement. As noted by Elder (1998), the life-course perspective is based on a number of important principles: (1) historical time and place are embedded within the life course and individuals are shaped by this context over time; (2) timing in life is important in that the impact of a life transition or event depends on when it occurs within one's life course and how it is interpreted at that time; (3) lives are linked through relationships, as well as social and contextual influences; and (4) individuals construct their lives using their own agency, which is influenced by external influences. Based on these principles, several factors, and their interactions, can be considered in explanations for desistance within the life-course perspective, namely prosocial bonds, agency, social structure, and social context. The following sections will consider each of these factors in turn, and the last section will address the interplay between factors and present a possible conceptual model for the desistance process.

### Prosocial<sup>46</sup> Bonds

The life-course perspective represented most prominently by Sampson and Laub (1990, 1993, 1997) and Patterson and colleagues (1989, 1992), attributes the decrease in antisocial behaviour evidenced by adolescents as they approach adulthood to enhanced prosocial bonding. In their age-graded theory of informal social control, based on social control theory (e.g., Hirschi, 1969), Sampson and Laub (1993) argue that the well-known, patterned increase in offending during adolescence is caused by a breakdown in social bonds to parents and schools and an increased attachment to delinquent peers. They hold that desistance occurs as bonds to

---

<sup>46</sup> As was indicated in Chapter 2, but important to reiterate, the use of the terms 'prosocial' and 'antisocial' here should be interpreted in the context of maintaining consistency with the terminology employed in the literature on the life-course perspective, and not as making normative judgments on given social behaviours.

prosocial institutions strengthen, typically when young people move into early adulthood and establish new bonds to prosocial actors (e.g., peers, significant others, employers).

The development of conventional social bonds can alter life trajectories (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Moloney et al., 2009; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Good marriages or relationships with romantic partners, steady employment, and military service may act as turning points in criminal careers (Laub & Sampson, 2001, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993, 2005). Applied to the context of gang membership, turning points may include similar events, such as gaining employment, entering into a romantic relationship, and parenthood (Carson et al., 2013). Former gang members often cite children, girlfriends, and jobs as their reasons for leaving the gang (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). These changes in the life course seem to be incompatible with the time, effort, and risks associated with criminal activity or gang involvement.

The relationship between prosocial ties and desistance has strings attached (Uggen, 1996). Sampson and Laub (1995) argue that on its own employment does not affect desistance. Rather, “employment coupled with job stability, commitment to work, and mutual ties binding workers and employers” reduces criminality (p. 146). Desistance depends not only on the existence of prosocial attachments, but also on their perceived strength and quality, and on the individual’s commitment to these new interactions (Sampson & Laub, 1993; West, 1982). If these new roles and opportunities create valued experiences that are important to the individual, then that individual may reach a point where the new lifestyle becomes a reality that is worth protecting (Mulvey et al., 2004). For example, in a Canadian study on Aboriginal gang members conducted by Goodwill (2009), participants reported becoming more accountable, particularly to family and children, and the feeling of satisfaction associated with this accountability reinforced their disengagement from the gang.

The turning points identified above provide the following: (1) social control through attachment to and surveillance by the prosocial other; (2) routine activities that limit unstructured time; and (3) new relationships with people who reinforce prosocial behaviour and limit time with antisocial peers (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Mulvey et al., 2004). Thus, desistance is not attributed exclusively to the inevitable aging process, but to the increased social bonding that accompanies movement into adult roles and responsibilities (Cernkovich & Giordano, 2001). External turning points can act as catalysts that redirect behaviours and trajectories, thereby beginning the process of desistance.

This perspective on the role of social bonds is popular, in part, because of its relatively easily measured characteristics. However, recent studies have questioned the extent to which external turning points can provide the initial motivation toward effective change.<sup>47</sup> A primary criticism of Sampson and Laub's (1993) theory of informal social control is that it fails to capture the role of human agency adequately, including the subjective elements of perception and decision-making involved in producing stability and change in behaviour (Giordano et al., 2002, 2007). Sampson and Laub (1993) specifically, and control theorists more generally, have been criticized for their focus on the change agent: "The actor is depicted as moving from adolescence to adulthood virtually unchanged, but for the good fortune of experiencing one or more of these events" (Giordano et al., 2007, p.1606).

### Agency

Individuals exert agency in their interpretive actions and interactions within situational contexts (Ulmer & Spencer, 1999). In all definitions of the term, there is an assumption of choice meaning that alternative courses of action are available, and individuals could have acted

---

<sup>47</sup> For examples, see: Giordano (2010); Giordano, Cernkovich, & Holland (2003); Giordano, Schroeder, & Cernkovich (2007); and Wright, Carter, & Cullen (2005).



differently (Hays, 1994). In this way, they are not exclusively determined, they are also determining. Individuals have the ability to ascribe meaning to objects and events, to define the situation based on those meanings, to consider alternative courses of action, and then to act (Musolf, 2003). Most definitions of agency also include something comparable to intention and transformation. Lindegaard and Jacques (2014) define intentional choice as an aware and directional decision. Aware in the sense that the choice is conscious. Directional in the sense that the choice is made with a certain goal in mind. There is also a belief that agency has some degree of 'transformative power' (Simmonds, 1989) which allows individuals to create, reproduce, or transform their personal and social environments (Hays, 1994). As noted above, for Elder (1985) agency is a central principle of the life-course framework. Settersten (2003) also lists agency as an emerging proposition of the life-course perspective: "The life course is a partial product of human action. It is actively created within the confines of the social worlds in which individuals exist" (p. 39). Within the constraints of their world, individuals plan and make choices among alternatives that form and can alter their life course (Elder, 1997).

To improve the explanatory power of the life-course perspective, researchers began focusing on the importance of agency in terms of understanding the change process (Giordano et al., 2003, 2002, 2007). This advancement recognizes the importance of personal experiences and changes in an individual's emotional and cognitive frames of mind during the desistance process. Specifically, cognitive shifts provide the motivation for changing old habits and moving toward new directions in life (Giordano et al., 2002). The motivation to change both precedes and accompanies sustained behaviour change (Giordano et al., 2007). This approach builds on the life-course perspective placing individuals at the forefront of the change process instead of seeing them as passively influenced by forces outside of their control (Giordano et al., 2002).

The theory of cognitive transformation advanced by Giordano and colleagues – presented first in 2002 and expanded in 2007 – posits that internal and external sources of change work together to facilitate desistance. Directed human agency is needed to gain access to the environmental elements or structural arrangements that act as ‘hooks for change’. The latter, which are similar in concept to social bonds but do not require the accompanying role shifts associated with adulthood, allow individuals to form a blueprint for change leading to moments or stages in a person’s life when a turning point is reached, and a decision is made to leave the criminal or gang lifestyle (Giordano et al., 2002, 2007).

Using a similar standpoint, Paternoster and Bushway (2009) focus on shifts in identity and social network preferences when individuals experience a ‘crystallization of discontent’ (Baumeister, 1991) sparked by the association of numerous negative life experiences with their current identity. This does not necessarily mean that the individual will immediately give up their identity and/or cut off any associated relationships. It does, however, typically initiate some serious reconsideration. The individual assesses the options, and may actively begin searching for alternatives (Baumeister, 1991). In both cases, the process of cognitive transformation and shifts in identity are gradual ones, often with relapses.

The combination of elements of prosocial bonding and agency and their role in the desistance process have been exemplified in an empirical study by Moloney and colleagues (2009) conducted in San Francisco, California with men from ethnic minorities coming from low-income backgrounds. They examined the meaning of ‘being a father’ on gang members’ decisions to persist or desist in gang life. For many of the young men, fatherhood acted as a turning point, facilitating important “subjective and affective transformations that led to changes in outlook, priorities and future orientations” (p. 305). Some men explained that the

responsibilities of fatherhood required a reorganization of their time and activities. The desistance process also required individual choice and agency. Numerous respondents reported that they desisted from gang activities because they wanted to become positive role models for their children. They also re-evaluated their past activities and priorities and realized that now they have something or someone to care for and about. The authors further noticed that although gang fathers' narratives of change were often dramatic, actual changes in behaviours were gradual. Sometimes, it took a long time before the individual could seize the hooks for change and reorient his day-to-day practices. Individuals' openness to change, commitment to change, and ability to identify turning points in the social environment all play a role in the desistance process (Giordano et al., 2002; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009).

Up to this point, agency has been conceived as inherently positive, the intentional and transformative decision to work toward achieving conventional success to raise social status, meaning position in the social hierarchy (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Laub, Sampson, & Sweeten, 2006). As discussed above, and illuminated in the work of others, desistance occurs when individuals benefit from agency because it moves them to adopt conventional markers of status such as employment, marriage, and parenthood.<sup>48</sup>

However, there are different kinds of status, and agency can include transformative action that leads to or exacerbates antisocial behaviours. Wealth for example, a conventional marker of success, can be earned through antisocial actions, and these actions can themselves infer status in some subcultures (Anderson, 1999; Jacobs, 1999; Sandberg, 2008a, 2008b). While this idea has been largely ignored in the life-course perspective, it fits within the rational choice framework (Clarke & Cornish, 1985; Cornish & Clarke, 2008). This theoretical lens emphasizes the role of

---

<sup>48</sup> For examples, see: Bottoms, Shapland, Costello, Holmes, & Muir (2004); Farrall & Bowling (1999); Gottfredson (2011); Healy & O'Donnell (2008); Maruna (2001); Sampson & Laub (2005); and Vaughan (2007).

intentional choice in lawbreaking, including the motive to offend and the method of doing so (Jacobs, 1999, 2000; Jacobs & Wright, 2006; Wright & Decker, 1994, 1997). Crime is explained as a means to an end. Entrepreneurial and predatory crimes like drug dealing, fraud, burglary, and robbery are a way to pay bills and earn economic status. In turn, illicit proceeds can be used to purchase other markers of status, such as ‘party items’, fashionable clothes, and jewelry (Anderson, 1999; Wright & Decker, 1994, 1997).<sup>49</sup> Moreover, antisocial behaviour can be a marker of status in and of itself. In some communities, drug users are respected for using drugs, violent individuals are respected for being violent, and thieves are respected for stealing (Anderson, 1999; Maggs & Hurrelmann, 1998; Moffitt, 1993; Sutherland, 1937).

Although agency may lead individuals away from gang involvement, it can also do the opposite. Agency is a crucial factor for the involvement in and continuation of gang affiliation. Gang involvement offers a way to gain status. In situations where education offers little prospects, jobs are scarce, social welfare non-existent, and family structures disrupted, gang involvement may be an important way to gain not only wealth but also belonging and respect. Further, beginning and continuing gang membership can be interpreted as choices to raise status. It allows individuals to redefine themselves in a manner that gives them self-esteem and power, rather than to construct themselves as victims of circumstances (Lindegaard & Jacques, 2014).

### Social Structure

Social structure encompasses the numerous social facts over which the individual does not have much control and cannot escape. Examples include race, class, sex, ideology,

---

<sup>49</sup> There are limits to the rational choice framework. An example is provided in the context of gaining economic status. In their work examining how human psychology drives the economy, Akerlof and Shiller (2009) highlight the Keynesian view that the economy is not just governed by rational actors who will engage in any transaction that is to their economic benefit but rather that economic activity is also governed by non-economic motives. Individuals are not always ‘rational’ in pursuit of their economic interests. This means that while individuals may consider the pros and cons of their behaviour; they are doing so within a particular context based on a socially-bounded rationality (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991) that cannot necessarily be reduced to an objective cost-benefit analysis.

institutions, organizational hierarchy, groups, geographical location, period of history, mode of production, generational cohort, family, culture, roles, and rules. Collectively these social facts constitute social arrangements, social relations, and social practices which exert enormous power and constraint over our lives (Musolf, 2003).

An individual's existence is bounded and constituted by these social forces that are beyond the horizon of their existence (Shammas & Sandberg, 2015). This suggests that we are born into situations that have existed before us and that will exist after we are gone. In Bourdieu's dispositional theory of action, he contends that 'fields', or domains of social action, have an impact on individuals. Central to this theory is the concept of 'habitus' which refers to an acquired system of preferences for individual action that is based on a system of durable cognitive structures, produced by historical and social conditions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

While agency is an important component of the life-course perspective, it does not adequately account for the complexity of desistance processes, or of the constraining effects of social structure upon decision-making (King, 2013). These social facts shape opportunities for deviant and conventional roles (Lindegaard & Jacques, 2014). An individual confronts social structural arrangements in everyday life and makes choices that are variously facilitated and constrained by these arrangements. Constraint is accounted for, in Elder and Johnson's (2003, p. 62) formulation of the life-course perspective, by "the principle of historical time and place: the life course of individuals is embedded in and shaped by the historical times and places they experience over their lifetime".

Many accounts of agency within the criminological and sociological literature have often relied too heavily upon the individualization thesis. The latter implies a degree of freedom and choice which is unavailable to many would-be desisters, given the socio-economic conditions of

contemporary late-modern society. The alleged range of opportunities available are often rooted in middle-class experiences, and do not incorporate a recognition of the social structural reality that many would-be desisters face in their everyday lives (King, 2013). Empirical support for the social, cultural, and economic marginalization of would-be desisters brings approaches to desistance underpinned by claims of choice under scrutiny (Farrall, Bottoms, & Shapland, 2010).

There is a growing body of work that recognizes the role of social facts in the process of desistance.<sup>50</sup> From a structural perspective, gang involvement can be framed as a lifestyle sustained by a given environment; often densely populated, low socio-economic status neighbourhoods (Curry et al., 2013; Egley, Howell, & Harris, 2014). Gang-involved individuals not only live in areas of high deprivation where opportunities are limited, but they also tend to live in areas of high crime. Crime is a part of their everyday lives and historically it has shaped community life. Most young people are involved in some form of low level offending but more importantly the majority encounter crime on a regular basis, either as victims or as witnesses. As a result, they must find ways of managing their relationships with crime in their own neighbourhoods. This can result in a culture in which individuals live by their own rules, resorting to violence and the illegal economy to support themselves and their families (Anderson, 1999). This can also be discussed in the context of ‘street habitus’ where individual action is generated by the sedimentation of social history, meaning the active presence of past experiences that produces schemes of perception, thought, and action more likely to succeed than formalized rules and norms (Bourdieu, 1990).

Many gangs serve as the primary source of material and social support for their neighbourhoods (Hagedorn, 1988; Venkatesh, 1997). Bourgois (1995, p. 8) has termed this an ‘inner-city street culture’ in which “a complex and conflictual web of beliefs, symbols, modes of

---

<sup>50</sup> For examples, see: Bottoms & Shapland (2011); Farrall et al. (2010); and Farrall et al. (2014).

interaction, values, and ideologies that have emerged in opposition to exclusion from mainstream society.” Leaving this culture or choosing not to adhere to its principles can be challenging and pose risks to the individual. Even those who have the desire to leave the gang may experience challenges due to the ingrained nature of this familiar culture (Fleisher & Decker, 2001; Griffin, 2007; Pyrooz, Decker, & Fleisher, 2011). Further, the inner-city street culture may impede the development of prosocial ties. Unable to support individuals or provide resources to families in a community, it may hinder the ability of other social institutions to foster social bonds with those seeking to desist from gang involvement.

Social structural conditions may also influence the nature of, and the processes associated with, desistance for different ethnic groups. For Aboriginal youth, gang involvement has precursors that can be traced back to historical and cultural losses, social and political inequalities, and economic barriers (e.g., racism, colonialization, loss of culture, loss of land, poverty, intergenerational violence, unemployment, poor health) faced by many Aboriginal people for multiple generations within Canadian society (Bracken, Deane, & Morrissette, 2009). The latter can create social and geographic conditions favourable to gang involvement among Aboriginal youth (Preston, Carr-Stewart, & Bruno, 2012; Sinclair & Grekul, 2012).

Social marginalization can also be observed among immigrant youth populations who may face several barriers to integration into Canadian society (e.g., linguistic, acculturative, psychological, educational, economic). First generation Canadian youth may also experience sociocultural challenges with respect to competing cultural expectations, cultural identity, and intercultural interactions (Ngo, 2010; Sersli, Salazar, & Lozano, 2010). Gangs typically form in communities where an accumulation of different forms of disadvantage (e.g., economic disadvantage, lack of opportunities, family disruption, racial discrimination) come together

(Pyrooz, Fox, & Decker, 2010). These groups experience what Vigil (2002) termed ‘multiple marginality’.

For individuals coming from marginalized backgrounds whose lives are characterized by social isolation and complex disadvantage, the process of desistance may be more complicated. It involves moving from a position of social exclusion to seeing oneself as deserving to be included (Deane, Bracken, & Morrissette, 2007). Some individuals may be left with a sense of pessimism about the future (Bania, 2009; Chettleburgh, 2007). For these individuals initiating, or even imagining, the process of desistance can be perceived as much more difficult.

Large scale institutional changes in areas such as the economy, employment structures, and the education system have also provided individuals with less predictability over the configuration of their life course (Bellair & McNulty, 2009; Cassell & Weinrath, 2011; Farrall et al., 2010; FitzGerald, Stockdale, & Hale, 2003; Hamnett, 2003). There are indications that the economic position of certain groups has been getting relatively worse and young men have felt this income inequality most acutely (Bania, 2009; Heisz, 2005). The relative economic position of young men aged 16-29 has declined over the past 30 years both in terms of their rate of full-time employment and in their earnings (Beaujot & Kerr, 2007). Within post-industrial economies, many manufacturing and trade opportunities, once available to young men (e.g., manual or unskilled labour), have diminished or disappeared. They have been replaced by jobs in the knowledge economy (e.g., banking, finance, insurance, information technology) that require more formal education, specialized skills or trade qualifications (Farrall et al., 2010; FitzGerald et al., 2003; Garland, 2001).

Thus, exactly the type of employment that in the past assisted many young men in making the move away from antisocial behaviour has largely disappeared, to be replaced either



by positions that require formal qualifications or by lower-status jobs that often have the image of ‘feminized work’ (e.g., administrative positions). Would-be desisters, many of whom have few educational or trade qualifications, have a limited set of options for integration into the labour market (Castel, 1995; Farrall et al., 2010). The economic situation among young people in Canada who fail in high school or do not continue to post-secondary education is very difficult. This is a particularly vulnerable group, with long-term difficulties anticipated given the fundamental role of skills and knowledge necessary to fully participate in economic and social life (Beaujot & Kerr, 2007). Young people’s present-day understandings of local labour markets and their emerging social futures can greatly influence their sense of inclusion, willingness, and ability to take on non-deviant pathways (Craine, 1997). Turning points linked to young people’s experience of work, and also perceptions of their own future employment chances may well be influential in shaping the desistance process (Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Finally, current social formations and processes related to the understanding of ‘emerging adulthood’ can impact the process of desistance. Terry and Abrams (2017) suggest that the last decade has witnessed increasing interest in this concept which is broadly defined as the period between adolescence and adulthood, roughly between 18-30 years of age (Arnett, 2000). Arnett (2000, 2004) outlines how age-norms have changed because of the postponement of transitions to adult social roles in many Western countries during the past few decades. In contrast to previous generations, young people are currently experiencing a delayed entry into adulthood that includes living at home longer, pursuing advanced educational degrees, and delaying marriage (Furstenberg, 2010; Oppenheimer, Kalmijn, & Lim, 1997). Changes in the housing market, including increased housing costs and a lack of rental accommodations, together with recent financial crises, have delayed leaving home and make it more difficult for young people to

live independently (Beaujot & Kerr, 2007; Farrall et al., 2010). A growing proportion of young people are seeking post-secondary credentials. This means that the completion of formal education occurs at older and older ages, as young adults take advantage of an extended period to gain human capital<sup>51</sup> for entrance into the labour force, or as they better position themselves in relation to others in a difficult labour market (Beaujot & Kerr, 2007). Marriage, once a fundamental life-cycle transition characterizing adulthood, has been reordered through other opportunities such as increased cohabitation and childbearing outside marriage (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991; Edin & Kefalas, 2005). The postponement of transitions to adult social roles may compel individuals to carry on gang membership well into their twenties and beyond (Fagan & Freeman, 1999; Hagedorn, 2007; Venkatesh, 1997).

This understanding of emerging adulthood also has implications for the life-course framework, and desistance theory more generally, as it demonstrates that the role of certain prosocial institutions has been altered over time. For example, as noted previously, Sampson and Laub (1993) focused on the importance of a good marriage and military duty in deflecting criminal trajectories and in reducing the probability of adult crime. As the rate and timing of marriage have changed considerably in recent years and there has been a decrease in active military service in early adulthood because of continuing education, it may be more difficult to rely on the same measures that Sampson and Laub (1993) used with their subjects who came of age 75 years ago (Krohn et al., 2011).<sup>52</sup> It may be necessary to re-examine the nature and type of prosocial bonds and institutions that play a role in the desistance process in the 21st century.

---

<sup>51</sup> Human capital can be thought of as the basic capacities, skills, and individual propensities that individuals have to work with as they take on the challenges of young adulthood (Becker, 1993).

<sup>52</sup> It should also be noted that military duty in and of itself may never have had the same significance in the Canadian context. Sampson and Laub (1993) studied desistance in the United States in the 1940s at a time when compulsive military service (i.e., the draft) was imposed by the federal government.

## Social Context

Agency is a multi-contextual factor, which means that it can be influenced by the context in which the individual makes and executes a decision or action at a given time. The various contexts that would-be desisters encounter solicit alternative temporal orientations of agency which can enable, constrain, or suppress these possibilities (King, 2013). As discussed in Chapter 2, involvement in the youth justice system is a common stage in the life course of adolescent gang members, and incarceration may impact the process of desistance, either negatively or positively. Given the focus in this research project on the role of the youth justice system in the process of desistance from gang involvement among justice-involved youth, the context of incarceration is explored in detail in this section.

Regarding the negative impacts of incarceration, mounting research concludes that incarcerated youth are significantly less likely to follow a standard trajectory into law-abiding adulthood (Fader & Traylor, 2015). Experiencing incarceration as a young person can be particularly disruptive for the life course, generating what Sampson and Laub (1997) refer to as ‘cumulative disadvantage’ by destabilizing already fragile social bonds and closing off future opportunities. For example, months and even years spent inside youth justice facilities can put young people off time in transitions such as high school graduation or establishing stable employment histories (Sampson & Laub, 1993). These young people also face many additional challenges when released from youth justice facilities. Lagging in psychosocial maturity, without a high school diploma or general educational development (GED) to guide them into post-secondary education and facing an absence of employment skills and a bleak low-skill labour market, formerly incarcerated young people are likely to struggle with decision-making processes and the realities of adult responsibilities (Panuccio et al., 2012; Steinberg et al., 2004).

Because of these accumulated risks, these young people are highly vulnerable to homelessness, poverty, repeated cycles of criminal activity and incarceration (Terry & Abrams, 2017), and in turn the continuation of gang involvement.

Alternatively, incarceration may also generate positive impacts, such as promoting desistance. While young people are held in youth justice facilities, they are removed from their regular social environment, temporarily cutting off delinquent opportunities and peers (Maruna & Roy, 2007). Although they are housed with other young offenders, they receive intensive attention from youth justice staff members who emphasize the necessity and desirability of self-transformation. Furthermore, being confined in a highly structured environment is an abrupt and temporary break in one's life course. Thus, incarceration can generate and enforce new routines (e.g., going to school) (Soyer, 2014). This encourages young people to perceive their imprisonment as a life-changing event. A cognitive shift may be initiated, and a gang-free lifestyle can be a possible future.

However, incarceration can be considered an artificial experience, disconnected from the social processes surrounding young people in their home environment (Carlsson, 2012). The networks built, and the new routines developed are only temporary, and young people are unable to exercise any agency beyond submitting to the institutional rules of the youth justice system. Once the justice-involved youth return to their community, the punitive structures that have ensured their compliance are gone and so is the immediate threat of repercussions for disobedience. The structural setup of incarceration generates the impression of a turning point without offering the tools to enact a prosocial life after being released (Soyer, 2014). Therefore, incarceration may act as a 'truncated turning point' for desistance. For example, the justice-involved young people that Soyer (2014) interviewed eagerly affirmed their transformation while

they were held in youth justice facilities but largely failed to put their desire to change into practice after their release. In this case, the imagination of desistance was limited to the deterrent effect of incarceration and did not include visions of a future self that could sustain desistance.

### Interplay Between Factors in the Process of Desistance

The arguments presented in this chapter demonstrate that desistance from gang involvement may be achieved as individuals mature; are exposed to external turning points, in the form of social encounters and opportunities; and devise and implement courses of action to leave the gang. However, the pathway taken will depend on the social structures that impinge on them, and how they mediate their current social context, in this case incarceration in a youth justice facility.

Recent works by several researchers have suggested that desistance involves an interplay between individual decisions and the socio-structural context within which the individual lives that can facilitate or restrict those decisions.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, “agentic processes can only be understood if they are linked intrinsically to the changing temporal orientations of situated actors” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 967). For example, in refining their informal social control theory, Laub and Sampson (2003; see also Sampson & Laub, 2005) developed a more nuanced perspective on desistance. They argue that, in addition to prosocial bonds, more attention should be paid to personal agency, situated choice, local culture, and community context. They more clearly articulate the role of subjective factors related to turning points, especially the malleability of perception and decision-making that can result from changes in social structures while making explicit that the experience of any particular transition event or turning point is mediated by perceptions and human decision-making. “Individual action needs to align with the

---

<sup>53</sup> For examples, see: Bottoms et al. (2004); Farrall & Bowling (1999); Farrall & Calverley (2006); Giordano et al. (2002); and Veysey, Martinez, & Christian (2013).

social structure to produce behavioral change and to maintain change (or stability) over the life course” (Sampson & Laub, 2005, p. 43).

The exact configuration and interaction of the internal and external factors in the desistance process remains uncertain. Laub and Sampson (2001) observed that unravelling the differential impacts of various factors has been a difficult methodological point in the empirical study of desistance. For example, Shover (1983) highlighted both the subjective (e.g., changes in definitions of oneself) and social (e.g., changes in one’s social relationships or networks) factors in the desistance process but argued that these changes could not be disentangled at that time.

LeBel and colleagues (2008) have outlined several possible models to explain the interplay of factors. Within ‘strong subjective’ models of desistance the emphasis is on the motivation and willpower of the individual concerned: “One need only decide to change and envision a new identity for oneself in order to go straight” (p. 138). However, this proposition suggests a concession to voluntarism, implying that individuals can transform or reproduce their social environment with free will, which is not the case (Elder-Vass, 2007). For example, individuals may be motivated and determined to move away from the gang lifestyle but may lack prosocial relationships or employment opportunities at that time in their lives.

On the other hand, ‘strong social’ models of desistance emphasize the importance of life-course turning points, such as marriage or employment, and that “it is the arrival of these events, which are largely outside of an individual’s control, that will best predict success ... rather than the mindset of the individual” (LeBel et al., 2008, p. 139). Similarly, Farrall and Bowling (1999) argued that critical situations can influence the structural changes which could precede desistance. However, while individuals may have access to potentially life-changing social bonds and opportunities, they may lack the necessary attitudes or motivation to take advantage of these.

In the context of the gang, individuals may establish relationships with prosocial individuals or be offered employment opportunities but do not have the desire to leave the gang.

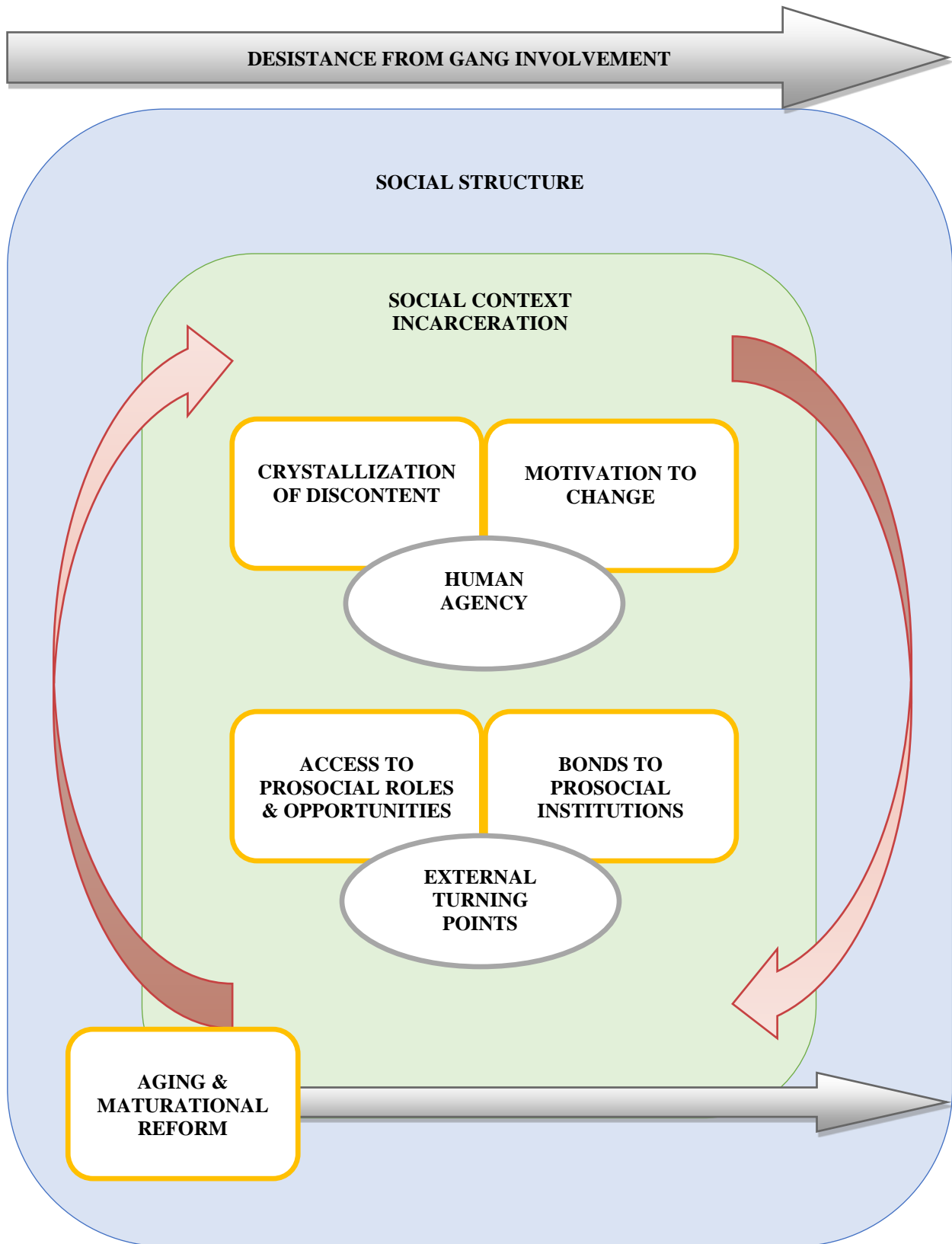
Several authors have argued that interactional models may offer the most effective explanations of desistance.<sup>54</sup> For example, LeBel and colleagues (2008, p. 155) suggest a ‘subjective social’ model and argue: “Subjective changes may precede life-changing structural events and, to that extent, individuals can act as agents of their own change”. Individual choice may be the driving force for desistance from gang involvement, but there is recognition that certain situations are more conducive to options than others. Factors in the social environment may condition the possibility of action available to individuals and they may enable or constrain what they are able to do or how they can act in their everyday lives (Carlsson, 2012; King, 2013; Marshall, 2005).

Taking account of the internal and external factors in the life course identified in this chapter, and their assumed interplay, I present a conceptual model in *Figure 1* on the following page that builds on LeBel and colleagues’ (2008) subjective social model. This integrated model of the process of desistance from gang involvement demonstrates the possible interaction of various factors but does not presume a temporal order. The purpose is to demonstrate that a complex interrelationship exists between a variety of factors in the desistance process, and that these factors operate through a dynamic, interactive process (Bottoms et al., 2004; Le Blanc, 2004). While not a definitive explanation, I believe that this conceptual model can serve as a point of departure for an examination of the process of desistance from gang involvement for justice-involved youth.

---

<sup>54</sup> For examples, see: Farrall (2002); Maguire & Raynor (2006); and McNeill & Whyte (2007).

Figure 1. Integrated Model of the Process of Desistance from Gang Involvement





## **Conclusion**

The life-course perspective offers an approach to understanding gang membership and gang activities over time and can account for the initiation, maintenance, and desistance of gang involvement. It also allows for the conception of gang affiliation as a turning point for other behavioural domains. Entry into a gang can increase delinquency within a person over time and can also engender disorder in life transitions that create hardship in multiple life domains (Huizinga & Henry, 2008; Thornberry et al., 2003). Using a life-course perspective allows for an examination of how individuals adapt to the circumstances they experience; understanding the interplay between how gang members perceive their environments, how they respond to their environments, how they integrate into their environments, and how they navigate relationships within and outside their networks in their local environments (Dong et al., 2015).

Having established my approach to employ the life-course perspective to understand gang membership and using the associated concepts of maturation, prosocial bonds, agency, social structure, and social context in an integrated model to examine and explain desistance from gang involvement, I move to examine how justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners understand gang involvement and the process of leaving the gang. An approach that incorporates experiences in specific social contexts, such as incarceration in a youth justice facility, can bring together prior research in a way that illuminates new pathways for advancing desistance theory (Fader & Traylor, 2015). Before turning to the findings chapters of this doctoral dissertation, the next chapter outlines the methodology used to structure this research project and the specific methods used to collect and analyze qualitative experiential data.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **ENGAGING WITH ‘THE PLAYERS’: METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

In comparison to quantitative research that seeks objectivity through structured and often rigid techniques with measurable validity, qualitative research privileges subjectivity through techniques that give preference to the voices and experiences of participants. Rather than proposing a supposedly ‘neutral’ analysis by an expert researcher, it allows for a situated understanding of a social phenomenon such as youth gangs, producing new insight and deep understanding (Bazeley, 2013). Given that I identified a need for additional empirical research to elucidate how gang-involved youth perceive and experience the processes associated with leaving gangs in the context of the youth justice system, an exploratory qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for this research project.

To answer the research questions set out in Chapter 1, I employed a qualitative research design that allowed me to explore gang involvement and desistance among justice-involved youth through the perspectives of the youth themselves as well as those of youth justice practitioners. In this chapter, I present the epistemological and methodological underpinnings of this research project and describe the research process in detail. I explain the data collection methods, as well as the coding and analysis processes used to make sense of the data. I conclude by discussing important criteria of methodological rigour, and I reflect on some of the limitations of conducting an exploratory qualitative research project.

#### **A Note on Epistemology and Methodology**

In my work I employ a constructivist epistemology, which is shaped by a relativist ontology that assumes that there is no ‘objective reality out there’ but rather that reality is only knowable through socially constructed meanings. This means that there is no single shared reality, only a series of alternative social constructions. The latter are subject to continuous

revision, with changes most likely to occur when relatively different constructions are brought together in a dialectical context (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lindgren, 2005; Yilmaz, 2013).

Given that the social reality that I seek to understand is assumed to be constructed with multifaceted meanings, a constructivist epistemology seeks to connect different meanings from an in-depth description of the phenomenon of interest from the perspectives of key social actors. ‘Gangs’, ‘gang involvement’, and ‘gang desistance’ are socially constructed by meanings attached to these concepts by those directly involved in youth gangs or by those with a presumed vested interest. Each of these viewpoints needs to be investigated to form the overall reality.

In employing a constructivist epistemology, the aim of research is to describe and understand the phenomenon studied by capturing and communicating participants’ experiences in their own words. This perspective lends itself to a phenomenological approach to methodology, which seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of everyday ‘lived’ experiences of people. According to Welman and Kruger (1999, p. 189):

“Phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved”. In qualitative research, the aim is to “engage in research that probes for deeper understanding rather than examining surface features” (Johnson, 1995, p. 4). Therefore, I sought to obtain thick description and as much detail as possible through interpretive data collection methods, specifically focus groups and individual interviews. In my interpretation of the data, I present individual accounts, but also acknowledge that deeper insights can be obtained by synthesizing and comparing the accounts of many participants. The strength of the phenomenological approach is that it “allows a person who has not had the experience to understand something about the essence of that experience through the participant’s eyes” (Courtney & McCutcheon, 2010, p. 35).

Finally, I acknowledge that my framework for understanding the world around me is value-bound and context specific (Hopper & Powell, 1985). As a researcher, I have an impact on the social world around me and vice versa. The findings from this research project are inevitably influenced by my perspective and values. A constructivist epistemology views the relationship between ‘knower’ and the ‘known’ as inextricable connected (Yilmaz, 2013). This means that I am interactively linked to the research participants so that my findings are created as the research proceeds and rely on both the participants’ and my understandings of the social world (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Yilmaz, 2013).

### **Inclusion Criteria**

Before engaging in a discussion on the research approach and the methods employed in this research project, I would like to clarify how some terms were used in the context of participant recruitment. In Canada, a **‘justice-involved youth’** widely refers to any individual between 12 and 17 years of age charged with and/or found guilty of an offence under the *Youth Criminal Justice Act* (S.C. 2002, c. 1; *YCJA*). For the purposes of this research project, the definition of justice-involved youth is both restricted and expanded. It is restricted in the sense that the focus is exclusively on youth who are currently under the supervision of formal control agents of the youth justice system. This includes individuals confined in an open or secure youth justice facility<sup>55</sup> as part of pre-trial detention or post-trial custody and individuals residing in the community under the supervision of a probation officer as part of a probation order and/or a community supervision component of a custody placement. This definition excludes individuals who have been subject to extrajudicial measures and/or extrajudicial sanctions as defined and

---

<sup>55</sup> ‘Open’ youth justice facilities are smaller residences, generally located in the community, where youth live under supervision. They must remain with youth justice staff at all times unless they have an approved leave from the facility. ‘Secure’ youth justice facilities are separated from the community by security fencing and other security features. Control over youth activity is much higher in these facilities.

described in the *YCJA*. On the other hand, the definition is expanded in that it includes individuals up to the age of 20. In Ontario, when an individual serving a youth sentence in a youth justice facility reaches the age of 18, a youth justice court judge may authorize the provincial director to place them in an adult correctional facility if the court considers it to be in the best interest of the young person or in the public interest. Otherwise the individual remains in the youth justice facility. When a young person in a youth justice facility reaches the age of 20, he is transferred from the youth justice facility to an adult correctional facility to serve the remainder of the sentence. While the *YCJA* relies on the biological age of 18 as the criterion to differentiate a youth from an adult, the administration of the youth justice system in practice appears to recognize other developmental and social criteria. This is reflective of work in the last number of years that has shown that young adult offenders aged 18-24 appear to be more similar to youth than to adults with respect to their offending, maturation, psychosocial capacities, and life circumstances (Corrado & Mathesius, 2014; Lösel, Bottoms, & Farrington, 2012).

As was demonstrated in Chapter 2, there are several ways to determine ‘**gang involvement**’. Over the past decade, much of the research involving gang members has used the self-nomination method, namely asking individuals if they self-identify as a gang member, or if they are involved in the gang and its related activities (Farmer & Hairston, 2013; Katz, Webb, & Decker, 2005; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). This has been due, in large part, to the influential work of Esbensen and colleagues (2001) and others<sup>56</sup>, in assessing the reliability and validity of claims of gang membership. The self-nomination method was employed in this research project. This means that participants were not subjected to any procedure or line of questioning to qualify them as ‘gang involved’, nor were background or criminal checks performed to determine gang

---

<sup>56</sup> For examples, see: Bjerregaard (2002); Thornberry et al. (2003); Webb, Katz, & Decker (2006); and Winfree et al. (1992).

membership status. Further, since the focus of this study is on understanding the experience of gang involvement and desistance from the perspective of the individual, it did not require any external validation. As noted by Wortley (2010), young people who think of themselves as gang members probably are gang members.

Practitioners are individuals with specialist skills and expertise in an area of practice that often includes specific approaches to thinking and ways of working (e.g., education, health). **‘Youth justice practitioners’** are individuals who work with young people in the context of the youth justice system. This definition is very broad and can include individuals affiliated with a variety of institutions and organizations (e.g., police officers, correctional officers, probation officers, social workers, health and mental health professionals, educators, representatives from community-based youth services) (Souhami, 2009). Given my specific focus on justice-involved youth who are currently under the supervision of formal control agents of the youth justice system, the definition of youth justice practitioners employed in this research project is similar in nature. I have chosen to include individuals who work in youth justice facilities in a variety of capacities (e.g., front-line staff member/correctional officer, supervisor, program coordinator, reintegration counsellor) as well as probation officers. These individuals exercise considerable control over the lives of justice-involved youth and their work blends rehabilitative approaches focused on supporting change to reduce offending and improve the quality of an individual’s life with measures of external control or constraint (Mason & Prior, 2008; Stephenson, Giller, & Brown, 2011). This dual role for youth justice practitioners is reflective of an inherent tension in the youth justice system, where the requirement to punish is coupled with a duty to protect young people’s welfare while encouraging reformation and rehabilitation (Souhami, 2009).

## Overview of the Research Approach

The Ontario MCYS has developed a *Strategy to Support Gang-Involved Youth*. This multi-year strategy involves several activities in detention/custody facilities with the aim of supporting the rehabilitation and reintegration of gang-involved youth and increasing staff capacity to work with this population. One of these activities involved a provincial asset mapping of community programs and supports for gang-involved youth justice clients who are transitioning from detention/custody settings and/or those being supervised in the community (hereinafter the *MCYS Youth Gang Project*). In late 2012, MCYS, specifically the Effective Programming and Evaluation Unit of the Youth Justice Services Division, engaged the Director of Youth Justice Services at the YSB to take on a provincial coordination role for the *MCYS Youth Gang Project* based on the agency's significant knowledge regarding the complex issues surrounding gang-involved youth, and previous involvement in the mapping of community assets in the city of Ottawa.<sup>57</sup> Through a partnership between the University of Ottawa and the YSB, the latter sought out the services of Professor Ross Hastings and myself to assist in the development of the methodology, coordination of the implementation of the project, and compilation of the information gathered into a comprehensive report.<sup>58</sup>

The *MCYS Youth Gang Project* involved identifying and compiling the information on the interventions currently available in each of the youth justice regions of the province of Ontario for gang-involved youth to enable the development of an electronic inventory.

Additionally, to map assets, it involved the development of processes to engage youth justice

---

<sup>57</sup> This project involved the following: (1) conducting a review of the research literature and of youth gang exit programs in an attempt to describe the lessons learned from current programs and to identify features of these initiatives that might be relevant to the Ottawa context; (2) developing an inventory of the services currently available in Ottawa for gang-involved young people (aged 16-25) who may wish to exit from gang life; and (3) identifying promising practices and approaches to intervention with youth and to service delivery that may be relevant to helping youth in Ottawa exit from gang involvement. The full report, *Leaving Criminal Youth Gangs: Exit Strategies and Programs* is available from <http://www.crimepreventionottawa.ca/en/publications/youth>

<sup>58</sup> A copy of the final report is available from <http://www.ysb.ca/index.php?page=youth-justice-services-2&hl=eng>

staff, local community partners and stakeholders, and youth in forums to identify local strengths in programs, services, supports, and resources, soliciting feedback on ‘what works and why’, and to speak to areas that require further development. These engagement activities also examined the needs and strengths of youth and youth serving agencies/organizations in communities within each of the youth justice regions. Agencies in each of the youth justice regions were identified to provide support to this project. In addition to its provincial coordination role, the YSB was contracted to coordinate the Eastern region case study and Professor Hastings and I were asked to develop and implement the regionally-specific processes to engage participants in various forums. Based on the information obtained through various data collection activities, we were also asked to draft the regional report.

The *MCYS Youth Gang Project* in general and the Eastern region case study in particular provided a unique research opportunity and the latter served as the basis for this research project.<sup>59</sup> This doctoral dissertation only uses the data from the focus groups with justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners conducted as part of the Eastern region case study. In late 2013, I facilitated the focus groups in collaboration with Professor Hastings and representatives from the YSB. For the purposes of the Eastern region case study, the YSB chose to focus its attention in Ottawa, the largest urban area in the region and where gangs and their criminal activities are the focus of a significant degree of police activity, of media coverage, and of preoccupation among the public. As I elaborate below, these data were supplemented with

---

<sup>59</sup> I acknowledge that there is potential for bias associated with externally funded research projects. I am aware of the importance of and sought to promote ‘objectivity in research’ as much as possible as it relates to ensuring that the design, conduct, and/or reporting of this research project funded in part by the Effective Programming and Evaluation Unit of the Youth Justice Services Division, MCYS was not biased by any conflicting financial or other interests. While it is important not be naïve when it comes to potential bias resulting from external funding, I am also realistic about the significant role that external funding plays in the implementation of research projects and dissemination of research results in the social sciences.



individual interviews with justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners in the city of Ottawa that I conducted myself in the winter and spring of 2016.

## **Data Sources**

For both the *MCYS Youth Gang Project* Eastern region case study focus groups and the additional individual interviews, the research population was accessed through the following two organizations:

### **1. YSB – Youth Justice Services**

The YSB's Youth Justice Services sector is responsible for overseeing two youth justice facilities in the city of Ottawa – the William E. Hay Centre offering pre-trial detention/post-trial secure custody and the Livius Sherwood Detention and Custody Centre offering pre-trial detention/post-trial open custody. Both centres house male youth aged 12-17 and, in some cases, up to age 20. Through an individualized case management approach, the two residential facilities and their youth justice staff members provide justice-involved youth with counselling support, life skills training, and educational programming. The organization's focus is on helping youth make a positive transition back into the community.

### **2. MCYS – Probation Services**

MCYS – Probation Services is responsible for providing supervision and case management support to justice-involved youth who are placed on a probation order and/or sentenced to a custody placement, which includes a community supervision component, by the Youth Justice Court in the Ottawa-Carleton area. More recently, MCYS – Probation Services has extended probation officer support to young people in pre-trial detention. This service is voluntary on the part of the young person. In addition to monitoring specific conditions set by the court, probation officers meet regularly with their clients, develop a plan for next steps (e.g., community release

plan), help with education and skills training, and can refer them to other services based on identified risks and needs.

## **Ethics Approval**

Given the research population and the requirements of the organizations involved, I submitted ethics applications on two separate occasions: (1) in the spring of 2013 for approval to additionally use information obtained from the *MCYS Youth Gang Project* Eastern region case study for the purposes of my doctoral dissertation<sup>60</sup>; and (2) in the spring of 2015 for approval to conduct individual interviews with justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners. In both instances, I was required to seek approval from the following three administrative bodies:

- Ontario MCYS, Youth Justice Services, Operational Support and Program Effectiveness Branch, Youth Justice Services Research Committee
- YSB Research Ethics and Advisory Committee
- University of Ottawa Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board

Ethics approval was granted from all three bodies. The two ethics approval notices for this research project from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board of the University of Ottawa are presented in Appendix B.<sup>61</sup>

## **Data Collection Methods**

The data collection methods for this research project combine multiple sources of data, including preliminary focus groups with justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners conducted as part of the *MCYS Youth Gang Project* and additional individual interviews that I

---

<sup>60</sup> The secondary use of data was described and outlined in the informed consent process. Permission was explicitly obtained from participants to additionally use the information obtained through these research activities for the completion of my doctoral dissertation.

<sup>61</sup> To be granted ethics approval for this research project, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board of the University of Ottawa required necessary governmental and organizational permissions first be provided. As such, the Ontario MCYS, Youth Justice Services, Operational Support and Program Effectiveness Branch, Youth Justice Services Research Committee and the YSB Research Ethics and Advisory Committee approvals are subsumed under the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board of the University of Ottawa ethics approval notices.

conducted with justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners. In total, I engaged with and heard from 30 justice-involved youth and 23 youth justice practitioners.

### Focus Groups

As part of the *MCYS Youth Gang Project* Eastern region case study, separate focus groups were conducted with justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners. Focus groups are essentially "...unstructured group interviews in which the group leader actively encourages discussion among participants who have personal or professional experience with the topic being studied" (Peek & Fothergill, 2009, p. 31). Focus groups are organized to obtain qualitative data on a wide assortment of information including answers for specific research questions, generating descriptive information, developing and elaborating hypotheses, and producing theoretical insights (Valdez & Kaplan, 1998). The purpose of the focus groups for this research project were to explore collective understandings and/or points of opposition for gang-related issues including definitions, membership requirements, motivations for involvement, methods, motives, and barriers for leaving the gang, and the role of the youth justice system in desistance from gang involvement.

### *Justice-Involved Youth*

Two focus groups were conducted with justice-involved youth in November 2013; one with young men confined in the William E. Hay Centre that involved 10 participants, and one with young men confined in the Livius Sherwood Detention and Custody Centre that involved five participants. In the presentation of findings in the following chapters, these focus groups are simply labelled as JIY-FG1 and JIY-FG2. Participants for the focus groups were recruited through regular interactions with staff in the youth justice facilities. With their agreement and support, the staff were asked to provide their clients with a brief overview of the research project

and to give the young men a letter of information / invitation to participate in a research study (see Appendix C). A coordinator at each youth justice facility organized the logistics for the focus groups which were conducted on-site during a pre-determined time as not to interfere with daily programming. As per a requirement of MCYS and YSB policies and procedures, a youth justice staff member was required to be in the room during the focus group sessions. While their role was to ensure the safety and security of the participants and the facilitators, on certain occasions they would interject and contribute their own comments and opinions to the discussion. Professor Hastings and I facilitated both focus group sessions. While we had anticipated that each focus group would last between one and one-and-a-half hours, both were approximately 45 minutes in duration. The research protocol and focus group guide, including open-ended questions with associated prompts (see Appendix D) was developed by the *MCYS Youth Gang Project Coordinating Committee*.

It is important to acknowledge here how the composition of the focus groups with justice-involved youth impacted on both individual contributions and the nature of the interaction that occurred in the focus group discussions. Given the concerns over the possible negative consequences of bringing together gang-involved youth in a youth justice facility to participate in a focus group (e.g., individuals disclosing gang affiliation to youth justice staff, physical and social repercussions from other gang members or rival gang members as a result of disclosure), former or current gang affiliation was not an explicit requirement for participation in these focus groups. Participants were asked to share knowledge, thoughts, and views on issues related to gang involvement and desistance in general terms. In some cases, youth participants may not necessarily have had first-hand experience with gang involvement and may have chosen to

participate in the focus group for other reasons (e.g., general interest in the topic, because of the honorarium provided, as an alternative to regular daily institutional programming).

In addition, the social context of focus groups in general, that is, the relationships among the participants and between the participants and the facilitators, as well as the larger social structures within which the discussion takes place, might affect the data that are generated (Hollander, 2004). These factors can affect the freedom of participants to speak, the patterns of influence regarding expressed opinions, the level of consensus in a group discussion, and the shape of the information obtained (Bazeley, 2013; Descormiers & Morselli, 2011). Two concerns related to group dynamics were particularly salient in these focus group sessions with justice-involved youth. They focused on the issue of honesty – do participants share their ‘true’ thoughts and beliefs in a focus group discussion?

First, the social context of focus groups conducted with young men confined in youth justice facilities encouraged the presentation of machismo and bravado in the discussions. For men, normative gender expectations include strength and dominance; they are expected to be tough, aggressive, and able to defend themselves and others (Hollander, 2001). These expectations may be especially salient for young men in an all-male heteronormative context such as a youth justice facility. Perhaps under pressure to demonstrate their masculinity in this domain, the justice-involved youth described experiences to validate their status and often seemed to want to impress each other with their comments, bragging about their money-making and consumption activities and fighting abilities.

Second, the status of the justice-involved youth participants in the youth justice facility relative to one another played a role in what and how opinions and information was discussed. In the focus group with justice-involved youth at the William E. Hay Centre, it became clear that

one young man ‘carried weight’ in the youth justice facility and commanded authority over the other participants. He tended to dominate the discussion and it was clear that conformity and social desirability pressures led the other participants to adjust their own contributions to match his (Hollander, 2004); following their comments, they would often look over to ensure approval.

While gang researchers have used focus groups to obtain initial baseline information on the gang population and to learn more about it from the members’ perspectives, the issues identified above affect the representativeness of the findings from the justice-involved focus groups as it relates to understanding gang-related issues (Valdez & Kaplan, 1998). As a result, the data obtained from the focus groups with justice-involved youth while informative, were not relied on heavily for analysis purposes. Alternatively, as noted by Wortley and Tanner (2006a, 2006b), focus groups can help researchers to identify important gang-related issues and to develop and inform other data collection activities (e.g., surveys, questionnaires, individual interview guides). Ultimately, the discussion in these focus groups helped me to situate myself in the area and to better prepare for the individual interviews.

#### *Youth Justice Practitioners*

Three focus groups were conducted with youth justice practitioners between November 2013 and January 2014; two with youth justice staff members from the William E. Hay Centre and the Livius Sherwood Detention and Custody Centre involving seven participants and five participants respectively, and one with MCYS – Probation Services staff members involving five participants. In the presentation of findings in the following chapters, these focus groups are simply labelled as YJP-FG1, YJP-FG2, and YJP-FG3. Participants included youth justice practitioners involved in the supervision of justice-involved youth. They were recruited based on having professional relationships and/or experiences working with gang-involved youth in a

youth justice setting. Participants for the focus groups were recruited by the YSB project leads via e-mail which provided them with a brief overview of the research project and an appended letter of information / invitation for participation (see Appendix C). The YSB project leads organized the logistics for the focus groups and they were conducted on-site at the youth justice facilities and MCYS Gloucester Probation Office during regular work hours. I facilitated all focus group sessions with the assistance of the YSB project leads. The focus groups each lasted between one and one-and-a-half hours. The research protocol and focus group guide, including open-ended questions with associated prompts (see Appendix D) were developed by the *MCYS Youth Gang Project* Coordinating Committee.

The focus groups provided an opportunity for youth justice practitioners to share their own personal and collective experiences working with gang-involved youth in the context of the youth justice system. Further, having focus group members interact with one another yields a new dimension of understanding by highlighting where youth justice practitioners agree and where opinions differ. In contrast to the focus groups with justice-involved youth, because the youth justice practitioners were speaking in their professional capacity rather than sharing personal information and experiences, they were unlikely to feel restrained or inhibited in sharing information (Kitzinger, 1994). However, it is acknowledged that the information that the youth justice practitioners did share is likely to be in line with the overall mandate and goals of their employer and of their profession. There is a tendency for socially acceptable opinions to be presented, and some individuals may have feared reprisal if they reported issues or concerns within their own organizations or with their professional capacities (Smithson, 2000).

It should be noted that the purpose of these focus groups and the individual interviews with youth justice practitioners discussed below was not to validate the responses of justice-

involved youth participants (Kitzinger, 1994; Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006).

Rather the goal of the data collection activities is to examine gang-related issues from the vantage point of different individuals thought to contribute to them and who are affected by them to highlight similarities and variations in perceptions, understandings, and perspectives.

### Individual Interviews

Interviews were conducted with justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners and data obtained through this method formed the bulk of the analysis for the purposes of this doctoral dissertation. Individual interviews provide a space for research participants to share their story and communicate meaning through narrative (Chase, 2003). They may provide therapeutic value to participants as they can offer a space for catharsis through sharing (Rossetto, 2014). As noted by Varallo, Berlin Ray, and Hartman Ellis (1998, p. 261): “Speaking does much more than transfer information from the interviewee to the interviewer; it has the potential to transform the interviewee”. As discussed by Bamberg, De Fina, and Schiffrin (2011, p. 180): “It is by way of narrative that people are said to be able to construct a sense of a continuous self – one that fuses past and future orientation together into one’s present identity”. Further, while somewhat unnatural in their formulation, individual interviews establish human-to-human relations so that the researcher can understand the perspective of the interviewee rather than passively explain a phenomenon through rigid survey questions (Fontana & Frey, 2000). It is a personal and intimate approach with an emphasis on depth, detail, vividness, and nuance (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

### *Justice-Involved Youth*

Fifteen individual interviews were conducted with justice-involved youth between February and April 2016; 10 with young men confined in the William E. Hay Centre and five



with young men confined in the Livius Sherwood Detention and Custody Centre. Originally, my intention was to also interview justice-involved youth currently under formal community supervision arrangements in Ottawa. However, once in the field, I ran into recruitment challenges, and in the end, it was not possible to conduct interviews with this target group.<sup>62</sup>

Recruitment flyers seeking participants for individual interviews were posted in common areas at the William E. Hay Centre and Livius Sherwood Detention and Custody Centre between January 2016 and April 2016. In addition, I conducted several information sessions at the two youth justice facilities during this time where I provided a brief overview of the research project and handed out a letter of information / invitation for participation that detailed the requirements of the study (see Appendix E). Individuals were asked to contact a coordinator / unit manager to indicate their interest in participating in an individual interview. The latter scheduled times for the interviews to take place on-site during pre-determined hours as not to interfere with daily programming, and then they contacted me to let me know when to come into the facility.

Unlike in the case of the focus group sessions, I was permitted to conduct the individual interviews with the justice-involved youth on my own. The interviews took place in the facility's designated professional/visitor meeting room and/or in the library at the William E. Hay Centre. While not in the room, at the William E. Hay Centre MCYS and YSB policies and procedures stipulated that a youth justice staff member was required to indirectly observe (i.e., maintain sightlines of) the interview to ensure the safety and security of the interviewer and the participant. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour, with an average length of 40 minutes.

---

<sup>62</sup> Recruitment posters were displayed in the MCYS Gloucester and Kanata Probation Offices between January 2016 and April 2016. During this time, only one young person contacted me to schedule an individual interview. We arranged a time and location to meet but the young man did not show up to the interview. I contacted him to re-schedule the interview, but nothing came of it.

Fifteen individual interviews with justice-involved youth proved to be sufficient for this research project. The first reason is that other researchers have indicated that a sample size of 12 is likely to be sufficient for qualitative interviews (Baker & Edwards, 2012; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The second reason is that the last few interviews were eliciting little new information and had much in common with the previously collected data, suggesting that a saturation point had been reached (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

The interview guide (see Appendix F) was developed and specifically tailored for this research project. It was based on the questions already included in the focus group guide for justice-involved youth and modified based on information obtained through discussions with participants involved in the focus groups. Interview questions pertained to understandings of gang-related issues including definitions, membership requirements, motivations for involvement, methods, motives, and barriers for leaving the gang, and the role of the youth justice system in desistance from gang involvement. The interview concluded with demographic questions, which allowed the interview to end on a lighter note. Semi-structured, yet open-ended, these interviews allowed me to gather information about the participant's subjective experiences of gang involvement and desistance while also allowing me to direct their reflections and comments toward the key themes of the study (Berg, 2009). The interview guide acted as a point of reference to ensure that broad themes were addressed, but the conversation emerged fluidly from the interests and comfort level of the participants.

One-on-one interviews with gang members have been favoured by researchers focusing on gang involvement.<sup>63</sup> This method presents a suitable approach to researching gangs as it allows for “exploration of the perceptions and opinions of respondents regarding complex and

---

<sup>63</sup> For examples, see: Decker (1996); Decker & Curry (2000); Hamel et al. (1998); and Hébert, Hamel, & Savoie (1997).

sometimes sensitive issues and enables probing for more information and clarification of answers” (Barriball & While, 1994, p.330). Individual interviews were an essential method given my interest in personal accounts of gang involvement and desistance. I placed great importance on the meanings that the justice-involved youth attributed to their actions and on understanding the social context within which these meanings and actions emerged. In this sense, this research project took on an ‘active subject, socially oriented’ position and view of the phenomenon under study (Bottoms, 2000).

Demographic information for the 15 justice-involved youth that participated in an individual interview is included below and in the following table. The justice-involved youth participants ranged in age from 16 to 19 with an average age of 17. One-third of the sample, or five participants, identified as Caucasian, two participants identified as Aboriginal, and the remaining eight justice-involved youth came from diverse ethnic minority backgrounds. Completed education levels ranged from grade eight to grade 12, the average was grade 11. One-third of the sample, or five participants, had past or present employment experience and another participant listed volunteer experience. Almost two-thirds of the sample, or nine participants, indicated living with immediate or extended family members and two-thirds of the justice-involved youth, or 10 participants, indicated having a girlfriend. Nine participants indicated that they were current gang members and only one among them indicated having experience with desistance from gang involvement. Four participants indicated they were former gang members and all of them denoted experiences with desistance from gang involvement.

Since desistance from gang involvement was an important consideration in this research project, it was important to distinguish between those who did or did not have experience with the desistance process. I was interested to what extent, if at all, that personal experiences of

leaving the gang impacted on the justice-involved youth participants' perspectives with respect to issues related to desistance as compared to the perspectives of those who had at most only contemplated desistance and/or who intended to leave the gang in the future. For this reason, participants with and without experience in the desistance process were identified and treated as two separate groups for the purposes of data coding and analysis. In the findings chapters that report on aspects of the desistance process, similarities and differences in perspectives between the justice-involved youth participants with and without experience in the desistance process are addressed, as applicable.

It is important to keep in mind that having experience with desistance from gang involvement does not correlate exactly with gang membership status. While all the justice-involved youth participants who indicated their status as former gang members denoted experience with desistance, as is to be expected, one individual who identified as a current gang member and another who was not clear on his membership status acknowledged having experience with desistance. Therefore, for the purposes of this research project, I refer to participants with and without desistance experience and do not employ the typical concepts of 'persister', which implies continued gang membership, and 'desister', which implies former gang membership.

Table 2. Demographic Data from Justice-Involved Youth Individual Interview Sample

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Level of Education	Employment (Past or Present)	Living Arrangements	Relationship Status	Gang Membership Status	Desistance Experience
AB	16	Caucasian	Grade 10	No	On Own (Girlfriend)	Girlfriend	Current	Yes
Allister	16	Caucasian	Grade 10	Yes	On Own	Girlfriend	Current	No
Bob	17	Aboriginal	Grade 11	No	On Own (Friend)	Girlfriend	Unclear	Yes
Costello	17	Black	Grade 10	No	Family (Parents)	Girlfriend	Current	No
FT	16	Caucasian	Grade 10	No	Family	Single	Former	Yes
JB	17	Jamaican	Grade 11	No	Family (Aunt)	Girlfriend	Current	No
JG	17	Aboriginal	Grade 11	Yes	On Own (Girlfriend)	Girlfriend	Unclear	No
John	16	Caucasian	N/A	No	N/A	Girlfriend	Former	Yes
Johnny	18	Kuwaiti	Grade 11	Yes	Family (Mom)	Girlfriend	Former	Yes
Juliano	17	Haitian	Grade 11	Volunteer	Family	Girlfriend	Current	No
KP	17	Jamaican	Grade 11	Yes	On Own	Single	Current	No
Matt	19	Somali	Grade 12	Yes	Family (Parents)	Single	Former	Yes
Michel	16	Caucasian	Grade 8	No	Family (Grandparent)	Single	Current	No
MJ	18	Arab	Grade 8	No	Family	Single	Current	No
Montana	18	Somali	Grade 12	N/A	Family (Brother)	Girlfriend	Current	No

### *Youth Justice Practitioners*

Six individual interviews were conducted with youth justice practitioners in March and April 2016. Participants included youth justice practitioners involved in the supervision of justice-involved youth (institutional staff, youth probation officers, community reintegration staff, etc.) from the William E. Hay Centre, the Livius Sherwood Detention and Custody Centre, and MCYS – Probation Services. With the permission and assistance of the Director of Youth Justice Services at the YSB and the Probation Manager at the MCYS Gloucester Probation Office, recruitment was conducted via e-mails to their respective youth justice staff teams. The e-mails included a brief overview of the research project and an appended letter of information / invitation for participation (see Appendix E). Recruitment was based on having expertise in this area, meaning knowledge of and/or experience working with gang-involved youth in a youth justice setting. Interested individuals contacted me directly to schedule an individual interview. All interviews took place during regular work hours and were conducted either at the individual's place of employment in a private room, or in an office at the University of Ottawa. I conducted all six interviews on my own and they lasted between 35 minutes and one hour, with an average length of 55 minutes. Coupled with the three focus groups with youth justice practitioners, I reached the saturation point quickly in the interview process. Although total saturation is seemingly impossible (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), at that point in the data collection process I felt that the depth and breadth of my understanding of the issues was clear (Kaler & Beres, 2010).

The interview guide (see Appendix F) was developed and specifically tailored for this research project. It was based on the questions included in the focus group guide for youth justice practitioners and modified based on information obtained through discussions with

participants involved in the focus groups. Interview questions pertained to understandings of gang-related issues including definitions, membership requirements, motivations for involvement, methods, motives, and barriers for leaving the gang, and the role of the youth justice system in desistance from gang involvement. Again, the interview guide acted as a point of reference to ensure that broad themes were addressed, but the conversation emerged fluidly from the interests and comfort level of the participants.

While the interviews with justice-involved youth made up most of the sample, the interviews with youth justice practitioners were an important component of the data collection activities. The youth justice practitioners often had significant experience working with gang-involved youth and were able to provide insight on gang involvement and desistance from this perspective. These individuals were also attuned to the social structures, discourses, and policies that affect these gang-involved youth, as well as to the guidelines and procedures of the organizations for which they work. During the interviews, professionals were asked to describe their own jobs and the various programs and activities that their organizations offered, allowing me to gain an understanding of the basic workings of the organizations. Participants were then queried specifically on their experiences, perceptions, and understandings of gang issues in accordance with their role. Throughout each interview, I privileged techniques such as asking for clarification and content development, as well as rephrasing and reformulation of their contributions. Partial probes on specific topics of interest were used as necessary. This allowed for more in-depth interviews and gave space for participant ‘truths’ to emerge (Personal Narratives Group, 1989).

Only a limited amount of demographic information was collected from the youth justice practitioners who participated in an individual interview. Five participants were male and one

participant was female. Four participants were employed full-time as youth justice practitioners while two participants had part-time status. Because there are a limited number of specific positions in the YSB – Youth Justice Services, I only refer to the youth justice practitioners' positions in general terms to minimize individual detection by those working in the field. Participants included those involved in the supervision of justice-involved youth (institutional staff, youth probation officers, community reintegration staff). Finally, there was a wide variety in the amount and type of experience of youth justice practitioners from one to 30+ years working in different capacities in the youth justice system. In general, the youth justice practitioners interviewed constituted a diverse group with respect to role and experience in the youth justice system.

#### Ethical Considerations

This research project raises several ethical considerations. First, I had to consider and remain cognizant of the relationship dynamics that existed between myself as a researcher and my participant population throughout the duration of the data collection activities. Through a volunteer placement and my work on the *MCYS Youth Gang Project*, I developed a relationship with the administrators and staff of the YSB – Youth Justice Services and the MCYS – Probation Services. In January 2013, once an agreement had been signed for the *MCYS Youth Gang Project* but before the data collection began, I started volunteering for the YSB – Youth Justice Services and subsequently spent one afternoon a week at the YSB's two youth justice facilities in Ottawa for the next four months. This volunteer placement involved providing research capacity and offering support to the youth justice staff as needed (e.g., I conducted literature reviews on best practices for anger management programs and cyberbullying programs to inform the



development of institutional programming) and giving presentations and workshops on the topic of youth gangs.

Although the formal gatekeepers, the Director of Youth Justice Services at the YSB and the Probation Manager, MCYS – Probation Services were supporters of this research project. I felt it was important to also build rapport with the informal gatekeepers, the youth justice staff members and probation officers. Through this volunteer placement and through my role in the *MCYS Youth Gang Project*, I could establish trust and familiarity with the latter and demonstrate interest in their work which I believe was important to establishing my credibility as a researcher (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987). I believe that these experiences helped with my recruitment for individual interviews with youth justice practitioners. I was also aware, because of my experiences, that the youth justice practitioners might have felt obligated to participate in my research project. For this reason, I ensured that it was clearly stipulated in the recruitment e-mail that individuals were under no obligation to participate in this research project, a sentiment reinforced by the Director of Youth Justice Services at the YSB and the Probation Manager at the MCYS – Probation Services.

While beneficial for developing rapport with the youth justice practitioners, I was concerned that my familiarity with and work conducted for this group might negatively affect my interactions with justice-involved youth. I recognized that the justice-involved youth being recruited for individual interviews may feel constrained to follow the wishes of those who they see as having some form of control over them. As such, I sought to position myself as separate from the administration and staff and reiterated my independence as a PhD candidate at the University of Ottawa during my informal information sessions. In these sessions and in the interviews themselves, I informed and reminded justice-involved youth participants that pre-

existing entitlements to care, education, and other services would not be prejudiced by the decision of whether or not they participate in, or withdraw from, this research project. Further, I informed them that their prime worker, reintegration counsellor, and/or probation officer, as applicable, would not be advised as to whether or not they chose to participate in this study. In the end, the justice-involved youth were quite satisfied that I was independent of and not affiliated with the youth justice practitioners. However, in one instance one of the interview participants did ask me facetiously if I was an undercover police officer.

Related to the voluntariness of participation is the issue of compensation. All justice-involved youth taking part in the focus groups for the *MCYS Youth Gang Project* and in the individual interviews specific to this research project were compensated for their participation. Because incentives are used to encourage participation, they are an important consideration in assessing voluntariness. Where incentives are offered to participants, they should not be so large or attractive as to encourage reckless disregard of risks. In this case, \$20.00 CAD in cash was provided to all participants at the outset of the focus group and individual interview sessions. By providing it at the beginning of the session, it was made clear to participants that they were free to withdraw at any time and they would still receive the compensation that was offered. I also respected the YSB guidelines for compensating young people for participation in research. For those confined in a youth justice facility at the time of the focus group or interview, the compensation was kept in their personal belongings lock-up as per the agency's policy. The young people had access to it upon release from the facility.

I also struggled ethically with the potential psychological stress that can come from participating in a research project. Discussing sensitive topics often causes anxiety or psychological discomfort (Neuman & Robson, 2007). I was aware that the justice-involved youth

participants represent a vulnerable population; these young men are likely to have faced difficult and/or traumatic experiences in their lives (Pyrooz, Moule, & Decker, 2014; Taylor et al., 2007). As the individual interviews involved discussions of participants' personal experiences with gang involvement, they had the potential to lead participants to recall troubling experiences in their lives. To minimize harm, if participants became uncomfortable or upset during the interview, the interview would be paused, participants' feelings and emotions would be acknowledged, and a new line of questioning would begin to minimize potential emotional harm. Luckily, this did not occur for any of the justice-involved youth interview participants. As a further precaution, at the outset of the interview, participants were also informed of available resources that they could access following the interview if they were feeling any distress. In contrast to the justice-involved youth, the youth justice practitioners that I interviewed occupy positions of relative privilege and they are not considered to be a vulnerable population as the risks they face from the research are minimal. The youth justice practitioners were asked to talk about their relationships with their clients and about their role in their clients' lives. As these topics reflect day-to-day work and interactions, I did not anticipate that answering questions on these topics would pose any potential harm.

Finally, ensuring participant confidentiality and anonymity, where possible, was an important consideration. Written consent was obtained from all focus group and individual interview participants (see Appendix G and Appendix H, respectively). The informed consent forms described the purpose and procedure of the research and provided guidelines on confidentiality and anonymity, among other items. The content of the forms were explained to participants and they were provided with a signed copy to keep for their records. In particular, the justice-involved youth participants were told about the limits of confidentiality as it relates to

the disclosure of criminal activity. They were informed that if they revealed any new crimes and/or harm to others, that the appropriate authorities would be contacted. This was an explicit requirement of the MCYS, Youth Justice Services Division in their research approval process. Luckily this did not occur. For the justice-involved youth, I felt that the time taken to review all aspects of the informed consent form was particularly important as the participants' levels of literacy varied dramatically.

Each participant was assured of the confidentiality of the information discussed during the focus group and individual interview session. For the justice-involved youth, pseudonyms of their choosing were used on the informed consent form, in the audio recordings, and in the transcripts. In fact, I had no knowledge of the participants' true identities as MCYS and YSB – Youth Justice Services policies and procedures do not allow for the disclosure of the surnames of youth justice clients. In some cases, I was aware of the justice-involved youth participants' first names, but in most cases I only knew them by their pseudonym. Pseudonyms were not used during the data collection process for the youth justice practitioners given my familiarity with these individuals. However, during the data coding and data analysis process, all names and identifying details were removed for youth justice practitioners and they were assigned an alpha numeric code for identification purposes (e.g., YJP-1, YJP-2).

It should be noted that because of the nature of focus group research, at the broadest possible level they are collective conversations or group interviews, ensuring the anonymity of participants is a particular issue. The protection of the identity of participants could not be guaranteed. Through the consent process, participants were informed of the waiver of anonymity within the focus group setting, and of the protection of participants' identities beyond the

immediate focus group session. Agreements were made with all focus group participants to ensure the confidentiality of the data and the anonymity of the other participants.

Through the consent process, I also explicitly sought permission to audio record the sessions and assured participants that only my supervisor Professor Ross Hastings, later Professor Patrice Corriveau, and myself would have access to the recordings. In the case of the individual interviews with justice-involved youth, I had two individuals refuse to consent to audio recording, so I proceeded to take detailed notes. At the time of the focus group and individual interview sessions, I offered participants the opportunity to contact me if they wished to consult their transcripts. No one contacted me to receive a transcript. All physical data collected from the focus groups and individual interviews is stored in a locked cabinet in my office at the University of Ottawa. The transcripts and written notes made from the audio recordings of the focus groups and individual interviews were coded and are stored in a secured cabinet. These codes are locked away separately from the written notes and audio recordings. All electronic data (i.e., transcripts, other notes, and digital audio recordings) are stored on my laptop, which has anti-virus software installed and a password to protect information from unauthorized access, loss, or modification.<sup>64</sup>

### **Data Coding and Data Analysis**

All the focus group and individual interview sessions with justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners that were audio recorded were transcribed verbatim, which includes documenting pauses, inflections, interruptions, and false starts to provide a close examination of the narrative (Lapadat, 2000). In total, I had over 21 hours of audio recordings which yielded 335

---

<sup>64</sup> As indicated in my application for ethics approval from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board of the University of Ottawa for this research project, all data will be conserved for a period of five years following publication of this doctoral dissertation. In 2023, at the end of the five-year storage period, all physical data will be shredded, and electronic data will be securely deleted.

single-spaced transcript pages; this also includes the electronically transcribed detailed notes for the two justice-involved youth participants that did not consent to audio recording. By transcribing the focus group and individual interview sessions myself, I could gain greater familiarity with the data and foreground the analytical process (McLellan, MacQueen, & Neidig, 2003). The qualitative data was compiled, organized, and coded with the use of NVivo software version 10 by QSR International. I engaged in a rigorous coding process that compared the data, labelled the data with specific codes, and allowed me to move from coding to producing analytic categories (Charmaz, 2006; Kaler & Beres, 2010).

I built a preliminary codebook based primarily on my research questions, notes I wrote during the transcription process, as well as from themes I gathered through my review of the literature and the life-course perspective (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). The codebook included two lists of these ‘provisional codes’<sup>65</sup> – one for the justice-involved youth participants and a second for the youth justice practitioners. Tailoring my coding frames and coding the two groups separately allowed me to use some of the same codes, and subsequently explore differences between the two, while allowing for the development of codes specific to each group.

The data was analyzed with the overarching objective of conducting a thematic analysis of the key issues and tensions found within it. To reach this objective, I undertook a polyvocal analysis, an approach that “acknowledges and analyzes the multiple and sometimes contradictory perspectives of participants, giving voice to all” (Saldana, 2009, p. 207). More specifically, I undertook a two-cycle coding process. First cycle coding, or open coding, was done to label first order concepts, which are the descriptions and interpretations stemming directly from the data. Second cycle coding, or focused coding, was done to gather and explore subsets of data, ask

---

<sup>65</sup> Provisional coding involves constructing a preliminary list of codes that represent anticipated categories or types of action and responses based on the research questions and the conceptual framework in question (Saldana, 2009).

questions, find patterns, and determine second order themes, the notions I used to explain and interpret relationships emerging from first order concepts (Saldana, 2009). A key ethical concern in interview-based research is being respectful of interviewees' stories and meanings (Personal Narratives Group, 1989). Although coding, and indeed any kind of data analysis, in effect alters participants' narratives, I believe that a thematic coding process such as this proves helpful in endeavouring to minimize distortion of participants' intended meanings.

To begin, careful reading of the data was done to highlight and name segments of the data according to key ideas – codes, also called nodes in NVivo – without worrying too much about how many codes were being generated or how they may eventually fit together. Since qualitative research adopts a 'unique case orientation' that recognizes the divergent nature of each individual's experiences (Patton, 2002), each transcript was examined vertically, meaning from beginning to end, several times to look for the continuity and integrity of themes on an individual level. I then proceeded to read the transcripts horizontally, meaning across participants, to make connections and explore themes across different cases, coding for new themes from case to case (Bailey, 2007; Charmaz, 2006). In addition to the provisional coding described previously, other first cycle coding methods were used. The latter overlap at times and were used in concert with one another throughout the first cycle coding process as opposed to using a step-by-step approach. These methods included the following<sup>66</sup>:

- Attribute coding – used to provide essential information on the participants represented within the data and the site and context in which the data was collected. This allowed me to link attribute codes to data segments to then query and compare data by variables such as participant type (e.g., all data depicting justice-involved youth with experience with desistance).
- Topic coding – used to summarize in a word or short phrase the basic topic of a data segment. This led to a general index of the data's contents, which was essential to help provide an overview of what I heard from participants, and to form the basis for further analytic work. This includes both 'parent codes' and 'child codes' (e.g., parent code: gang

---

<sup>66</sup> See Saldana (2009) for more detailed descriptions of each method.

purpose and child codes: gang purpose – conflict; gang purpose – gain-oriented; gang purpose – retreatist; gang purpose – social; gang purpose – survival; gang purpose – multiple.

- Versus coding – used to identify in more binary terms the individuals, groups, perspectives, and concepts that were in direct conflict with one another. Versus coding helped identify differing and opposing points of view and perspectives between groups of participants (e.g., portrayal of gang allegiance: absolute loyalty versus every man for himself).
- In Vivo coding – used to code a data segment using the exact language found within the data. Codes are participant-generated instead of researcher-generated (e.g., ‘shmoney’).
- Co-occurrence coding – used for the application of two or more different codes to the same data segment, or the overlapping of two or more codes for the same data passage.

In the second coding phase I performed focused coding, which was done to pull all the data together (Saldana, 2009). This involved reviewing, reorganizing, and refiguring first cycle codes, and their associated data, making connections between codes so that some were broken up into several more specific codes and others were merged. As is the case with most qualitative data analysis, as codes were developed and refined I revisited the transcripts so that several rounds of focused coding took place. The methods used to explore subsets of data and to develop and consolidate descriptive and analytic propositions included text search, word frequency, and content coding. These techniques were facilitated by the ‘Queries’ function within the NVivo 10 software.

My preliminary codebook contained a description of each code to ensure greater consistency as I coded the focus group and individual interview transcripts. For example, for the justice-involved youth code ‘context for leaving’, the following description was included: the participant indicates an issue, circumstance, event, or occasion in his life that influenced his decision to leave the gang. Throughout the first cycle and second cycle coding processes, I revised the codebook as necessary. Reliability in the coding process was improved by frequent re-examination of earlier transcript data to ensure that coding was being applied in a consistent manner. Further, reflective analytic memo writing was done throughout the entirety of the coding process to allow me to reflect on and determine the reasoning behind my coding decisions



(Saldana, 2009). In its final form, my codebook had 86 codes that fell within 13 themes for the justice-involved youth participants and 97 codes that fell within 14 themes for the youth justice practitioner participants. It is these themes that form the basis of the following findings chapters.

I employed an ‘adaptive theory’ approach in my data coding and analysis process. Layder (1994, 1998) developed adaptive theory by incorporating the principles of critical realism for constructing and elaborating theory in conjunction with ongoing empirical research. Agency and structure are combined in a single approach creating a link between “human activity and its social contexts” (Layder, 1994, p.5). Through this link, it is possible to merge the use of existing theory with theory generated from data analysis. In short, Layder (1994, 1998) advocates for a dialectical relationship between theory and data. I adopted concepts and elements stemming from my research questions, the literature, and the life-course perspective and a range of general social theories<sup>67</sup> to draft my list of provisional codes. However, as qualitative data was collected, coded, and analyzed, my provisional codes were expanded, revised, and modified to include new codes or to alter existing ones based on the emerging findings (Saldana, 2009). For example, my preliminary ‘gang definitional criteria’ code was revised and reorganized to include twelve different sub-codes, or child nodes, including ‘gang criteria – secrecy, low key’, which was identified in 12 of the 15 individual interviews with justice-involved youth. My analytical framework was flexible, and my interpretive process balanced inductive and deductive procedures. This allowed me to refine and finalize themes as needed to remain as responsive to and representative of the data as possible, and to develop and elaborate pathways for advancing the understanding of gang involvement and desistance (Bottoms, 2000; Layder, 1998). Through

---

<sup>67</sup> General social theories are broad explanatory frameworks concerned with the processes involved in the development of societies, general aspects of social reality, and the relationships between macro and micro influences on social reality (Bottoms, 2000).

its balanced approach, the employment of adaptive theory tends to result in a more informed analysis and a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under study.

### **Methodological Rigour or ‘Trustworthiness’**

In the context of qualitative social science research, the traditional markers of scientific rigour, such as reliability, validity, and generalizability, which emphasize research as objective and the researcher’s position as ‘dispassionate observer’ are not appropriate or relevant (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Kraska & Neuman, 2011; Palys, 1997). Rather the focus is on methodological rigour or ‘trustworthiness’, meaning the demonstration of integrity and competence within a research project. Three important criteria of trustworthiness are credibility, transferability, and sincerity.

**Credibility** refers to the truthfulness and plausibility of the research project, and the authenticity of the data and analysis (Tracy, 2010). As Kraska and Neuman (2011, p. 127) describe: “Qualitative researchers are less concerned with matching an abstract construct to empirical data and more concerned with giving a candid and accurate portrayal and interpretation of social life that is true to the experiences of people being studied”. Several provisions can be made by researchers to promote confidence that they have accurately recorded the phenomenon under investigation. I have employed three of the latter in my research project: (1) the adoption of appropriate, well recognized research methods; (2) the development of early familiarity with participating organizations; and (3) the use of thick description of the phenomenon under study.

Shenton (2004) recommends the adoption of research methods that are well established in qualitative investigation. The specific procedures employed should be derived from those that have been successfully utilized in previous comparable projects. Focus groups and individual interviews have a long and reputable history in qualitative research and have become popular

methods for investigating hidden populations such as gangs.<sup>68</sup> Compared to other quantitative-oriented methods, the latter provide a more detailed and informed perspective on how gang members perceive their world.

Shenton (2004) encourages the development of an early familiarity with the culture of participating organizations before data collection takes place. ‘Prolonged engagement’ is recommended between the researcher and the participants for the former to gain an adequate understanding of the organization, and also to establish a relationship of trust between the parties (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Further, particular to the study of gangs, the less familiar the researcher is with the participants, the greater the opportunity for the latter to exaggerate or produce an account which creates an understanding that matches the background expectancies of the researcher (Hagedorn, 1996). In this chapter, I have highlighted the relationship that I have built with the YSB – Youth Justice Services and the MCYS – Probation Services as well as justice-involved youth through my role in the *MCYS Youth Gang Project* and through other volunteer and research activities over the last number of years. My continued involvement with these organizations also promotes reciprocity, efforts made to give back time and effort to those who helped me to gain access to the justice-involved youth population. This included conducting workshops for youth justice practitioners on topics related to gang membership, preparing brief reports on best practices for various youth justice topics, and offering general research assistance.

Thick description helps to convey the actual situations that have been investigated, and to an extent, the contexts that surround them (Shenton, 2004). To illustrate the data’s complexity, researchers are advised to ‘show’, meaning that they provide enough detail that readers may

---

<sup>68</sup> For examples, see: Decker (1996); Decker & Curry (2000); Del Carmen et al. (2009); Descormiers & Morselli (2011); Hamel et al. (1998); Valdez & Kaplan (1998); and Wortley & Tanner (2006a, 2006b).

come to their own conclusion about the scene (Tracy, 2010). This means preserving the participants' subjective point of view and acknowledging the context within which the phenomenon was studied (Horsfall, Byrne-Armstrong, & Higgs, 2001; Leininger, 1994). This requires the researcher to demonstrate clearly how interpretations of the data have been achieved and to illustrate findings with quotations from the raw data (Rice & Ezzy, 1999). The participants' reflections, conveyed in their own words, strengthen the credibility of the research (Patton, 2002). The process of data analysis outlined in this chapter, and the following findings chapters, demonstrates how overarching themes are supported by excerpts from the raw data to ensure that interpretation remains directly linked to the words of the participants.

Formal quantitative understandings of generalizability are generally unhelpful and not applicable for qualitative research. This is because statistical generalizations require large random, representative samples using data that is isolated from any particular context or situation. In contrast, qualitative research engages in-depth studies with small sample sizes that generally produce historically and culturally situated knowledge. Therefore, there is no assumption that the findings from one research project should mirror similar research in different locations and/or with different populations (Shenton, 2004; Tracy, 2010). Despite the inapplicability of statistical generalization, knowledge generated through qualitative methods can still transfer and be useful in other settings, populations, or circumstances. Instead of relying on formal generalizations, qualitative research achieves resonance through transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Transferability** is achieved when readers feel as though the story of the research overlaps with their own situation and they intuitively transfer the research to their own action. Qualitative researchers are encouraged to provide a detailed description of the field, the ways

data were collected, and the analysis process so that the readers can make their own judgement as to whether the research may fit their populations of interest (Tracy, 2010). In this chapter, I provided a detailed account of the research process, the focus group and individual interview samples, and the analysis methods to make the research design clear. Moreover, in the appendices, I have provided the data collection tools used, namely the focus group and individual interview guides that were developed and employed.

Finally, **sincerity** relates to notions of authenticity and genuineness but does not require a single authentic, genuine reality or truth. Sincerity means that the research is marked by honesty and transparency about the researcher's biases, goals, and shortcomings as well as about how these played a role in the research process (Tracy, 2010). Self-reflexivity is honesty and authenticity with one's self, one's research, and one's audience and is an important practice in qualitative research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). It is important to remain conscious and aware of one's contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process, reflecting upon the assumptions that may have been made, and thinking about the implications of the latter for the research and its findings (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

To better understand and reflect on the role that I played in the research process, it is crucial to present a short description of my personal background and acknowledge how this may have affected this research project.<sup>69</sup> First, I am a privileged person. I have enjoyed the benefits associated with being born into a middle-class family, having white skin, a supportive family, post-secondary education, and steady employment. This background places me in a position of power relative to many of the justice-involved youth who I encountered in this research project.

---

<sup>69</sup> All knowledge is inevitably partial and situated and this research project is no different. While I acknowledge the importance of self-reflexivity in the qualitative research process, I put a limit on the space allocated in this doctoral dissertation to self-reflective qualifications and problematizations about the limitations of knowledge production to avoid veering into the self-indulgent presentation of a detailed personal biography on one hand and 'preaching to the choir' on the other (Haggerty, 2003).

Second, I am a woman and all but one of the participants in this research project were men. There is some research that has investigated the complicated gender dynamics that exist between men interviewees and women interviewers (e.g., Arendell, 1997; Williams & Heikes, 1993). Like the work of others, I found variation in the nature of my interactions with the male participants. In some cases, participants' presentations of their masculinity and superordinate status were pronounced and persistent. Like the presentation of machismo and bravado that I observed in the focus groups with justice-involved youth, this type of behaviour was also present in some of the individual interviews. Participants were reluctant to demonstrate any vulnerability, perhaps out of a fear of emasculation. However, in most cases, I had the impression that the participants may have felt more comfortable speaking candidly and emotionally to me than they would have felt in the presence of a male researcher. As a woman, I may appear non-threatening to them and they may be willing to disclose more information. The interactions between participants and the interviewer in a research project are inevitably complex, multifaceted, and dynamic. While contextually situated, these interactions nonetheless are influenced by the identities and histories of those involved (Arendell, 1997).

Last, I have never been a gang member. Some would argue that I should not have conducted this research project because I do not have the lived experience to claim expertise on the subject. However, I do not claim expertise. While researchers who have intimate knowledge of a field have a unique 'insider' perspective, research from an 'outsider' can also be valuable because I may perceive a different but equally valuable dynamic in the field (Bailey, 2007). I have gained a significant amount of research experience examining youth gangs. I have written articles, book chapters, and reports, given presentations and workshops, led a province-wide project examining the topic, and I am a member of the *OSVGS* Steering Committee. While these

experiences mark me as an individual with privileged knowledge on youth gangs, I acknowledge that they also bias me to see gang-involved youth from an academic perspective instead of understanding their realities as they see them. Finally, given my position as a researcher, I need to acknowledge the relative ‘truthfulness’ of the information that I was provided through the data collection activities. This specific research project and the larger *MCYS Youth Gang Project* were conducted in partnership with the YSB – Youth Justice Services and the MCYS – Probation Services. No matter how I tried to distance myself from the administration of these organizations, I know I was seen in the eyes of my participants, at least partially, as an authority figure to the justice-involved youth and as an expert to the youth justice practitioners.

In addition to being honest and vulnerable through self-reflexivity, another practice of sincerity is transparency. Transparency refers to honesty about the research process. Seale (1999, p. 468) terms this process ‘auditing’ and notes that researchers should provide “a methodologically self-critical account of how the research was done”. Transparency can be enhanced through strategies such as careful documentation and clarification of the research procedures. This means relaying the concrete research actions taken to readers so that they may appreciate the logic and purpose of these actions in the context of the specific research project (Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010). Further, transparency calls for researchers to be explicit about the logic of their inquiry so that readers are clear as to the practical, ethical, and political nature of the research (Denzin, 2009). Moreover, to be transparent means to identify the data that supports the analysis. Given my epistemological position, it was essential that I build the analysis from participant accounts. In the following findings chapters I use the research participants’ narratives to situate my analytical arguments. Where possible I use more than one individual’s perspective to demonstrate the prominence of a theme.

## **A Note on the Dissemination of Research Findings**

As noted at the outset of this chapter, objective quantitative research is inadequate to investigate social phenomenon. Engaged qualitative research into the subjective realities of people's experience leads to a more nuanced and complete understanding of not only those elements which can be objectively measured but the full complexity of the issue of youth gangs. Further, listening to research participants' own stories and learning from their constructions and analysis of their lived realities as recalled by them is based on 'ethics of caring',<sup>70</sup> and accountability. This means that we cannot extract our research from them, write and publish their stories, and then just walk away (Mander, 2010).

Rather, as qualitative researchers we should promote research participation, strive to infuse benefits into each study, routinely articulate benefits to participants, and carry through on promises to promote long-term benefits of the research. We should also share accessible outcomes with research participants (Dalton & McVilly, 2004). While this research project was not fully participatory in nature, I was conscious of my responsibility to the participants throughout the design and implementation of the research, and I am pursuing ways to responsibly follow-up with them on what I have learned.

Following the completion of this research project, I will be disseminating my research findings with the justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners involved in this study as well as with other key stakeholders. I will provide the information in a manner that is tailored to the specific audience so that it is both accessible and relevant to their needs. For the justice-

---

<sup>70</sup> The 'ethics of caring' refers to moving beyond the ethical principle of 'do no harm' toward the principle of 'doing good'. Ethics cannot be limited to fulfilling the formal requirements of sponsoring institutions, but rather should be extended to promoting the interests and well-being of research participants, in ways that make sense for them, as well as for researchers and their academic institutions and professional bodies. Thus, it promotes an ethical understanding of subjects as participants in and beneficiaries of research (Mander, 2010; Pittaway, Bartolomei, & Hugman, 2010).



involved youth participants, I acknowledge that this may be difficult due to the transient nature of this population. In fact, because of privacy protocols, I will not be able to contact research participants who have been released from the youth justice facilities. However, I believe that sharing these findings with the larger justice-involved youth populations at the William E. Hay Centre and the Livius Sherwood Detention and Custody Centre will still be beneficial and may lead to recommendations for changes to current practice and/or suggestions for future research on the topic of youth gangs.

Further, I feel that it is important to put together reference material (e.g., presentation, booklet, report) of the main findings from this research project to provide to the YSB – Youth Justice Services, MCYS – Probation Services, the OSVGS Steering Committee, and the Effective Programming and Evaluation Unit of the Youth Justice Services Division, MCYS for their review and consideration. I believe that the knowledge and insights derived from the participants in this research project will be invaluable for the development of future efforts by these groups to help justice-involved youth with gang affiliations, and in the design of future policies and practices to address youth gangs in Canada.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of the methodology employed in this research project are those inherent to many qualitative studies. While not a goal of this study, or of qualitative research more generally for that matter, it should be acknowledged that my sample was not representative and my findings cannot be generalized (Sanders, Lankenau, & Jackson-Bloom, 2010). Locating and engaging with gang-affiliated individuals for research purposes is a difficult task. Gangs represent a hidden population whose members are neither easily identifiable nor found. Nonetheless, those working with and researching gangs generally have relied on convenience

sampling methods (Petersen & Valdez, 2005). I relied on such a sample composed exclusively of self-reported youth gang members confined in youth justice facilities in the city of Ottawa. By its very nature, this type of sample is not random or representative. There is a possibility that my sample of gang members is different from a sample of non-institutionalized gang members. Also, this sample lacks the inclusion of additional gang members who were held in these same two youth justice facilities during the time of data collection activities but who did not identify as such. Therefore, self-selection bias is evident in this research project since my sample of justice-involved youth was drawn entirely from those willing to participate. As a result, the research participants are not representative of all gang-involved youth, even those involved in the youth justice system in the city of Ottawa.

Ultimately, the results of a qualitative study must be understood within the specific context in which the field work was carried out. This research project was intended to be exploratory in nature. My findings reflect the experiences and opinions of a small group of justice-involved youth confined in youth justice facilities and of youth justice practitioners at a certain point in time in the city of Ottawa. To assess the extent to which my findings may be true of gang-involved youth in other settings, similar projects employing the same methods but conducted in different environments could be beneficial. Because gangs and gang behaviour are not uniform, the truism that ‘gangs vary’ is as old as gang research itself (Thrasher, 1927). The accumulation of findings from research studies staged in different settings might enable a more inclusive, overall picture of desistance from gang involvement. Further, this research project focused exclusively on the accounts of male gang members. Given that current research argues that ‘we should not forget the girls’ considering their prevalence in gangs, the volume of crime they commit, and the victimization they experience (Maxson, 2015), it would be advantageous to

specifically examine gender differences in desistance from gang involvement. The understanding of a phenomenon is gained gradually, through several studies, rather than one research project conducted in isolation. Moreover, findings from multiple populations, rather than from a small selective group, can lead to more appropriate policy formation and program development (Petersen & Valdez, 2005).

A second limitation is the largely unchallenged assumption that participants will be willing and able to ‘tell it like it is’ in qualitative research (Hollway & Jefferson, 2001). Thus, while focus groups and individual interviews are regarded as providing insight into authentic experiences, there is an assumption that the participants are both willing and able to convey these experiences (Silverman, 2001). Further, qualitative methods of data collection are employed in social contexts and are subjected to social influences. As noted by Munn (2014), participants retain the power to decide which stories to tell. Participants may exaggerate, minimize, or withhold experiences depending on the social context. In this research project, conducting data collection activities with young men confined in youth justice facilities may have impacted the type of information shared. For example, on one hand these individuals may perceive tangible incentives for portraying themselves positively in rehabilitative terms as responsible or remorseful individuals (Presser, 2009). Alternatively, the use of ‘hype’, meaning to promote or publicize without real foundation, is a common strategy employed by gang members, and particularly younger individuals, in research settings to build themselves up to others and to outsiders (Densley, 2013).

While I acknowledged that the group dynamics and social context of focus groups conducted with young men confined in youth justice facilities encouraged the presentation of machismo and bravado, and promoted social desirability, and I limited my reliance on this data

collection method for the purposes of analysis, it is naïve to think that all social desirability and self-presentation pressures were removed in the individual interview sessions (Hollander, 2004). So, I must concede that in the self-reports of the justice-involved youth participants there may be a ‘gap between word and deed’ (Bryman, 1984). This is not to say that their stories are inauthentic but rather that they reflect the subjectivity and partiality of all discourses; they represent one of the ways that narratives may be conceived. Moving forward, we must find ways to encourage justice-involved youth to tell their as-yet-unheard stories. These stories are just as meaningful and uniquely valid interpretations of reality (Presser, 2009, 2010).

A third limitation of this research project is reflective of the use of cross-sectional research methods in general in that it represents a ‘snapshot in time’. I relied on data from justice-involved youth who participated in a single focus group session or individual interview to examine stages and turning points in gang membership. Moreover, the partially retrospective nature of this research project could have impacted the recall of some information and temporal association of the factors that drove the participants’ decisions around gang involvement and desistance. For example, as noted by Descormiers (2013) in her research study examining turning points in gang trajectories, it can be hypothesized that when the participants were asked to identify the motivations that led them to join gangs, the motivations they reported could have been more related to the ones that were keeping them in their gangs at the time of the data collection activities and different from the ones they had when they joined their gangs. The use of longitudinal data, engaging research participants at the inception of gang affiliation and re-engaging over a prolonged period, including throughout gang membership and after leaving the gang, is an important avenue for future research to address and gain a more in-depth understanding of gang involvement and desistance.

Finally, I acknowledge a limitation in the context of conducting research with vulnerable populations. There is an ethical challenge for researchers to add value to the lives of the people they are researching, recognizing them as subjects in the process and not simply as sources of data (Hugman, 2005, 2010). While I sought to include the voices of my participants in this research project, and I was respectful of their autonomy, agency, and capacity to tell their stories and to control the narrative in the focus group and individual interview sessions, I could have done more to prioritize the self-determination of the research participants throughout all phases of this research project.

Although youth engagement in research has increased and diversified over the last number of years, marginalized populations, including justice-involved youth, continue to be viewed as problems to be solved instead of partners and stakeholders in understanding the issue of interest (Daiute & Fine, 2003). By employing participant-centered methodologies (e.g., participatory action research, peer research, community-based research), youth engagement in this research project could have been better supported by making young people equal partners in a collaborative research process. For example, I could have involved the justice-involved youth participants in the identification of research questions based on issues that were important to them. I could have also ensured that they played a more active role in carrying out all aspects of the research from inception to completion. Participatory research methods seek to alter the unequal relationship of power between the researcher and the researched and to democratize knowledge and the way that it is collected and used (Jacquez, Vaughn, & Wagner, 2013; Mander, 2010; Pittaway et al., 2010). Moving forward, more concerted effort should be placed on creating opportunities for participatory research practice, in which research participants are genuine partners and self-determination is able to grow and flourish (Pittaway et al., 2010).

## **Conclusion**

This research project was systematically developed within a constructivist epistemology where I sought to connect multiple meanings on topics related to the phenomenon of youth gangs from the perspectives of key social actors, namely justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners. Given that the aims of this research project were exploratory in nature, I employed a qualitative research approach and used best practices offered in the qualitative methods literature to design a methodology that would allow me to answer my research questions. To obtain thick description and as much detail as possible, I used interpretive data collection methods, namely focus groups and individual interviews. In the five findings chapters that follow, I present the findings of this research project. Phenomenology emphasizes the importance of capturing and communicating participants' experiences in their own words. Therefore, grounded in the voices of my participants, I present my analysis of the perspectives of justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners on what constitutes a 'gang', why young people become involved, the methods, motives, and barriers for leaving the gang, and the role of the youth justice system in desistance from gang involvement.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **UNDERSTANDING ‘THE GAME’: WHAT IS THE GANG REALLY ALL ABOUT?**

As was demonstrated in Chapter 2, what constitutes a ‘gang’ remains an actively debated issue with little agreement on the characteristics necessary or sufficient to define it and related concepts. This issue involves three related questions: (1) what is the gang; (2) who is a gang member; and (3) what is gang-related activity? Different perspectives on the issue can lead to variations in the breadth of the definition (e.g., inclusive versus more restrictive), the qualities of the group (e.g., structure and leadership), and membership requirements (e.g., attitudes and behaviours). This is because these perspectives hinge on the unique perceptions of various individuals, groups, or stakeholders.

Given my employment of a constructivist epistemology, the purpose of this chapter is to examine the gang issue from the vantage point of two groups who contribute to it and who are affected by it, namely justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners. Klein (2012) has argued that the ‘realities’ surrounding gangs and their membership vary among insiders and outsiders. I begin with a presentation of the youth justice practitioner perspective followed by the justice-involved youth perspective. By organizing the findings in this way, I believe that areas of convergence and divergence on the gang issue can be more clearly elucidated. This approach allows me to highlight how perspectives of self-identified gang members differ from those of groups charged with responding to the gang problem. This is important as perspectives of the latter tend to be more commonly viewed as representative of typical characterizations of the issue. The way in which these two groups define and attribute meaning to gangs and the variation in their perspectives on what features are pertinent to gang membership and gang activities will serve as an important foundation to further inform our understanding of why young people join gangs in the first place and the process of desistance from gang involvement.

## Youth Justice Practitioner Perspective

Through focus group and individual interview sessions, the youth justice practitioners were asked to provide their own definition of ‘gang’ and ‘gang member’ based on their experiences working with gang-involved youth in the youth justice system. Specifically, they were asked to identify and describe the criteria, characteristics, and attributes of gangs and their members; to identify the purpose of the gang; and to describe gang-related activities. Three main themes emerged from these discussions: a focus on criminal behaviour in definitions; distinctions between types of gang members; and the multifunctional nature of gangs. Each of these themes will be discussed in turn below.

### Focus on ‘Criminality’ Criterion

First and foremost, the youth justice practitioners referred to the criterion of ‘criminality’ as a defining feature of the gang and gang membership. As discussed previously, this has been identified as a necessary component by many gang researchers.<sup>71</sup> When they were asked to identify how they determine gang affiliation among their clients, several youth justice practitioners indicated that they often rely on information from a third-party, typically the police<sup>72</sup> or youth probation officers, as well as official records (e.g., police citations, arrest records, sentencing reports), and various assessment reports (e.g., Risk-Need Assessment, Gang Risk Assessment Instrument). For example, as indicated by one interview participant:

So first it’s criminal history, so and we’ll look at the individual’s criminal history you know are we talking first-time offender or a person who has extensive involvement... the ones that I know or suspect to be gang involved is sort of a continuum of information and that’s usually through... you know we have the information, we gather the information from various sources, we get it from the police reports so of interest to me is you know

---

<sup>71</sup> For examples, see: Bjørge (1999); Esbensen et al. (2001); Houston (1996); Miller (1975); Mohammed (2007); and Peterson (2000).

<sup>72</sup> In Ottawa, the DART (Direct Action Response Team) and Guns & Gangs Unit of the Ottawa Police Service collect information on individuals they suspect or know to be gang involved based on prior criminal history, known gang associates, and physical evidence (e.g., tattoos, colours, photographs, video clips, documents).



who is the co-accused, is that person known to be gang involved. We'll look at the information that we've obtained concerning risk of gang-involved youth to see if this youth was involved with a known gang member well then obviously that would raise red flags. (YJP-1)

It should be noted that several of the youth justice practitioners indicated that they attempt to authenticate or contextualize the information that they receive as much as possible, especially as it relates to identifying and labelling a justice-involved youth as a gang member. For example, as discussed in one of the focus groups:

I really try to be careful with the naming that they're gang involved because I find that can set the ball rolling in another direction so that's why I say even if I get the information from police, I try even when police say, 'yeah, we have him as gang involved' is ask a lot more questions as to why they came to that conclusion, you know? And sometimes you find out that wrong place, wrong time. The kid was there and, you know? Yeah, it's... there's a lot of people in the city and some people you might associate with because you've been to school with. It doesn't mean that you are totally gang, you know? So, I try to take that information as well. (YJP-FG3)

Additionally, the youth justice practitioners tended to make inferences about gang involvement based on the types of crimes committed by their clients. In line with previous research demonstrating that a variety of criminal offences have been consistently linked to gang membership (Boyce & Cotter, 2013; Gilman et al., 2014), they identified several offences that they believed to be associated with gang involvement, including: property offences (e.g., theft), drug trafficking, the extortion of women (e.g., prostitution activities at gang parties), and violent crimes (e.g., robbery, assault with a weapon).

Based on the responses provided, the definition of the gang employed by the youth justice practitioners prioritizes the legal/enforcement aspect of the phenomenon, meaning the engagement of group members in criminal behaviour. However, I believe that it is important to contextualize the use of the criminality criterion. As noted by Wortley (2010), the focus on certain criteria of the gang definition employed will tend to mirror the needs of the entity who is

interested in it. Youth justice practitioners are agents of the youth justice system and as such criminal activity triggers their interest. This does not necessarily mean that criminal behaviour is the most important defining feature of gang involvement, but it may be the most relevant feature given the lens through which youth justice practitioners approach their work.

### Distinctions Between the 'Hardcore' and the 'Wannabe' Member<sup>73</sup>

Gang researchers have categorized individuals as having various levels of commitment to gang life, such as hardcore, associate, fringe, or wannabe (Klein 1971, 1995; Vigil, 1988). In their identification of gang-involved youth, the youth justice practitioners often made distinctions between 'hardcore' and 'wannabe' gang members.<sup>74</sup> Differences were observed in the areas of self-identification, the display of gang symbols, demeanor in the youth justice facility, and behavioural characteristics of gang-involved youth.

The self-nomination method, where researchers ask individuals if they self-identify as a gang member or if they are involved in a gang and its related activities, has been shown to be an effective way to determine gang involvement in previous research studies.<sup>75</sup> However, from the perspective of the youth justice practitioners, self-identification as a gang member appears to vary based on the individual's level of gang involvement. They consistently indicated their belief that there is an inverse relationship between self-identification and level of membership. Young people that are more deeply entrenched in the gang lifestyle are unlikely to identify themselves

---

<sup>73</sup>According to the research literature, 'hardcore' members are full-time gang members whose daily activities further the interests of the gang. They have total commitment to the gang lifestyle and comprise a small percentage of the gang. They have significant influence on the gang and may be frequently incarcerated for criminal activity (Gordon, 2000). 'Wannabe' members refer to those persons who desire to be in the gang but are currently not a part of the gang. Although wannabe members may not be fully accepted in the gang arena, their activities still mirror that of other gang members and full acceptance is their goal (Bolden, 2012).

<sup>74</sup> The level of commitment to gang life or engagement in gang activities should be viewed along a continuum (Klein, 1971, 1995; Vigil, 1988). In this doctoral dissertation, the sole focus on hardcore and wannabe gang members does not imply that I believe in a dichotomy as it relates to gang involvement and activities, but rather that these were the two reference points provided by the youth justice practitioner participants.

<sup>75</sup> For examples, see: Bjerregaard (2002); Esbensen et al. (2001); Thornberry et al. (2003); Webb et al. (2006); and Winfree et al. (1992).

as gang members, are selective in the information that they disclose to the youth justice practitioners, and tend to keep a low profile in the youth justice facility and/or while under community supervision. The more peripheral or wannabe gang members are likely to identify as gang members, often bragging about their gang affiliation and naming their gang, and more likely to openly display symbols of membership (e.g., wearing gang colours, engaging in graffiti and tagging, using hand signs, employing gang-specific language). This was highlighted in discussions with two youth justice practitioners:

[Wannabe gang members] want to be identified while someone who's there [truly gang involved] might be a little more secretive realizing that it's not great to have that out there. It's like some guys will change, like they'll have their hat and their bandana and their identification of who they are and that comes off when they move from location to location, right? (YJP-3)

Yeah, basically there's one person we have now out in Sherwood [youth justice facility], he's really gung ho about becoming a member of the Crips. So, you go into his room, there's always papers. He just draws Crips all day, talks about it non-stop, but he actually isn't one [gang member] he's just aspiring to be. Whereas, like I was saying earlier, the ones that really are [gang involved], they don't say a single thing. (YJP-2)

Some of the youth justice practitioners believed that a better method of gauging the level of gang involvement is by observing how justice-involved youth 'carry themselves' and interact with one another in the youth justice facility:

I think the way that we distinguish some of them is just by the way they carry when they come into a unit, when they walk onto the floor. So, you have the other guys that'll be very vocal about the fact that they're part of a gang or proud of it and the other person who doesn't talk about it but carries a lot of weight in the unit. And then all of a sudden well that kind of gives you an indicator that this has to be someone who's affiliated [with the gang] somehow. (YJP-FG1)

So, sometimes a lot of information that we will gather about young men is through potential conflict that they have with other young people that are here [youth justice facility]. Sometimes that will come through from a young person who is afraid of another young person that's here; that's usually an indicator that that person carries a lot of weight in the streets, so that for us can be an indicator for sure. (YJP-2)

The distinction between hardcore and wannabe gang members can also be observed in their behaviour. According to the youth justice practitioners, the more deeply entrenched gang members are perceived to be more thoughtful and reflective in their actions and to display self-control while the wannabe gang members, as well as the general justice-involved youth population, are perceived to be more reactionary and impulsive in their actions. They believe that the hardcore gang members try to avoid ‘catching heat’ from the youth justice staff members and try to ensure that the status quo is maintained in the youth justice facility. As noted by a participant in one of the focus groups: “They know how to play the game” (YJP-FG1). If they do engage in violence within the youth justice facility, it is instrumental in nature, meaning premeditated, timed, and specific in focus to re-establish the equilibrium (e.g., putting another justice-involved youth back in line). As described by another participant in the focus group:

They [hardcore gang members] have this self-control, right? Because it’s all about planning, right? They’re not very impulsive. They’re not going to react. They’re not going to get... they’re going to plan things out... they know how to manipulate... Like when they want something, they’re not going to go get it but somebody else is going to get it for them. And they know who they can get to go and get it for them or whatever it is that they need or... it’s always kind of like... it plays out somehow that way... So, I understand that the staff are, you know, running the facility but right under them, ‘I’m [hard core gang member] running the rest of the unit behind the scenes, I’m running the unit, and if you’re [wannabe gang member or other justice-involved youth] disrupting this you’re angering the staff... disrupting the environment’. (YJP-FG1)

Finally, another participant in that focus group indicated that the wannabe gang members and other justice-involved youth clients tend to be more aggressive toward the youth justice staff members and engage in violent altercations with their peers on a reactionary basis: “You hit me, I’m hitting you. That’s it we are going to fight” (YJP-FG1).

This perspective on divergent behaviours based on level of involvement adds a caveat to previous research examining whether gangs are a group of individuals with negative personal attributes. While the representation of hardcore individuals is reflective of Sánchez-Jankowski’s

(1991, 2003) argument that gang members are intelligent and demonstrate high cognitive competence, the image of wannabe individuals is more reflective of other accounts that view gang members as self-interested and poorly self-controlled individuals (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990), and that they display problem behaviours (e.g., risk factor research on reactivity, aggression, and impulsivity; see Peterson & Morgan, 2014).

### Gangs Are Multifunctional

Overall, the youth justice practitioners identified and described three major functions, or purposes, of the gang for its members that can be classified as economic-oriented, socialization-oriented, and status-oriented. They typically discussed these functions as being interconnected and that they varied based on the individual's level of gang involvement.

The economic function identified by the youth justice practitioners most closely aligns with the 'criminal gang' as described by Franzese and colleagues (2016) where the purpose is to secure income through illegal means (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960). Sánchez-Jankowski (2003) suggests that in this case the gang assumes the role of economic organization and generates money for its members through its business ventures in the illegal economy. The youth justice practitioners believed that income gained through gang involvement was used to pay for basic needs (e.g., food, shelter), to pay for entertainment (e.g., alcohol, drugs, women), and to purchase other luxury items (e.g., cars, jewelry). Drug selling activities, theft, and robbery were the means most cited for securing income. As noted by one interview participant: "Illegal ones [activities] are whatever's going to make money because money is at the bottom of all of this [gang involvement]. So, activities are often around drug sales" (YJP-4). Further, another youth justice practitioner indicated:

Typically, it's selling drugs of some kind that would be the number one. Outside of that what you see less of is discussions surrounding robbery, both like personal robberies as

well as stores and banks, that's lower on the list, home invasions which kind of goes in part with the drug selling as part of the motive and rationale [for the gang]. (YJP-1)

The socialization function identified by the youth justice practitioners most closely aligns with the 'social, street corner, or turf gang' as described by Franzese and colleagues (2016), which is primarily concerned with social activities such as hanging out, partying, and having a good time. The youth justice practitioners believed that gang members would often come together to play videogames, play basketball, use illicit drugs, and attend house parties. They indicated that these social activities are often also used simultaneously as occasions to make money through illegal activities. This supports the premise that although the social gang does not necessarily focus on criminal activity, their members are often involved, sometimes collectively, in minor forms of illegal behaviour (Franzese et al., 2016). As discussed by one participant:

I mean there's a social aspect of it. I mean they come together to make money but it's also social activities like playing video games and playing basketball. I mean I think a lot of the population likes to use outdoor basketball courts as a social way of interacting, selling drugs... like I said there's a social aspect, I mean they're not always doing crime; they're not always selling drugs. There's a lot of just chilling and passing time and connecting with other human beings. (YJP-1)

The status function identified by the youth justice practitioners is typically aligned with the 'conflict gang' where the manipulation of violence predominates as a way of winning status (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960). The youth justice practitioners believed that the focus was on gaining acceptance and becoming a recognized member of the gang and demonstrating an improved social position through the visible display of gang symbols and use of coercive power. As explained by one interview participant, gang-involved youth seek to be respected and/or feared by those around them:

They don't want the police or the authorities to know that they're gang members, but they want everyone else to know that's within this population [justice-involved youth] because it's important for them to exert their power and their influence on the young men that are

here [youth justice facility]. They get what they want through basically intimidating, and sometimes their name is enough to intimidate young men. So, their reputation as gang members is very important to them. (YJP-2)

As noted by Cloward and Ohlin (1960) and reinforced through the observations of the youth justice practitioners, gangs and gang members need not specialize in one function to the exclusion of others. Further, some youth justice practitioners also noted that the relative importance of the functions of the gang may vary based on the individual's level of involvement. For the wannabe gang members, the status function may be more relevant as they seek acceptance in the gang and welcome the notoriety that comes with membership. This is in line with the youth justice practitioners' observations that these individuals tend to be more forthcoming or vocal about and proud of their gang involvement. As noted by one interview participant: "Someone aspiring to be something I think loves a label, right?" (YJP-3). For the hardcore gang members, involvement is often viewed as a means to an end. Therefore, in certain instances, the economic function may be more relevant as gang-involved youth maintain a low profile to effectively engage in illegal money-making activities and to avoid detection by agents of the criminal justice system, while the status function may be used to ensure cooperation from others in pursuing their endeavours.

### **Justice-Involved Youth Perspective**

Through individual interviews, justice-involved youth were asked to provide a definition of 'gang' and 'gang member' based on their own knowledge and individual experiences. Like the youth justice practitioner participants, they were asked to identify and describe the criteria, characteristics, and attributes of gangs and their members; identify the purpose of the gang; and to describe gang-related activities. Three main themes emerged from these discussions: a focus on relationship dynamics in definitions; the use of geography and gang-related symbols to

characterize membership; and the economic-oriented and protection-oriented functions of the gang. Each of these themes will be discussed in turn below.

### Focus on 'Relationship' Criterion

The justice-involved youth consistently described gangs as groups of people or friends (e.g., homies, buddies, dudes) and often employed terms such as crew, squad(ron), and team when referring to their gang. As noted by Johnny:

... a gang means to have a squad, I guess. You know, to have, like having a basketball team, like having a team, you know, it's like having a wolf pack... it's like being involved with a group of people that you do activities with. A basketball team can be a gang, a football team can be a gang... you do activities with them, you know?

Further, they often described the gang and gang members using comparisons to characteristics and qualities of the 'family' which, defined through a symbolic interactionist perspective, is a group where people come together to form a strong primary group connection, maintaining emotional ties to one another over an extended period and providing for one another's physical, emotional, social, and economic well-being. Families are groups in which participants view themselves as family members and act accordingly (Little et al., 2014). As demonstrated in the passages below, the justice-involved youth described gang members as being as close as brothers, interacting with one another at a high rate, often daily, and participating in activities together. They also believed that the gang takes care of you by providing food and shelter, and as members you always 'have each other's backs':

They were just kind of like... got really close to me like brothers almost. You kind of have like people that are there for you... Yeah, I was always with them, always doing things with them... Well they were like brothers to me too so... I mean I think that it's a good thing that they consider me like family to them. I never really had that before so... like being with them, like I'd wake up and believe it or not they'd make breakfast and stuff and they'd give me food that they'd got and I'd help them out... and pretty much it was my home too... Yeah... and we really never even said gang, we didn't use the word gang between us... it was more of a family to a certain extent. (Bob)



Well for me a gang would be having people that would... kind of like a family member always be there for you. Like say shit goes down somewhere they would be there for you to protect you, even give you a place to sleep if you really need it or something. (FT)

... it's more your family those are your brothers, do you know what I mean? I do everything with them. If I'm in the house, then I'm chilling with my brothers. I'm not chilling with just random people, I'm hanging out with my brothers. I'm in the house with my brothers. I go to their houses with my brothers. I'm partying with my brothers. You know do everything with your brothers. (KP)

Well, to me a gang is a group of people who are as close as family... Throughout your life you are always going to have hard times and times where somebody is going to be messing with you, where somebody is not going to be liking you very much and doing stuff about it, and you need that support, you need to know that there's always somebody there to help you... no matter what you did, you weren't judged harshly by them. There was no way that they'd kick you out, there was no way that they'd stop being your brothers. (Michel)

Loyalty and trustworthiness were concepts that were often employed by the justice-involved youth to describe the gang and its members, as Johnny stated in particular:

Like growing up you had to be loyal. It's like loyalty before royalty, it's like something you know I was taught, you know? Like loyalty is number one, you know?... Yeah, yeah, it's just something that you are, like let's say the British army, you know, they are all loyal to the Queen, you know, they die, you know? Us, you know we have loyalty to each other.

Two interview participants equated this loyalty to not disclosing gang-related information to authority figures, which was often described as the most important rule of the gang:

Be loyal, never snitch, don't be a rat. Because I know most of these niggers here [youth justice facility] they've been riding for those niggers out there. It's all about loyalty. Never snitch and never rat on your niggers, always hold it down. (Costello)

So now that I'm here [youth justice facility] you know, if someone's asking me like tell me who's one of your gang members, what is their name for example, you know I would never tell. I'd say I'd rather die instead of snitching, you know? That's a part of being in the gang too. (Montana)

Finally, honesty was discussed by Michel: "No lies to each other, always be honest with everybody there", and Allister described the importance of having respect for the gang:

That's the biggest thing with gangs I think is just respect... I don't know I'd say if you're buying and selling drugs and stuff you can only really re up [replenish drug supply] or buy drugs again off your gang and like if you don't and if you're trying to make your own money that's how they... like you're trying to get a better price and make your own money and not trying to support your gang or whatever then they take that as you're disrespecting them and that you're trying to screw them over in a sense and do stuff behind their back.

These various forms of 'reliability' described by the justice-involved youth have been shown in previous research to be highly valued attributes by gangs and fundamental to gang membership.<sup>76</sup> However, it should be noted that these characteristics are not unique to gangs, but instead reflect the norms of many other groups and institutions, including the family. In fact, in Homans' (1950) study of the 'human group' he argues that mutual obligation, reciprocity, loyalty, and trust are all requirements of group membership regardless of group type.

Only two justice-involved youth made explicit reference to the criminality criterion with JG stating: "To be involved in a gang I would say it would be to partake in such things as violence, rape, a lot of drug use, also stealing, murdering..." and Juliano stating: "[The] gang is like people getting into organized crime, like more than a couple friends". While the youth justice practitioners relied on the criminality criterion to define the youth gang and identify involvement, reflective of the position that without this measure the concept becomes too broad and would encompass the study of all organized group behaviour<sup>77</sup>, the emphasis on the relationship criterion of gang involvement by justice-involved youth is reflective of more inclusive definitions of gang and gang members found in the research literature. Miller (1976) argued that the term gang refers to a collectivity of humans comprising identifiable persons and is conceptually similar to terms such as 'group' or 'organization'. Johnstone (1981, p. 355) provided a definition consistent with Miller's suggesting that: "One person's gang may be

---

<sup>76</sup> For examples, see: Klein (2012); Moran (2015); and Stretesky & Pogrebin (2007).

<sup>77</sup> For examples, see: Klein (1995); and Wood & Alleyne (2010).

another's peer group, street-corner group, crowd, clique, hanging group, club, or simply youth group", or from the perspective of the justice-involved youth, a family.

The gang occupying the role of primary group in the lives of justice-involved youth can be understood from different perspectives. For individuals coming from broken homes<sup>78</sup> or having experience in the child welfare system, the gang may assume the role of 'surrogate' family, providing them with what was missing in their own homes. This premise will be explored further in Chapter 6. Additionally, the primary group role of the gang can be understood in the context of the life-course perspective, which suggests that in the early teenage years, a young person's primary reference group shifts from the family to the peer group; the influence of the latter intensifies as that of the former wanes. Peer interactions become crucial contexts for young people's interpretations of their world and are essential for the development of knowledge and skills necessary to participate in the adult world (Demo, 1992; Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth, & Jang, 1991). The gang becomes a second family in an ongoing socialization process.

In both cases, the focus is on the relationship dynamics of the group and not on the behavioural dynamics. The gang represents one of a variety of available social group options (e.g., fraternity, sports team, social club) for young people to fulfill their needs. Proponents of the 'inclusive position' identify that the problem of defining gangs based on behavioural dynamics (i.e., criminal behaviour) is that while gang members may engage in illegal activities this does not mean that they are, or should be, understood as inherently criminal groups.

Members of other social groups (e.g., fraternities, competitive sports teams) also engage in

---

<sup>78</sup> It should be noted that recent qualitative research conducted by Young, Fitzgibbon, and Silverstone (2013) lends support to the proposition that gang members can emanate from families of all types but 'non-traditional' family structures tend to predominate. Their study reported gang members coming from an eclectic mix of families including single parent households, reconstituted households, meaning a stepfamily or living with other relatives, and homes with both biological parents present.

illegal behaviour (e.g., using and selling illicit substances, hazing activities); yet they are not considered criminal organizations because most of their activities do not involve crime. The same can be said of gangs as most members' time is not spent engaging in criminal activities either. Evidence points to the fact that like fraternities, competitive sports teams, or other social clubs, gangs are formal collectives that view their main purpose as providing economic, social, and status benefits to their members (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Suttles, 1968; Thrasher, 1927; Venkatesh, 2000; Vigil, 1988; Whyte, 1993).

Therefore, while much of society, including agents of the criminal justice system, may be most concerned with the criminal behaviour of gang members, this interest should not be translated into definition perceptions and misperceptions (Sánchez-Jankowski, 2003). As perceived by the justice-involved youth, the most salient criterion of the gang is the strong and reciprocal relationship between gang members, reminiscent of a prototypical family. This reflects Thrasher's (1927) argument that gangs are simply one of many possible forms of peer group activities for adolescents and involve behaviours that range from the conventional to the deviant. This inclusive definition of the gang can serve to provide a more holistic understanding of gang membership that moves beyond criteria based on the presence of criminality.

#### Rep'ing the 'Hood, Claiming Territory, and Using Symbols

Geography plays two important roles as it relates to gang membership. The justice-involved youth indicated their belief that gang members typically come from and identify with specific blocks, neighbourhoods, or communities in the city of Ottawa, and the gang name is often a reflection of that particular area. Gang members then act to protect that territory against outsiders and work to expand it, typically for the purposes of generating income and increasing the gang's status relative to other gangs.

The justice-involved youth indicated that being ‘born and raised’ in a specific area is often a pre-requisite for membership in the gang. As noted by two interview participants:

It’s like people from my neighbourhood. You know I’m from [...] and so like anybody from my neighbourhood, like who grew up together, you know?... And there’s only just one clique in the neighbourhood. In like one neighbourhood there’s no three cliques, no two cliques... Like there’s the young guys and there’s the old guys, you know and that’s it... It’s like generation after generation, it keeps going, you know? (Johnny)

[The gang is] people you went up with from like the projects, your ‘hood, you know? ... you can’t just be in the game [the gang] unless you’re from the area and you know, you grew up with the people who you are in the game with. (KP)

Similar to what Wortley and Tanner (2008) observed in their work on the Toronto Street Gang Pilot Project, for several justice-involved youth what eventually became the gang often began as an informal friendship grouping of individuals who grew up in the same neighbourhood. That geographic area becomes your ‘turf’ and the gang and its members identify themselves in relation to it. This was discussed by several other justice-involved youth: “But me I’m from the south. Me I’m a Crip” (Costello), and “We stick to one part of the city and that’s close to [...], but the crew’s name is Southside. The name of the crew is Southside gang” (Montana).

While gangs and their members may have established themselves in and identify with a specific geographic area, this does not impede their ability to move around and operate in other locations. Prior research has suggested that to improve economic gains and elevate their status, gangs and their members are prepared to move into, fight for, occupy, and defend as much geographic space as possible; this can extend over very extensive areas and boundaries (Sánchez-Jankowski, 2003). KP suggested that for him personally:

... like most of the dudes in the game [the gang] are from my territory, you know? But like me I go everywhere to make money. I go all over the city and make money; most of my dudes will go all over the city and make money, yeah.

Additionally, JG noted: “So, say there is a block, they fight for it, they earn it, they want to stay there then. They don’t want to leave because they just fought that”.

Previous research has also supported the importance of territory as a defining element of the gang. Hagedorn (1988) identifies gangs as a friendship group of adolescents who share common interests, with a more or less clearly defined territory, in which most members live. They are committed to defending one another, the territory, and the gang name. Hagedorn’s definition underscores the importance of turf and solidarity to understanding gangs.

The justice-involved youth believed that gang-related symbols are also an important part of gang identification. Gang specific colours, custom tattoos, graffiti, and hand signals are all visual indications of gang membership that were identified and discussed by interview participants. However, the visibility of these membership symbols is based on an individual’s decision to ‘represent’ gang membership or to ‘keep it low key’.

Showing gang specific colours was the most common gang identifier discussed by the justice-involved youth. As noted by Johnny: “Like west siders wear red, south siders wear blue...”. Gang colours could take the form of hats, sweatshirts, jackets, and bandanas; the latter was the most common item mentioned. AB indicated that to demonstrate your membership in a gang: “You just wear a red bandana on the right side. I used to be like really, really, really involved. I used to always wear red and drop my red bandana and everything”. Montana further explained: “Usually I like wearing bandanas because of the... like all of the gang members, they usually wear bandanas because you can tell when somebody’s wearing the bandana they’re like part of the gang”. According to the justice-involved youth, employing visible gang identifiers, like colours, helps to easily identify your gang members and to distinguish them from members of other rival gangs, which is important when moving throughout the city. Representing

membership in this way can also be used as an intimidation tactic, demonstrating the size and solidarity of membership to other gangs and non-gang members, often to protect territory or to conduct gang-related business.

This gang identifier has also become readily recognizable to those outside the gang and can lead to negative attention from agents of the criminal justice system and the education system for the wearer. Examples were provided of adverse interactions with authority figures based on wearing what were, or what were perceived to be, gang colours. As noted by Bob: “I got pulled over all the time because I had my flag flying. I would be wearing colours and DART would pull me over”, and as discussed by Allister:

Yeah, there are people always watching what you are doing like police. Like sometimes they’ll stop you for random reasons and say something just to search you and stuff. Like it happened to me a lot of times just because I wear a red jacket.

Some justice-involved youth participants indicated that because of this negative attention, especially on the part of the police, that showing gang colours as an indicator of gang membership is becoming less prevalent. This finding is consistent in part with the perspective of the youth justice practitioners that young people who are more deeply entrenched in the gang lifestyle are unlikely to publicly display gang-related symbols. This revelation is important given the emphasis that is typically placed on this criterion by agents of the criminal justice system. For example, the CISC uses the display of gang colours as one of the seven criteria that must be met for an individual to be considered a confirmed gang member. This classification system has been adopted and employed by many regional and local police departments including the Ottawa Police Service. Given the lessened emphasis placed on the use of colours by gang members themselves, a continued focus on this criterion may lead to the erroneous identification of gang members. As discussed by several justice-involved youth:

Not many people wear bandanas anymore because it just makes them like a big red flag to the police and that, it draws a lot of attention to themselves... Because there's a lot of Guns & Gangs Unit and police and stuff going around Ottawa and so people are trying to make it harder to tell. (Allister)

Well yeah... like out on the streets we just try to keep it low key. That's what our gang is, you got to keep it low key because cops see you with certain colours on they're going to suspect that... because they are always on their toes and looking out. (John)

We don't want anyone in authority to know because it can cause problems for us... Having us get arrested or just basically just criminal records, most of the people in the gang already have criminal records. (Michel)

As noted above, the justice-involved youth have indicated the increasing importance of employing less readily observable symbols of gang membership, and ones that are more difficult to replicate by non-members (e.g., hand signals, handshakes, graffiti tags). Some interview participants referred specifically to gang tattoos as a method of branding you as a gang member:

Tattoos everybody gets a tattoo. When you turn a certain age you get the tattoo, when you turn 18 you get the tattoo. You don't get the tattoo, shit you better be getting the fuck out. You'd get jumped out; you can't be in the game [the gang] without the tattoo. (KP)

I guess for Bloods they brand you and Crips have a different way. But Bloods have a certain brand, if you don't have the brand then you're not a real Blood and you don't want to try and impersonate a Blood...yeah. Tattoos are one of the main things because it shows yeah, I'm a Blood or whatever. But tattoos are one of the main things. No normal street person would just have you know their gang symbolization. (JG)

It is important to note the different perspectives of the youth justice practitioners and the justice-involved youth related to the purpose and use of gang-related symbols. While the youth justice practitioners discussed the likelihood of displaying gang-related symbols as a function of level of gang membership (i.e., wannabe versus hardcore), the justice-involved youth indicated that it was more of a reflection of what the display could accomplish for (e.g., intimidation, ability to conduct gang business) or cost (e.g., harassment by authorities) gang members.



## It's All About the 'Shmoney'<sup>79</sup> and 'Having Each Other's Backs'

Overall, the justice-involved youth indicated that the main purpose of the gang is to make money. As noted by KP: "It's like a brotherhood, your homies you know you get money with your homies that's all it is really. To get money. That's all that matters. To get money and get out of the 'hood...". Further, Costello noted:

Because the game [the gang] is all about making money and eating and shit, you know? It's not all about that violence shit. Like that was the past that shit about the Crips versus the Bloods that was all in the past like, you know? Now it's all about the shmoney.

All but two participants referred to the primacy of the economic-oriented function of their gang. Further, the justice-involved youth indicated that the money obtained through gang involvement addressed different goals, namely to survive (e.g., to eat and to put a roof over your head), to demonstrate independence (e.g., earn money for yourself and to provide for others), and to show status (e.g., through material possessions and money earned for the gang), all of which will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 6. As identified previously, this economic orientation aligns with the criminal gang typology where the primary purpose is to secure income through illegal means. Like the activities identified by the youth justice practitioners, the justice-involved youth described making money through illegal activities such as drug selling, theft from other gangs (e.g., money, drugs, weapons), break-and-enters, and robberies.

Only two justice-involved youth referred to the socialization function of the gang identified by the youth justice practitioners, which is primarily concerned with social activities. AB indicated: "Yeah we just chill, usually we just smoke weed and hang out". Johnny also discussed the social purpose of the gang, but it was in the context of the evolving nature of his gang over time:

---

<sup>79</sup> 'Shmoney' is the name used for money that is acquired illegally or through under the table offers. Hence the 'shhh' sound emphasizing the fact that one must be quiet about how they receive the money (UrbanDictionary.com).

It was like... it was more like first we did it for fun, you know? First, we did it just as a joke, you know we were like little kids, oh we have our own little group, stealing bikes, just little kid stuff, you know? You have your little fort like in the forest, just funny stuff, you know? And then like after a while like it started getting like bigger and you know it's kinda like how are we going to make money now? Ok let's go to this party, ok yeah, we need alcohol, we need drugs, you know?

This evolution in the gang's function is addressed by Hagedorn (1988), Taylor (1990), and Sullivan (1989) who suggest that gang formation often involves passage through a series of stages, beginning with a network of friends that are socially-oriented (e.g., hanging out, partying) or conflict-oriented (e.g., engaging in street fighting, turf wars) and as they age they become more criminally-oriented (e.g., involved in economic crime, crime for profit). However, others, like Costello, did not buy-in to the socialization or conflict function of the gang:

Because the game [the gang] is all about making money... it's all about the shmoney.... At the end of the day, everyone is just in the streets trying to hustle to make some money. Some people are just there trying to make trouble some people are just there to make money. But I think that's stupid for some people to be in the game just to enjoy it, the shooting and the violence and shit, you know? Me I see it as making money and putting food on the table for a family or your friends, you know?

'Protection' was another gang purpose that was identified by the justice-involved youth participants. This function was most often discussed in the context of gang members 'having each other's backs'. Participants indicated that the gang protects against rival gang members and other non-gang individuals, and in some cases against agents of the criminal justice system.

The gang, simply as a function of being a collective, can prevent negative interactions with other individuals and groups, and further if something happens to an individual member, the gang and its members can assist with retaliation or prevent a future incident from occurring. As noted by several justice-involved youth:

But the good thing is if I was with my crew, my gang and there's other people, when I'm with the gang they don't do nothing because they see my crew and they'll be like 'this guy's got his own crew', they can't do nothing... But if they see just one person, they can

just crush them... but as soon as they see all blue and they're all red, they can't just come and start beefing, you know? Like start a fight or something like that... (Montana)

If there's a guy... it's never happened to me before but let's say there's a guy that beat the crap out of me, I know that if I couldn't fight back I know I'd always have... because my buddy is friggin' 6' 8 and a huge guy and he would always be there to protect me... and the other way around too, I mean not that he needs any protecting, but it's just like they have your back. (Bob)

Three justice-involved youth discussed the protection function of the gang with respect to interactions with agents of the criminal justice system, particularly the police. The perspective of these participants is that by their actions, the police require youth to seek out and employ the protection of the gang, and that the police themselves constitute a gang:

Basically, what it is... gangs were all initiated and designed to protect your neighbourhoods from rival gangs. There wouldn't be gangs without police, police started off gangs. Police are saying that we're negative, police are the ones that came into the areas to rough up Black youth, White youth, Arab youth and we're the ones... you know we didn't really do much to cause that stuff, we're just doing our thing. (KP)

Yeah, um like for example... 15 years old, I was hanging out you know with a few guys. I was hanging out with one of them... I was smoking pot with him and uh cops come by and they're like 'so what are you guys doing' and it was like... it's the middle of the day, you know? So, they take the pot from us, whatever. And then we start walking back to the neighbourhood and the neighbourhood has like tunnels, you know? Like there's a house right here and there's like tunnels... I'm walking by and five cops come up to my face, you know and I'm like what do you guys want, you know? And they're like 'so you think you're a big boy, you think you're a tough boy', you know? I got a punch in the face and I drop, you know? Bop, bop and I'm getting punched, I'm getting punched, I'm getting punched. The guy puts a knee on my chest. He tells me 'yo you better stay right', you know? We're watching you. And I'm like what the hell? And that's what I thought about, you know? I can't trust these guys, even if I had a problem, even if I was getting... if some guy wanted to hurt me... I can't trust them. I would rather call my boy and tell him to come back and help instead of calling the cops and telling them to come help me. (Johnny)

I think that I just want to go on record saying that the DART team is the biggest gang in Ottawa... they do the same thing that I do, but not what I do but that guys like me do... did but they have a uniform, you know? (Matt)

Since the time of Thrasher (1927), researchers have documented the role of ‘conflict’ in the development of youth gangs. The gang typology bearing the same name suggests that the gang is compelled by outside forces to defend itself, its members, and its turf or risk victimization by the latter (Franzese et al., 2016). As outside forces (e.g., other groups, the police) begin to compete for desired goods (e.g., drug markets, territory), gangs form out of a desire for protection (Melde et al., 2009). According to Decker and Van Winkle (1996), protection from harm, whether at the individual or group level, is central to both the formation and continuation of gangs. At the individual level, involvement in the gang offers a level of protection against physical harm that cannot be attained alone. At the group level, the threat of outside groups infiltrating one’s territory and taking control of some desired good, leads to the organization of similarly situated individuals to guard against this (Melde et al., 2009).

While the youth justice practitioners and the justice-involved youth both identified the economic orientation of the gang and had similar viewpoints on some of its overarching goals (i.e., survival, demonstrating status), there were differences between the two groups on the emphasis placed on this function. The youth justice practitioners perceived it to be one of three interrelated purposes of the gang and that its importance varied based on the individual’s level of gang involvement. For justice-involved youth, the purposes of the gang were perceived to be universal to all members, namely to make money and to offer protection. MJ put it well noting: “The gang protects its own and it protects wealth; these are the two most important things in the gang health and wealth”. Further, Juliano indicated: “So that’s what they try to get to is that people are mostly focused on money and also that they can have people that can back them up if they’re down on some problems”. Finally, while both groups identified purposes that aligned

with the conflict gang typology, the youth justice practitioners emphasized the status function while the justice-involved youth emphasized the protection function.

## **Conclusion**

The findings from this chapter demonstrate a juxtaposition of different perspectives on how the gang issue is constructed and understood. As noted by Klein (2012), the gang and gang membership reside in the eyes of the beholders, and the beholders are often in disagreement. Given the lens of youth justice practitioners and how they approach their work with justice-involved youth, the utility of defining the gang and its members relates to identifying and classifying individuals based on different levels of 'deviation'. They characterized gangs and their members based on engagement in illegal activities, perceived clear differences between hardcore and wannabe members, and saw the relevance of the gang's economic, socialization, and status functions based on the individual's level of gang involvement. Alternatively, the justice-involved youth tended to highlight 'normative' aspects of the gang and its members as reflective of a typical relationship trajectory from adolescence into adulthood. They identified and described the gang as a surrogate family that espouses loyalty, with members coming from the same 'hood, who see the gang's function as earning money and protecting each other from outside threats. Further, while several overlapping factors were identified (e.g., use of gang symbols, overarching goals of the gang), the focus or emphasis underlying these concepts often differed between the two groups. See *Table 3* at the end of this chapter for a summary of the main findings with respect to the three gang-related concepts identified at the outset of this chapter.

The different perspectives presented by these two groups suggests the importance of seeking out and utilizing more nuanced and contextual definitions that challenge some of the

more general and 'common sense' invocations of gang-related terms that have been employed in the past. By appreciating the gang issue from the vantage point of those who are directly involved in it, contribute to it, and are affected by it, we are better positioned to understand why and how individuals move into, through, and out of gang involvement.

Table 3. Summary of Perspectives on Gang-Related Concepts

Justice-Involved Youth	Youth Justice Practitioners
<i>Gang Definition</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants focused on the ‘relationship’ criterion using comparisons to the prototypical or surrogate family and emphasizing various forms of reliability (relational dynamics).</li> <li>• Participants tended to employ more inclusive definitions that use normative development or life-course perspective lenses.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants focused on the ‘criminality’ criterion using references to types of crimes committed by individuals (behavioural dynamics).</li> <li>• Participants tended to employ more restrictive definitions that use deviation or legal/enforcement lenses.</li> </ul>
<i>Gang Membership</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants focused on the role of geography and gang-related symbols (colours, tattoos) to characterize membership.</li> <li>• Participants indicated that membership in the gang relates to the physical environment (gang location, gang name, a pre-requisite for individual involvement).</li> <li>• Participants suggested that the use of gang-related symbols is a function of what it can accomplish for (e.g., intimidation, ability to conduct gang business) or cost (e.g., harassment by authorities) gang members.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants focused on the different levels of involvement in the gang (‘hardcore’ versus ‘wannabe’ members).</li> <li>• Participants indicated that differences between these levels of involvement could be observed in individuals’ likelihood to identify as gang members and to display gang-related symbols (inverse relationship with level of membership), and in their demeanor in the youth justice facility (how they ‘carry themselves’) and their display of certain behavioural characteristics (e.g., self-controlled versus impulsive, strategic versus reactionary).</li> </ul>
<i>Gang-Related Activities</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants focused on two major functions of the gang: economic-oriented and protection-oriented.</li> <li>• Participants suggested that the economic-oriented function is primary (survive, demonstrate independence, show status). The protection-oriented function was often discussed in the context of gang members ‘having each other’s backs’.</li> <li>• Participants indicated that these functions are universal to all gang members regardless of their level of gang involvement.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants focused on three major functions of the gang: economic-oriented, socialization-oriented, and status-oriented.</li> <li>• Participants indicated that these functions are interconnected and vary based on an individual’s level of gang involvement.</li> </ul>

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **JUMPING IN: REASONS WHY YOUNG PEOPLE JOIN THE GANG**

Researchers studying the motivations for gang involvement have found that individual, social interactive, and wider environmental factors all have the potential to influence the decision to join the gang.<sup>80</sup> Johnstone (1983, p. 296) emphasized that gang involvement can be explained through a combination of macrosocial and microsocial factors: “The opportunity to join a gang is established by the external social environment, but the decision to do so is governed by social and institutional attachments and by definitions of self”. Gang affiliation often provides psychological, social, and/or economic benefits, and those that become involved do so to meet unfulfilled needs (Chettleburgh, 2007; Wortley & Tanner, 2006a, 2006b).

Before undertaking an investigation of desistance, it is important to explore the complex nature of gang involvement by identifying and examining the diverse reasons why young people may have initially joined the gang. All participants in this research project were asked about their perspectives on why individuals may want to be involved in the gang and to identify some of the benefits of membership for the latter. Unlike in Chapter 5 where there were considerable differences between the two perspectives on the gang issue, analysis of the focus group and individual interview sessions with justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners demonstrated a substantial overlap in the identified motivations for gang involvement. As such, to avoid repetition in the interpretation of results, the findings from the two groups have been combined and are presented thematically below.<sup>81</sup> However, where there are divergences in perspectives between the two groups, these differences are highlighted and discussed.

---

<sup>80</sup> For examples, see: Curry et al. (2013); Decker et al. (2013); O’Brien et al. (2013); and Wood & Alleyne (2010).

<sup>81</sup> Within each theme, the order in which the findings are presented is based on the flow of information for ease of understanding and is not an indication of the preference of one perspective over another.



Through my discussions with the justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners in this research project, both groups highlighted that the pathways to gang membership are complex and motivations for involvement often vary from person to person. As illustrated by one youth justice practitioner:

There's a lot of different things that are present and a lot of different reasons. I think someone can end up in a gang because of many different factors, because of trauma they experience, because there hasn't been enough glue to keep their home or their community together... because of racial reasons. There can be many, many factors. (YJP-3)

Further AB indicated: "Well some it's just to make money, some it's for friends. Some people just want to feel like the king of the world". It is a combination and accumulation of various factors that lead to gang involvement and further, as noted by another youth justice practitioner:

"I mean like I don't think a kid wakes up one morning and says I want to be involved in a gang. I think... it becomes sort of a trajectory over time" (YJP-5).

Among the multitude of factors that can impact gang involvement, several key themes were identified in this research project: circumstances in an individual's life that can promote future involvement, namely family relations and experiences of disadvantage; and motivations for joining the gang framed as a means for survival, safety, and belonging, and as a vehicle for achieving 'manhood'. Each of these themes will be discussed in turn below. This chapter concludes with a discussion of instances of gang-related crime and violence as instrumental to achieving goals related to the motivations for gang involvement.

### **Precursors to Gang Involvement**

As Miller (2001) noted, and as described previously, gang involvement does not happen overnight; there are factors and events, fostered in the pre-membership period, that influence and encourage commitment to the gang. During one of the focus groups with justice-involved youth, a participant indicated: "Most kids who have a normal life and they're doing good, they don't

want to get involved in that [the gang], you know? It's usually the kids that are a little more hard off' (JIY-FG2). Those who seek out gang involvement have often endured struggles in various aspects of their lives, and specifically for participants in this research project they were described in the context of family relations and experiences of disadvantage.

### The Role of Family Relations

The youth justice practitioners and justice-involved youth believed that family relations play an important role with respect to motivations for gang involvement. Both groups highlighted an absence of family support and a lack of positive attachment between parents and their children. Some youth justice practitioners discussed family absenteeism, particularly for those involved in the child welfare system, as a reason for young people to seek out involvement in the gang:

You know with a lack of parenting... some of them didn't even have parents and I mean that's the reality, I think of a lot of group home kids that went off and became part of gang activity... (YJP-1)

Especially [child welfare] system guys that have been, they have lost their family because they have been taken into state care and they've lost a home, they've lost another home, they've moved to this group home, they've moved... and often the failure in many of those locations is assigned to them. (YJP-3)

Other youth justice practitioners referred to disconnect with family based on poor parental supervision or limited parental engagement as described below:

I do believe it's lack of supervision, I believe all these youth... or sometimes they're emerging adults so that 18 to 24 range, so youth as well as emerging adults, which is some of the population we work with, they do have parents, they do have a home base it's just a lack of supervision allows them to congregate together. (YJP-1)

... there may be issues in the family, whether they be newcomers, whether the fact that this, you know, the mother is escaping an abusive household, whether or not, you know, the family is working several jobs and therefore you have, you know, children that are left alone. And because they're working a lot of minimum wage jobs, they're in a high-

risk area... at least from my experience with some of the gang guys I have, there's usually a lot of issues with family involved. (YJP-5)

The justice-involved youth also made references to being abandoned by their families or not supported and cared for by family members. For John: "Just like I said, it's all in the family. Like if you have a family that kind of drops you, like you have nowhere else to turn so that's it. That's really it". Costello further elaborated: "Sometimes people when they were a little boy or a little girl they're struggling with shit, you know? They didn't have no mom, they didn't have no dad or something like that". Finally, Bob noted:

... maybe like family that doesn't really want to be involved anymore, especially in like the younger kids that I know.... Like some of them don't have a family right so it's hard for them to go to school when you don't have a dad or a mom telling you to get your ass to school...

The life-course perspective examines social bonding over the life course and suggests that delinquency and social bonds are inversely related. A precursor to Sampson and Laub's (1993) age-graded theory of informal social control, Hirschi's (1969) social control theory sought to express how positive attachment within the family offered protection against delinquency, arguing that when the bond between parents and children is strong the latter are less inclined to engage in delinquent behaviour. This proposition has been extended to work on youth gangs suggesting that where attachment to the family is weak, young people are more likely to be involved in gangs (Young et al., 2014). Parental absenteeism, emotional distance, an inability to respond to the needs of their child(ren) and/or to supervise and establish appropriate boundaries, and inconsistent parenting, can all have detrimental effects on parent-child attachment, which in turn can lead to gang involvement (Loeber & Farrington, 1998; Scott, 2008; Thornberry, 1998).

The youth justice practitioners went on to address the impact of negative family influence through multi-generational or intra-familial gang involvement. They discussed the influence of gang-involved or gang-supportive family members as motivating factors for gang involvement among young people. Two interview participants referred to 'family tradition' as a reason for joining the gang:

One of the big reasons, and we don't hear it talked about a lot is that it's...for want of a better term, multi-generational. My family has always identified with or my family has always run with, or my family's reputation is... and let's face it that's kind of an ego boost too carrying on the tradition of 'this is what my family does'. (YJP-4)

You know a lot of the young men have adhered to that lifestyle sometimes through family, I think family relations, I think it's like a family tradition to be part of a gang and I think that others basically turn to it a lot because they feel that it's a necessity for them to survive in the environment that they're in. (YJP-2)

Other youth justice practitioners discussed the influence of siblings on the decision to join the gang as noted by a participant in one of the focus groups: "Well because a lot of those guys that we're talking about, because it's not just a friend, a peer group. It's family. It's family involvement that they, themselves and siblings, they've all been a part of it" (YJP-FG2). One interview participant specifically discussed the influence of older brothers:

They're influenced by older brothers and they follow in their older brothers' footsteps, right? So, they've kind of grown into the... I'm not sure we use the term gang life but the antisocial views of society and how one needs status... somebody might associate with a crew and not do any of the illegal activity but be part of that crew because there's an attachment somehow whether they grew up with an older brother and eventually that crew, you know became a member of that crew. (YJP-1)

These findings are reflective of the work of past researchers who have claimed that families' positive attitudes toward gangs encourage young people to become involved and promote intergenerational gang membership.<sup>82</sup> Further, Decker and Van Winkle's (1996) finding

---

<sup>82</sup> For examples, see: Maxson & Whitlock (2002); Rutter & Giller (1983); and Thornberry et al. (2003).

that a sibling's involvement in the gang is a significant contributory factor support the results of some earlier studies indicating that young siblings joined gangs because of their brothers' and cousins' involvement.<sup>83</sup> These findings also recognize a limit to the autonomous exercise of individual agency in the decision to join the gang. While an important component of the life-course perspective, individual agency is constrained by social facts, including family influences, which impact individual decision-making (Lindegaard & Jacques, 2014). This demonstrates that gang involvement develops over time through avenues of socialization where there may be an expectation for an individual to join the gang life because gangs 'run in their family' (Bubolz, 2014; Del Carmen et al., 2009; Goodwill, 2009).

While the youth justice practitioners' perspective, supported by previous research studies<sup>84</sup>, has highlighted familial ties to the gang as an important motivation for gang involvement, it is interesting to note that the justice-involved youth did not identify this as a reason for joining the gang. In fact, Johnny was the only interview participant to refer to having family members, specifically an older brother and cousins, involved in the gang but that the latter actually sought to discourage him from joining:

But like my brother told me, 'yo stop hanging out with this guy, he is going to get you in trouble' ... But when I first went up to a guy and I told him you know I want to start selling drugs, he told me no. I went to a second guy and he told me no. I went to a third guy and he told me no. 'He has to like go to school', yo what are you talking about, you know? I went to their bosses and I told them listen, like I don't care, you know I want to make money, you know? And he's like 'yo you want to make money, yo what about your brother?' I'm like yo I'm good, I'm my own man you know; screw my brother, you know?

A variety of family factors (i.e., lack of parental discipline, lack of parental supervision/monitoring, low family income, familial criminality, and gang-involved family

---

<sup>83</sup> For examples, see: Bourgois (1995); and Moore (1991).

<sup>84</sup> For examples, see: Decker & Curry (2000); Decker & Van Winkle (1996); Klein & Maxson (2006); and Spergel (1995).

members) have been found to put young people at risk of joining a gang and provide young people with a home environment that reinforces gang-related behaviours (Alleyne & Wood, 2014). What appears to be more relevant for the justice-involved youth in this research project is a lack of overall positive familial influences as opposed to the presence of negative familial influences. This is in line with what was found in Chapter 5, where for justice-involved youth, the gang assumes the role of surrogate family, offering them the positive support and companionship that was missing in their own families. So, while having family members in the gang may be a risk factor for gang membership, for these justice-involved youth, it does not appear to be a driving force for involvement. These findings demonstrate a break from past research which supports a differential association hypothesis<sup>85</sup>, where association with gang-involved family members is thought to promote gang involvement.<sup>86</sup>

#### The Role of Experiences of Disadvantage

While several youth justice practitioners acknowledged that gang-involved youth can come from a variety of backgrounds, they indicated that in their experience, justice-involved youth who are gang affiliated tend to have experienced various forms of disadvantage in the neighbourhood/community, with family, in school, and/or with peers. Based on their individual circumstances and experiences, these individuals may believe that the gang is their best and only option. As noted by one youth justice practitioner: “There are some youth who, you know, see gangs as a way out. They see themselves as I have basically no hope so therefore this is the best thing I can do” (YJP-5). More detailed explanations were also provided by other youth justice practitioners:

---

<sup>85</sup> Differential association refers to the direct and indirect, verbal and nonverbal communication, interaction, and identification with others where individuals learn the values, attitudes, techniques, and motivations for deviant or conforming norms and behavioural models (Sutherland, 1939).

<sup>86</sup> For examples, see: Decker & Van Winkle (1996); Sánchez-Jankowski (1991); and Vigil (1988).

Obviously, many times the gangs are located in very poor communities where poverty's really prevalent... some of that speaks to a lot of these guys are living in very tough circumstances. Although I've read things and seen things about gangs that come from quite wealthy neighbourhoods... but the ones I'm dealing with... most of these guys are coming from poverty and I believe that when you're struggling to survive, right, it gives you more of a 'in the moment' type thing because surviving is about living in the moment. And it's like daily; I'm hungry today, shitty things happen today. (YJP-3)

I believe that they've kind of always been labelled as the bad youth, they've just grown up in that... and if anything that would rationalize it, sometimes it rationalizes that I'm not going to do well in school, that negative self talk starts to kick in, I'm not going to do anything, I'm not going to be anybody, um so they begin to think negatively about themselves... (YJP-1)

Some justice-involved youth also provided explanations of disadvantage where previous circumstances and experiences created a situation where gang involvement was the best, or only, option from their perspective:

I think it's not because they're not the smartest, it's because they had difficulties in school and stuff and having not the best family to help them through their struggle so I think it doesn't technically mean they're stupid, they just, they don't know any other way to make the right choice because that's what they grew up in. (Juliano)

... a lot of people they turn into gang members because it's just what they have to do basically and when you turn into a gang member it's mostly because... honestly a lot of it has to do with parents sometimes, people at school, influences around you and stuff. But no, they're not bad people it's just right place, wrong time and it's just at that point... it's what I have to do to fit in. (FT)

Further, the youth justice practitioners and several justice-involved youth referred to a lack of legitimate employment opportunities as a reason for seeking out membership in the gang. As indicated by one youth justice practitioner: "Employment, I know a lot of youth that are dissuaded and unable to get a job, so they feel there's no other alternative" (YJP-1). As noted by Costello: "I'm trying and shit, but they don't give jobs and shit, that's why most of these niggers out there, they've been riding with the gangs, they wanted jobs and shit but they didn't get no jobs". Matt added the following:

I had no job even when I looked for it. So, then you've got a lot of guys who are gang affiliated who are looking for a job but couldn't find one. [Gang involvement was] the only option that we saw at the time.

Previous research has indicated that young people's perceptions concerning the availability of legitimate employment opportunities, and their ability to take advantage of them, are an influential precursor for gang involvement.<sup>87</sup> As discussed in Chapter 3 with respect to the role of social structure in the life-course perspective, an individual confronts social structural arrangements in everyday life and makes choices that are variously facilitated and constrained by these arrangements. These social facts shape opportunities for deviant and conventional roles (Lindegaard & Jacques, 2014). Young people's present-day experiences of work, their understandings of local labour markets, and their employment futures can greatly influence their sense of inclusion, willingness, and ability to follow prosocial pathways in adolescence (Craine, 1997; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Young people's negative perceptions of the chance to take advantage of available legitimate opportunities may lead to strain, and those who feel alienated or excluded from mainstream society are much more likely to seek support through gang membership (Wood & Alleyne, 2010; Wortley & Tanner, 2006a, 2006b).

Finally, several youth justice practitioners and justice-involved youth indicated that young people who join gangs are 'angry' often because of past life struggles and current circumstances. One youth justice practitioner stated: "There's a righteous anger in gangs too, like the thinking like I've been fucked over and this is what you get back" (JYP-3). As noted by Johnny: "It's like, it's like growing up in the streets, you're hungry and mad". Further Matt said: "It was more like an anger mode that you were in constantly. You are just angry at the world".

---

<sup>87</sup> For examples, see: Hagedorn (1988); and Young & Hallsworth (2011).



Overall, the youth justice practitioners and justice-involved youth emphasized that the nature of their early lives made it foreseeable that some young people would become involved in the gang. Previous research has indicated that gangs are largely composed of young people who have experienced or have the perception of experiencing discrimination, exclusion, or ostracism.<sup>88</sup> These findings are consistent with Cohen's (1955) theory of delinquent subcultures where the gang becomes an 'escape valve' for young people frustrated with a society that they see as offering unequal opportunities for success. Further, Castel (1995) argued that given their lack of integration into the workforce and into mainstream society, young people often give up on traditional methods to achieve success and adopt survival strategies that are based in the present, on 'living day to day'.

Several justice-involved youth indicated that it was these types of precursory factors that served to 'push' them into gang involvement. These factors created the conditions of possibility where gang membership became a viable, and sometimes perceived to be the lone, option for the individual:

To be honest the game [the gang] chose me, I didn't choose it. I guess at the end of the day it's where you're from, it's who you associate yourself with and the situations you get yourself in will push you toward that. Like I didn't think I was going to join this gang shit back in the day but then situations pushed me... so I just went with it from there.  
(KP)

Well they are most likely part of the gang because you are kind of pushed into it. Like I said when you live and grow up in a terrible home style, you know you have no money right, so you do what you got to do to get that money. (John)

While predispositions to become involved with the gang existed, many justice-involved youth held the position that ultimately becoming affiliated with the gang was their choice. For Matt: "Yeah, out of my free will it was my decision". Additionally, Bob indicated:

---

<sup>88</sup> For examples, see: Dorais & Corriveau (2009); and Pyrooz et al. (2010).

It was weird because it wasn't like I woke up one morning and said hey, I want to go join a gang. It was just... it kind of happened that way. I had a choice for sure... It's about, you can always make your own decision right, so it comes down to it's your decision to join a gang, you know? You can't really blame anybody else.

The notion of individual choice, a central principle of the life-course perspective, suggests that individuals plan and make decisions among alternatives that can form and alter their life course (Elder, 1997). However, through the analysis of responses from youth justice practitioners and justice-involved youth, it becomes apparent that properties in the wider social environment condition the possible options available to individuals, and the way they respond to, utilize, overcome, or bypass these properties, in turn, condition their decisions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Marshall, 2005). For the participants in this research project, behavioural choices and efforts to achieve objectives are influenced by experiences of disadvantage, the perception of a lack of legitimate employment opportunities, and feelings of injustice. The gang offers these individuals the means and tools to achieve dominant goals (i.e., making money) that are otherwise hard to procure, and in many cases, it is perceived to be the only option available. The choice to join the gang, and the behaviours that accompany it, become understandable reactions to the social environment within which these individuals find themselves (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991, 2003).

### **The Gang as a Means for Survival, Safety, and Belonging**

Based on the precursory factors identified above, there may be a deficiency in the resources necessary for basic needs, and the options for meeting them are few. Gang affiliation may appear to be an effective way of achieving stability in the eyes of vulnerable young people who are identified as having limited family support and/or options to succeed through traditional

means. Like findings presented in previous research studies<sup>89</sup>, several participants in this research project reported survival as a strong motivational factor leading into gang life.

In one of the focus groups with youth justice practitioners, the notions of making money through gang involvement for survival and taking care of others were discussed:

One guy I was talking to, we had talked to him, and he said he never wants to be in a situation where he's not going... he's going to be living in a house with no heat and, you know, scraping for food. He never ever wants to ever be in that situation again and he would never want his kids, so it was like a way to make as much money as he could so he would never have to put his kids through that again or his kids ever through that.  
(YJP-FG1)

The justice-involved youth discussed survival in terms of joining the gang to have a place to stay after being kicked out of the house by your family. As stated by Johnny: "Like if you need money, here you go. Like my mom kicked me out once, so you need a place to stay when you're on your own". Joining the gang and participating in gang-related activities is also perceived as a means of securing money in order 'to eat'. As MJ noted: "The number one reason for gang involvement is to survive, money is the key to survival, staying in the food chain".

Other justice-involved youth provided more detailed accounts of joining the gang for survival purposes:

I was going through a lot of crap, right I didn't have a lot of family supports and then to have some of them [gang members] actually let me stay at their house, their mom's house actually I lived with their mom too, the one guy was quite a bit older and his mom let me stay there. Like I had food cooked for me and I'm from a family where I'm not really use to that, right? Well one Thanksgiving my Dad wouldn't even let me come home for Thanksgiving and this guy's mom invited me, so stuff like that... that's why I joined for sure and I said yes. (Bob)

Well yeah actually to survive and if... like one of my buddies actually he was kicked out when he was 13, he's like 24 now but he was kicked out when he was 13 and that's when he turned. When he was 13 he was selling like ecstasy, crack, cocaine, and everything like that and it's what he had to do to survive, it's what he had to do to eat... recently he

---

<sup>89</sup> For examples, see: Chatterjee (2006); Dean et al. (2007); Goodwill (2009); and Hemmati (2006).

went back to school and got his schooling all done, got himself a job now and he got out of it, but it's what he had to do to survive. (FT)

Well the thing is... like if you're in the game [the gang], you're here for some reason right but the thing is that if you're in the game it's because you're trying to eat and shit, you're trying to make some money... And then after that I was 13 I tried to find a job and shit, I was starving and shit and I needed some money and shit, you know? So, all I did, I'm like yo I have to do anything to have some paper in my pocket and shit. Try to find a job but those fools tried to mess around with my head and shit, they didn't take my resume and shit so I just at one point I said fuck it, you know? I said fuck it. I started pulling licks and then I'm here [youth justice facility]. (Costello)

A second motivational factor for gang involvement identified by justice-involved youth is protection. The search for protection as a reason for joining the gang has also been regularly identified in previous research literature.<sup>90</sup> Gangs can provide protection from predatory elements at school or on the streets; they are a response to perceptions and experiences of violence and intimidation (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Thornberry et al., 2003). Two justice-involved youth identified bullying experiences in the school setting as a motivation for joining the gang:

Well I had some friends that were in a gang and I had some problems with other kids in my school, like older kids, they beat me up and I got into fights with them and I really couldn't handle it myself. (Michel)

In the past or like when I was in elementary [school] you know, one day I was about to get jumped by a lot of people. Then I started getting mad like what is going on, you know and I didn't even know how to speak English at that time, you know? I couldn't even tell them back up, you know? (Montana)

Further three justice-involved youth indicated that the potential to get 'jumped' by gang members as they went about their business in the community or experiencing fights in the neighbourhood were motivational factors for joining the gang:

---

<sup>90</sup> For examples, see: Decker & Curry (2000); Melde et al. (2009); Sánchez-Jankowski (1991); Thornberry et al. (2003); and Vigil (1988).

Because when I wasn't in the gang, there was a night where I was walking by myself, you know, every time I'm walking by myself at night, I don't feel comfortable, that's why. Because usually me... at nights I usually walk till like five o'clock and five o'clock if you are by yourself and there's other gangs outside, they can do whatever they want to you and you're done, you know? (Montana)

Uh, I didn't want to get caught with so called... I don't know if you know but when you are walking around and someone... a group of people just catches you and beats you down, you know? (Matt)

Like... you are, like growing up in the 'hood, like everybody fights, you know? Like you fight everybody, you know? But like when you have your own squad, nobody messes with you. So, let's say I'm on the basketball court and some random kid, me and him get in a fight... right then we got in a fight...but when I was in a gang, me and him get in a fight and he won't mess with me. The guy would be like 'yo, my bad'. (Johnny)

Protection was only briefly addressed by two youth justice practitioners as a motivation for gang involvement. It was discussed in the context of survival, in that it was safer to be a member of the gang than to be its victim (YJP-2), and alternatively in that protection from rival gangs is only in fact necessary once you are involved in the gang, and that a young person is safer outside the gang (YJP-4). The lack of focus by the youth justice practitioners on this factor is not surprising given that they did not identify or recognize protection as an explicit purpose of the gang as noted in Chapter 5.

A third motivation for gang involvement identified by both the youth justice practitioners and justice-involved youth is the search for a sense of belonging. As social beings, young people rely on social interactions with others to define their identities and build a sense of connection. As found by Ngo (2010) in his research on criminal gang involvement among youth from immigrant families, the disintegration of their connections to different spheres in their lives (i.e., families, schools, and communities) resulted in crises of identity and gravely compromised their sense of belonging. As a result, they turn to alternative social networks, including social cliques

and criminal gangs, to fill this void. The argument is that gangs offer young people a much-needed sense of belonging, an argument which has been supported by other research.<sup>91</sup>

For the youth justice practitioners, disconnect with the family and experiences of marginalization lead young people to seek out acceptance from a group that believes in them. As noted by one interview participant: “Like it’s [joining the gang] a lot about acceptance and not having family or a supportive enough family” (YJP-6). Others provided more detailed descriptions of the need for acceptance. For example, in one of the focus groups with youth justice practitioners, it was suggested: “They want acceptance, they want the love, they want the caring, they want this, they want that. So that’s why they’re involved with a group of people that feel the same way” (YJP-FG1). Other interview participants indicated the following:

There’s a sense of belonging... So, I think that for some of the younger/wannabe gang members, I think that the word gang is a symbol of acceptance and power. I think that for them it gives them a sense of belonging, a sense of bragging rights to be part of something that’s bigger than them and then hopefully within this environment might help keep them safe as well or be taken seriously by either staff or other residents in the facility. (YJP-2)

I think I always bring it back to the attachment, if you’ve been told that you’re a loser your whole life and that you’re not going to amount to anything and then you’ve got a group of people that say that you are going to amount to something, you’ve got skills, you can do this well, you’re not a snitch, you know you represent... yeah just that social acceptance which is strong... (YJP-1)

For the justice-involved youth, the breakdown of interactions between young people and their families was highlighted, which created a void in social connections and support, propelling them to seek out membership in the gang. Throughout the interviews, the justice-involved youth expressed their need to belong to supportive social networks. Several participants discussed

---

<sup>91</sup> For examples, see: Alleyne & Wood (2010); Blakemore & Blakemore (1998); Sánchez-Jankowski (2003); and Stretesky & Pogrebin (2007).

joining the gang in the context of the desire to connect to people who would care about their existence, who would accept them and want them to be in their lives:

I don't really know. I think it was more wanting to fit in with them. I don't know it's kind of wanting to fit in with them but also you kind of want... if your family's not really there for you, you want to kind of have that second family and support and people that you kind of feel really care about you. (Allister)

Me like I only did it... I was making money like enough without being in it [the gang] but they were just kind of like... got really close to me like brothers almost. You kind of have like people that are there for you. I never really had that before, so I drifted toward that. (Bob)

Well gang is... I don't know, most people from gangs don't... it's like they don't have a home and the only way that they can you know connect with people is to join that gang... They're looking for someone to look up to. Maybe, maybe if he grew up the wrong way, his parents weren't the best parents, he ran away from home, he found another family to look up to, you know? (John)

There's a time when they hit rock bottom which is what I did with my family... When you hit rock bottom right, you have nothing. Your only foundation is... you have to build off nothing, right? So, the reason I got involved was because when you have nothing, your foundation is other people... Well the only satisfaction that I had was to feel like wanted, to feel the urge that people actually wanted me to be somewhere and like cared about me kind of thing. (FT)

Faced with the prospect of belonging to nothing and feeling alone, individuals in this situation may feel that they must join a gang (Simon, Ritter, & Mahendra, 2013). Sense of belonging is consistently cited in the research literature as a motivation for gang involvement.<sup>92</sup> Stemming from the precursors identified above, membership can offer these young people a sense of self-esteem, identity, companionship, and support through which they can fulfill personal needs.

These three main motivations identified for seeking membership in the gang are reflective of 'deficiency needs' in Maslow's (1943, 1954) hierarchy of need model, namely: (1) physiological survival; (2) safety and security; and (3) belonging or love. He asserted that if

---

<sup>92</sup> For examples, see: Hemmati (2006); Klein (1995); Lurigio et al. (2008); Robert (1966); Taylor (2009); and Wood & Alleyne (2010).

these three areas are not met, then the individual will experience negative physiological and psychological consequences. The stages are not mutually exclusive and may overlap based upon which need dominates and motivates the individual at any one time dependent upon individual psychological and physical circumstances (King-Hill, 2015). While there have been several critiques to this approach<sup>93</sup>, Maslow's model provides an appealing framework for understanding the perceived adaptive benefits of gang membership. When a need is present, gangs can be sought out, offer benefits, and satisfy those needs. Gangs can function as adaptive social mechanisms for satisfying needs of some young people that are not met through traditional and socially acceptable means (Sharkey, Sekhtmeyster, Chavez-Lopez, Norris, & Sass, 2011).

Individuals who do not have their basic needs, such as hunger and shelter, met by their families and socio-economic environments (e.g., food insecurity, unstable housing) may seek out gang membership to fulfill them. When young people join gangs, their physiological needs are met as the gang provides them directly with food and a place to stay, or alternatively the means through which to make money to pay for them (Voisin, King, Diclemente, & Carry, 2014). Because legitimate employment opportunities may not be accessible or simply unattractive (e.g., long hours, minimal pay), joining the gang may appeal to young people in need of money to support their survival. With respect to safety and security, young people living in areas run by gangs and violence are at an increased risk of membership themselves, which may be due to these needs (Li et al., 2002). In other words, individuals exposed to violence may feel that their safety is at risk and that they do not have means to protect themselves nor a group of peers to

---

<sup>93</sup> Wahba & Bridell (1976) carried out an in-depth review of the hierarchy of need (HON) model which concluded that the evidence for the framework proposed by Maslow is sparse. While acknowledging that human beings do have needs to be met, the existence of a rigid order of needs for every individual has been questioned by several academics (e.g., Cianci & Gambrel, 2003; Hofstede, 1984; Tay & Diener, 2011). Other criticisms of the HON discuss the methodology as unrepresentative as Maslow used the top one per cent achievers of college populations and referred to well-known academics and high achievers such as Einstein in his research, making it impossible to generalize his findings to the wider population (Mittelman, 1991).



fight beside them. Thus, they may look to gang membership believing that the gang will protect them and if they are ever harmed by another individual or group, the gang members will retaliate against those who caused the harm. Finally, Maslow (1943, 1954) believes that individuals will strive with great intensity to achieve a sense of belonging. As discussed in Chapter 2, gang membership is characterized by being part of a cohesive group or subculture with a shared identity (Becker, 1963; Cohen, 1955; Esbensen et al., 2001). Thus, gang involvement is an attractive means of fulfilling this need. As was discussed previously, poor family relations such as the absence of parental involvement and lack of positive family support, where an individual does not feel a sense of love and belonging, can lead the young person to seek other ways to satisfy the need for familial connections, such as with gang-involved peers (Voisin et al., 2014).

### **The Gang as a Vehicle for Achieving ‘Manhood’**

The concept of ‘masculinities’ acts as reference point against which behaviours and identities can be evaluated (Hearn, 2000). It can be examined in relation to differential access to power and resources, and how different groups of men construct and negotiate with similarly situated others the meaning of ‘manhood’ (Messerschmidt, 1993, 1997; Newburn & Stanko, 1994). Several research studies have found that gang masculinities often resemble mainstream notions of what it is to be a ‘real man’.<sup>94</sup> Young men may join gangs to increase their status in a society in which they feel alienated from conventional means to achieve manhood (Deuchar et al., 2016; Sharkey et al., 2011; Stretesky & Pogrebin, 2007). While ‘becoming a man’ was not explicitly identified by the justice-involved youth or youth justice practitioners as a motivation for gang involvement, they did discuss the gang’s ability to ‘generate income’ for its members and to ‘garner respect’ from others, which serve to reproduce idealized notions of hegemonic

---

<sup>94</sup> For examples, see: Hagedorn (1998); Majors & Billson (1992); and Messerschmidt (1993).

masculinity (i.e., demonstrating independence, success, power, dominance, and control) (Connell, 1987; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Messerschmidt, 1993).

### Generating Income

In the 1950s, Talcott Parsons (1963, p. 303) stated that in Western societies the occupational system “is the most important competitive process in which the individual must achieve his status”. However, for young men who have restricted access to pursue conventional roles or obtain masculine status through the legitimate economy, the gang can act as the means to achieve manhood (Bourgois, 1996; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Messerschmidt, 1997). As discussed above, the youth justice practitioners and several justice-involved youth referred to a lack of legitimate employment opportunities as a reason for seeking out membership in the gang. As demonstrated in previous research, in many instances joining the gang and a turn to illegal activities is a way for those with low employment integration to increase their income.<sup>95</sup>

For many justice-involved youth ‘being a man’ was perceived to mean being able to generate income through gang involvement to demonstrate independence and show the ability to support others. As noted by Johnny:

I was never into school and stuff, so I would skip school and go and chill in the neighbourhood, like I didn’t want to stress out my mom, like give me money for this, you know? Like it felt like, I don’t know I wanted to become a man, you know so I gotta make my own money you know? It’s [the gang] the fastest way, the fastest money, you know?

Further, using the gang to generate income for conspicuous consumption is a way for young people to demonstrate their success and power (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009). Previous research has shown that it is money and the ‘social respect’ that money can buy that are primary

---

<sup>95</sup> For examples, see: Hemmati (2006); Laidler & Hunt (1997); Lurigio et al. (2008); Robert (1966); Sánchez-Jankowski (1991); and Stinchcomb (2002).

motivations for gang involvement.<sup>96</sup> As noted by Costello: “You get paid. You get respected. You get mad girls and shit because girls want to see you with money in your pocket, they don’t want no broke ass niggers”. Other justice-involved youth reiterated this point:

Money is everything, and money is power and everybody wants power. People form gangs to make a group or organization to get money and power... You show everybody really who’s boss, you know? (John)

I was actually making a decent amount of money, more money than I have had before. Like I’d be able to go into a store and buy any pair of shoes that I wanted to. I could take my girl to a nice dinner, you know? I didn’t have to worry about anything. I wasn’t rich, like I didn’t have everything...I could take a taxi instead of the bus... and that felt really nice. (Bob)

Given the importance of money as an indicator of success and power for young men, it is not surprising that individuals seek out gang membership as an alternative to other legitimate forms of employment in situations where they believe that they can make more money. As indicated by Juliano:

The one thing is... I mean getting involved people think about it like why would I work at McDonald’s for \$10.50 an hour when you can make triple the money and make fast money, you know what I mean, in a day more than some people could actually work for.

Some justice-involved youth also expressed the belief that there was more dignity in gang activity than working in the service industry. These types of jobs provide low pay and no opportunity for either social status or personal pride. The youth justice practitioners also believed that making money through these alternatives to legitimate employment provides justice-involved youth with a sense of power, feelings of respect, and a sense of accomplishment that they have not been able to achieve outside the gang. As noted by two interview participants:

You know we’ve had young men here [youth justice facility] at 16, 17, 18 years old that easily double my salary probably and for them that alone is power because working with the individuals who in their eyes are representing the justice system, you know for them

---

<sup>96</sup> For examples, see: Padilla (1992); Sánchez-Jankowski (1991); Shakur (1993); Sullivan (1989); and Taylor (1990).

we become less, how can I say, less relevant in their eyes because we actually make less money than they do, right?... And ironically there's also a very negative concept about working a very, very blue-collar type traditional, student-type work. Within the population it's seen as a weakness because there's a better way of making money and making way more money and it's seen as much cooler to sell drugs or beat people up and rob them as opposed to working an eight-hour shift at McDonald's, you know? So, motivator yeah, I think that for them to try and be respected within an environment where perhaps they don't feel that they have a lot of respect is to be part of a gang or a group that commands respect and that demands it. (YJP-2)

You know I think that they have a sense of accomplishing something; okay they're a successful drug dealer, you know they're making money. So that's I think, that sort of drives them to get into the gang. I mean especially the young ones who... in the sense that they're maybe told that they can't be, they're not good at school, they're not good at home and all of a sudden, a guy says, 'hey man you're doing good delivering those drugs for me'. You know so it's a sense of achievement. (YJP-5)

### Garnering Respect

Respect demands deference to, and at the same time, commands status, power, and authority in an environment with few legitimate pathways to attain a sense of self-esteem and importance for oneself and among one's peers (Bourgois, 1996). As argued by Anderson (1999), having respect is a form of social capital<sup>97</sup>; it is a protective asset, as well as at the core of the individual's identity and self-esteem. In past research, respect has been identified as a core value of the gang lifestyle and gang involvement provides an opportunity for young men to gain and maintain respect.<sup>98</sup>

The justice-involved youth indicated that 'being a man' means commanding respect to improve their status in relation to their peers. John highlighted how gang involvement provided him with power:

Well, when I was a kid like I said everybody wants power... When I was a kid like school wasn't the best, I wasn't the smartest kid and I had learning difficulties at school

---

<sup>97</sup> Social capital can be thought of as the total value that individuals derive from their social network which can include friends, family members, coworkers, people in community groups, etc. (Lin, 2001).

<sup>98</sup> For examples, see: Decker & Curry (2000); Descormiers (2013); Matsuda, Melde, Taylor, Freng, & Esbensen (2013); Thornberry et al. (2003); and Vigil (1988).

and whatnot and the only thing I knew was street smart, not school smart and everybody just kind of bullied me for that because I didn't know how to do math equations or anything like that. So, I had nowhere else to turn to and I wanted more power, I wanted people to see like who I really am, and I want people to be not scared of me but just to know that I can mess someone up if you mess with me kind of thing. So, it wasn't really about the money but mostly power, yeah.

Juliano discussed how involvement in the gang allowed him to make a name for himself:

Pretty much people just kind of want a name for themselves also. If you're a street gang you're going to want to have your name out there, right? So, there's a reason why you're not only in it because you want the power or the money or the drugs but you just want to have your name out there so that people can be afraid of you. People want a name for themselves because they don't have another way to make a name for themselves to be successful, so that's the only way they have to be successful is to make a name on the streets.

The pursuit of respect, and consequently the affirmation of hegemonic masculinity for young men, is facilitated through group processes of the gang, expressed simultaneously through the gang's intimidation of others outside their gang and gang members demonstrating their toughness to others within their gang.

In the case of the justice-involved youth, gang intimidation is accomplished through exaggerated demonstrations of bravado, fearlessness, and aggressiveness with others on the street. Several interview participants described how they perceived themselves as gang members and how they conducted themselves in their gang. As noted by MJ: "You don't take shit from anybody", and FT said: "Oh you're a badass kind of person or just like don't fuck with him or whatever... because you have the feeling like oh I have all my boys are backing me so like I run all this." Further, for Johnny:

When I was a kid in a gang I felt like I was invincible, like nobody could touch me. I felt like I was the man, like I would walk around with them [the gang], no one was gonna mess with me, you know?... Nothing could touch me, that's how I felt.

For several justice-involved youth, intimidation of individuals outside the gang was measured in 'fear' or how scared people were of their gang and its members. For Bob: "I like walking down the road and watching people turn away or avert their eyes and stuff." Other interview participants provided more detailed accounts of achieving respect through fear:

I think having people scared of you too that's a big thing, like having people kind of... say if you are going to do something to be a lot more afraid if they know you're in a gang or something or knowing that people you're affiliated with are in gangs than if you were just some regular person. (Allister)

Well I enjoy being in a gang because the first thing when I wasn't in a gang, I used to be scared of other people who were in the gang. So as soon as I started being in the gang, I see a lot of people who are scared of me now, you know? That's why I became a gang member... Yeah, now the people who used to disrespect me before, they respect me now. Now I get more respect, that's why I started being in this gang, you know? While you're in the gang you get more respect, more power, more everything, you know? That makes me come in the gang. (Montana)

Intimidation of individuals outside their gang allowed gang members to conduct their business and ensured that others would not mess with them. Some justice-involved youth provided examples of the importance of intimidation to the regular operation of the gang:

Intimidation for sure. And not just for intimidation but, it's going to sound bad for a gang, but they like to show off and stuff, like prove that they have more stuff... Mmhmm show its presence, show how they're trying to take over or dominate a certain area. (FT)

You have freedom in your neighbourhood. Nobody will talk back to you in your neighbourhood. Oh, you say you're with him ok sorry my mistake. They aren't going to mess with you. (KP)

Yes, because that [fear] makes people sometimes think twice about what they're going to try to do to them or funny stuff like they might try to kill them so if they're feared, they will think twice like I don't want to mess with this person. (Juliano)

The justice-involved youth indicated that they were also able to obtain respect by demonstrating their 'toughness' to the gang by participating in initiation rituals or completing other activities to 'earn their stripes'. Allister indicated that you need to be able to demonstrate

strength and toughness to other members to enter the gang: “I think it’s just like if you’re tough enough or hard enough... Yeah, I’d say so. I’d say it’s more on like how big you are and how much power you have. It could be like strength”. Further, as noted by KP: “You got to be tough you know you get jumped into the gang”. Johnny discussed toughness in more detail:

It’s like a thing when you grow up like you want to earn your stripes, you know, like you want to be that guy, you know? It’s like you grow up when you are a kid like yo, yo, yo man let’s go do this; let’s go do that, you know?... It’s about your reputation; it’s mostly about your reputation... And like the thing is that when you’re younger you just want to you know I’m this guy, I’m mister tough guy, you know?... Like before when I was a kid I wanted to go around like that, I wanted to earn my stripes, I wanted to go oh, I’m the big guy here, you know?

The youth justice practitioners also noted the operationalization of respect as the perpetration of fear and intimidation of others by gang-involved youth. As noted in one of the focus groups with youth justice practitioners: “Because they really, they really feel respected and but what they aren’t really getting... what they don’t really care about is that that respect is coming from fear or intimidation” (YJP-FG2). Another youth justice practitioner elaborated on this point as well:

Yeah, for a lot of the guys it is a status, like I’m finally being recognized. You know, I get treated with respect. And respect and fear are often confused. They mix respect and fear up, one is not the other. (YJP-4)

In our society, ‘being a man’ is largely tied to different aspects of status, whether economic – typically demonstrated through achieving a high-paying occupation (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) or interpersonal – typically demonstrated through receiving respect from peers (Lindegaard & Jacques, 2014). Agnew’s (1992) work on strain theory suggests that a gap between status goals and a lack of means and resources by which to achieve them results in compensatory behaviours by those in such a society. As individuals find themselves with fewer opportunities to gain status through legitimate means, the gang can fill the

void (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960). For the justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners, joining the gang was interpreted as a choice intended to raise status and the vehicle through which to achieve manhood. The point was to affirm social presence and to compensate for a generally marginalized economic and social position (White, 2013).

### **A Note on Instances of ‘Gang-Related’ Crime and Violence**

Throughout this and the previous chapter, many references have been made to instances of engagement in illegal behaviours as part of involvement in the gang lifestyle. This finding is not surprising given much of the research literature suggests that youth gang members account for a disproportionate amount of criminal behaviour, particularly serious and violent acts, and gang membership itself increases both the frequency and severity of offending.<sup>99</sup> What is of interest here is how the justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners explain, qualify, or justify illegal behaviour as being instrumental to the gang’s purposes for achieving gang members’ goals based on their motivations and needs for joining their gang.

In the context of the rational choice framework, which emphasizes the role of intentional choice in lawbreaking, crime and violence are often explained as a means to an end (Clarke & Cornish, 1985; Cornish & Clarke, 2008). The justice-involved youth saw gang-related crime as significant money-making opportunities. Given their backgrounds and current circumstances, they justified illegal activity as necessary for their survival. For Allister it’s: “... an easier way to make money like if you don’t have a job and that it’s quick cash selling drugs and robbing people and that”. Costello provided a more detailed justification for ‘pulling licks’ (i.e., engaging in criminal activities):

The thing is with gang members that the community doesn’t know how you’re supposed to eat, you know? Like if you want to stay fresh and shit you know, you need a job but

---

<sup>99</sup> For examples, see: Battin et al. (1998); Esbensen & Huizinga (1993); and Thornberry et al. (1993).



they won't give you a job. So, what are you going to do? You're not going to starve and shit, you're hungry you want to get that paper and shit, you know so you have to become the hustler, do work, you have to put out work, you know? Also, some niggers out there, they're going to pull licks to eat.

One of the youth justice practitioners also identified this process of rationalization:

Obviously, a sense of rationalization in the sense that they see their behaviour, you know I'm doing this, it's right even though it's wrong and so they have their sense of rationalization, a sense of you know I don't have money, I can't get a decent job so I'm going to go to the gang and do drug dealing because this works well for me, you know? And if that involves being involved with a gang well so much the better. (YJP-5)

For the justice-involved youth, gang-related violence was described and employed as a symbolic representation of manhood, supporting the image of being protective, tough, and intimidating. As noted previously, gang membership is a mechanism operationalized to accumulate masculine capital, and this process contributes to a continuum of violence (Baird, 2012). The justice-involved youth discussed the use of violence predominantly in the context of ensuring the safety of their families or other gang members and/or serving a pay-back or retaliation function. As noted by Allister: "If someone was to hurt someone in your gang you know the whole gang would have their back and go out to hurt them". For Johnny:

It's something like that you know, like you mess with one of my boys, you're crossing a line, you know? Like I'm not going to stand there and watch you mess around with one of my boys. The same thing goes for me, you know? Like if anyone messes with me, yo I'm not going to stand there and let it happen.

Gang-related violence was also discussed as the means through which to obtain respect from others. The justice-involved youth described the use of violent initiation rituals when entering or exiting the gang. For Michel: "If you want to enter a gang, you need to be initiated. So basically, you have five or six of the strongest people basically beat the crap out of you". They also used violence as a way of securing territory and intimidating others. Allister acknowledged the violence that can accompany attempts to acquire and secure territory:

Yeah like so say a gang from the west end like in [...] or something was selling drugs and stuff and they went over to the south to try and take over like their territory and where they sell drugs and stuff, people have been shot or stabbed over that.

The gang has set clear boundaries of its territory or turf and protects its members and turf against other rival gangs through fighting or threats (Pyrooz, 2014a).

In general, the justice-involved youth indicated that you do not engage in violent activities for 'fun'. As noted by Costello: "... I think that's stupid for some people to be in the game [the gang] just to enjoy it, the shooting and the violence and shit". Further, Bob indicated that gang members were not the instigators of violence: "Between us we were really good, and we never really went out looking for fights. I mean like usually trouble always found us". Michel provided a more detailed description justifying the use of violence:

Gangs, they don't go beat up random people just for fun... They are not violent against like innocent people, you know what I mean?... The only time they do that [use violence] is if most of the people in the gang are usually troubled and they need help with people in general who don't like them, or they pick on their family members or whatever. So, they go after them just to teach them a lesson. So, in my mind they fix problems... So that's the only reason that they would become violent is when it comes to their friends because they have to back them up.

Finally, the justice-involved youth also attempted to differentiate themselves and their fellow gang members from a more detrimental view of gangs, such as collections of individuals with psychological abnormalities who are inherently sadistic and who act out this disposition through violence. As noted by MJ: "Gangs don't kill innocent people, people who harm innocent people are clowns and often are mentally ill".

In summary, individuals do not join the gang because it is an opportunity to engage in illegal behaviours but rather the latter provide a means to an end. Instances of crime and violence can be understood as an externality or by-product of the motivations for gang involvement (Baird, 2012). The findings of this instrumental role to achieving the gang's purposes is

reflective of Cloward and Ohlin's (1960) theory of differential opportunity which suggests that gangs offer individuals a way of obtaining societally sanctioned goals using forbidden methods when other pathways and resources are blocked. This again recognizes the limitations of using the criterion of criminality as a defining feature of the gang and gang membership.

## **Conclusion**

The findings from this chapter support previous work that has demonstrated that the decision to join the gang is based on a combination and accumulation of various factors that are internal and external to the individual. There were some discrepancies between the justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners on the motivations identified for gang involvement (see *Table 4* at the end of this chapter for a summary of the findings). However, overall there was general agreement that those who seek out membership in the gang have often endured negative or stressful life events with respect to family relations, including the absence of family support and a lack of positive parental-child attachment, and experiences of disadvantage including a lack of legitimate employment opportunities. For these individuals, they feel that the gang may be their best and only option to satisfy what Maslow (1943, 1954) has termed deficiency needs (survival, protection, belonging), as well as status needs related to achieving manhood. Instances of gang-related crime and violence are justified as instrumental to meeting these needs.

What was clear throughout the arguments presented by the participants and what has been referenced throughout this chapter is the importance of 'strain' with respect to the motivations for gang involvement. Classic strain theories (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955; Merton, 1938) as well as more recent adaptations (e.g., general strain theory; Agnew, 1992) have focused on the disjunction between aspirations (ideal goals) and expectations (expected goals). This discrepancy creates pressure for corrective action and gang involvement is one possible

response. Membership in the gang is a method for alleviating strain, that is, for terminating or escaping from negative stimuli or achieving positively valued goals. Agnew (1992) states that delinquency is only one possible response to strain, several non-delinquent responses are also possible. However, strain is most likely to lead to delinquency when the constraints to non-delinquent coping are high. Cohen (1955) and Cloward and Ohlin (1960) further argue that lone individuals would be unlikely to respond to strain with delinquency, such a response would only occur if individuals had the support and aid of delinquent companions.<sup>100</sup> Applied to the context of the gang, individuals are more likely to join when they feel alienated from conventional methods and in the absence of legitimate social and economic opportunities. This frustration and tension may be resolved by young people associating with similar others and engaging in illicit activities. Among their gang peers, there is a discernible attitude of ‘normalization’ toward gang involvement and the behaviours necessary to attain its benefits (Young et al., 2013). The choice to join the gang and the behaviours that accompany it then become understandable reactions to the social environment within which these individuals find themselves (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991, 2003).

Based on the findings from this chapter, young people become involved in gangs because of various interrelated influences that give rise to and provide a means for dealing with specific problems (Mohammed, 2007; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991). In moving on to a discussion of desistance from gang involvement in the next chapter, it is important to remember the functional nature of gang membership. Gangs exist because they serve a purpose, namely meeting the unfulfilled needs of their members (Robert, 1966).

---

<sup>100</sup> It is acknowledged that there are differences between these two perspectives in their explanations of how delinquent subcultures operate. Cohen (1955) sees delinquent subcultures as an escape valve or a way out from one’s current situation where the latter take on norms and goals that are oppositional to those of the main culture. Cloward and Ohlin (1960) see delinquent subcultures as alternative opportunity structures where illegitimate means are employed to obtain main culture norms and goals.

Table 4. Summary of Perspectives on Gang Involvement

Justice-Involved Youth	Youth Justice Practitioners
<i>Precursors to Gang Involvement</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participants focused on a lack of positive family relations (family abandonment, lack of care and support from family members).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participants focused on lack of positive family relations (family absenteeism, poor parental supervision, limited parental engagement) as well as the presence of negative family influences (multi-generational or intra-family gang involvement).</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Both groups of participants identified experiences of disadvantage that create a situation where gang involvement is perceived as the best, or only, option for individuals. This includes the perception of a lack of legitimate employment opportunities and feelings of injustice.</li> </ul>	
<i>Gang as a Means of Survival, Safety, and Belonging</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>With respect to survival, participants indicated that individuals join the gang to have a place to stay (when they are kicked out by their family) and to make money in order 'to eat'.</li> <li>With respect to protection, viewed as a major factor by participants, it was indicated that individuals join the gang to guard against potential future victimization experiences.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>With respect to survival, participants indicated that individuals join the gang to make money to take care of themselves and to support others.</li> <li>With respect to protection, viewed as a minor factor by participants, it was indicated that individuals join the gang because it is safer to be in the gang than to be its victim. It was also suggested that protection is only necessary once individuals are involved in the gang.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>With respect to sense of belonging, both groups of participants indicated that individuals join the gang because of a void in social connections resulting from a breakdown of family relations or experiences of marginalization. This leads individuals to seek out support and acceptance from the gang.</li> </ul>	
<i>Gang as a Vehicle for Achieving 'Manhood'</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>With respect to generating income, participants indicated that individuals join the gang to make money to demonstrate independence and the ability to support others, as well as to achieve power, respect, success, and dignity.</li> <li>In terms of garnering respect, participants indicated that individuals join the gang to obtain respect to improve status in relation to peers. This is facilitated through intimidation tactics, the perpetration of 'fear', and the demonstration of 'toughness'.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>With respect to generating income, participants indicated that individuals join the gang to make money to achieve power, respect, and a sense of accomplishment.</li> <li>In terms of garnering respect, participants indicated that individuals join the gang to obtain respect. This is facilitated through intimidation tactics and the perpetration of 'fear'.</li> </ul>

*Instances of 'Gang-Related' Crime and Violence*

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Both groups of participants indicated that instances of gang-related crime are rationalized as money-making opportunities necessary for survival.</li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Participants indicated that instances of gang-related violence are rationalized in the context of ensuring the safety of others, retaliation, obtaining respect, securing territory, and intimidating others.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Participants did not explicitly offer their perspective on instances of gang-related violence.</li></ul>

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **GETTING OUT: METHODS & MOTIVATIONS FOR LEAVING THE GANG**

Despite growing interest in the subject over recent years, there remains considerable variability in the operationalization and understanding of desistance within the existing research on gang involvement. Scholars have identified different pathways to desistance, and there is a general agreement that the process is less black and white than it is shades of gray.<sup>101</sup> The purpose of this chapter, and of the following chapter, is to examine the various factors involved in leaving the gang. This involves investigating the nuances of the desistance process as perceived and experienced from the perspective of justice-involved youth, and where possible in comparison to the perspective of youth justice practitioners. The rationale is that in identifying the meaning that gang-involved individuals attribute to leaving the gang, greater insight can be gained into what desistance entails, how and for what reasons individuals decide to leave the gang, and what barriers impact this process. In turn, as noted by others<sup>102</sup>, this knowledge can help to better inform the future development of prevention, intervention, and desistance strategies.

The focus of this chapter is on the factors related to the methods and motivations for leaving the gang. All participants in this research project were asked about their perspectives on what desistance means and how gang-involved individuals might go about leaving the gang. They were also asked to identify motivations for leaving. Like in Chapter 6, analysis of the focus group and individual interview sessions with justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners demonstrated a substantial overlap in the themes identified. As such, to avoid repetition in the interpretation of results, the findings from the two groups have been combined

---

<sup>101</sup> For examples, see: Bushway et al. (2003); and Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule (2014).

<sup>102</sup> For examples, see: Decker & Lauritsen (2002); Pyrooz (2014a); Pyrooz & Decker (2011); and White (2013).

and are presented thematically below.<sup>103</sup> As before, where there are divergences in perspectives between the two groups, these differences are highlighted and discussed. In addition, in this and in the following chapter addressing aspects of the desistance process, similarities and differences in perspectives between the justice-involved youth with and without experience in the desistance process are also noted.

Among the multitude of factors that can impact desistance from gang involvement, several key themes were identified in this research project: differences in how desistance is conceptualized either as a complete cessation from the gang or as a more gradual departure; differences in the methods of leaving the gang characterized as either hostile/active or non-hostile/passive; and the variety of motivations that are associated with leaving the gang. Each of these themes will be discussed in turn in this chapter.

### **What Does It Mean to ‘Leave’ the Gang?**

As discussed in Chapter 2, desistance may be conceptualized as an outcome, often observed using a standard measure of de-identification as a gang member or as a process of disengagement from the gang over time.<sup>104</sup> While both aspects of desistance are important, many researchers have chosen to focus on the process of disengagement. The preference for using this approach to explain leaving the gang was also reflected in the accounts provided by participants in this research project.

Only one justice-involved youth discussed the importance of de-identification in the context of leaving the gang, placing the emphasis on desistance as an outcome. For AB desistance meant no longer identifying himself as a member of the ‘Bloods’:

---

<sup>103</sup> Within each theme, the order in which the findings are presented is based on the flow of information for ease of understanding and is not an indication of the preference of one perspective over another.

<sup>104</sup> For examples, see: Carson et al. (2013); Krohn & Thornberry (2008); Pyrooz & Decker (2011); and Sweeten et al. (2013).



No, well I'm not really a gang member... like I kind of just got out of it and now I'm like kind of just helping out, just friends, like my homies... Like I'm still with them but I'm not at the same time. I don't look at myself as a Blood I just help them out... they've always been there for me so I'm going to be there for them... Oh no, I do all the stuff still [gang-related activities], I just don't... I'm not known as a Blood...

De-identification is an important component of desistance from gang involvement; however, it is not tantamount to disengagement. Past research suggests that simply attesting to have left the gang may not represent the individual's true behaviour as it relates to participation in gang-related activities.<sup>105</sup> For example, even after de-identifying as a gang member, individuals may still associate, fight, or do business with their former gang peers (Carson et al., 2013). As indicated above, while AB no longer self-identified as a gang member, he continued to maintain ties with other gang members and stayed involved in all gang-related activities. According to Pyrooz and Decker's (2011) typology, he would still be considered as 'socially tied to the gang'. This includes individuals who have de-identified gang membership, but still participate in gang-related activities, including crime. My point here is not to invalidate AB's perspective on desistance from the gang, but rather to highlight the importance of not uniquely focusing on the shift in identification from 'gang member' to 'not a gang member', recognizing that such a measure does not necessarily allow for a complete understanding of desistance and the process and experiences of disengagement (Sweeten et al., 2013).

While there is variability in conceptually defining desistance as a process (i.e., to what extent must all emotional, social, physical, and criminal ties be severed), there seems to be a consensus among the participants that it involves a lessened association with group members and/or reduced participation in group activities. Through their responses in the interviews, the

---

<sup>105</sup> For examples, see: Dong & Krohn (2016); and Maruna & Roy (2007).

justice-involved youth, and to a lesser extent the youth justice practitioners, highlighted different thresholds for desistance and conceptualizations for what it means to leave the gang.

For justice-involved youth without experience in the desistance process, their perspectives were largely tied to a more complete cessation from the gang – as members and from activities – usually accomplished through relocation. Further, this need to physically escape the gang was often based on notions of ‘once in the gang, in the gang for life’ and the assumption that individuals who do attempt to leave the gang will suffer serious repercussions. As noted by MJ: “You have to physically leave the game [the gang] and cut-off all contact; fly under the radar [of the gang]”. KP stated: “In most cases if you are in the game [the gang] then you’re in the game, you are not leaving, you know? Most cases unless you move to another city or something like that”. Other participants provided more detailed explanations:

You’d have to change everything, your identity, your name, and address, maybe leave the city. So, say if your gang was in the city you’d completely switch them... say Ottawa you’d go to Toronto or something and hide. It’s one of the only things you can do. Because they don’t just let you go, once you’re in you’re in. (JG)

Yes, you have to cut everybody off even if they were your friends since you were two years old and you were like 30, you wouldn’t say anything to them, you’d cut off everybody... Well I’d leave the city; I’d leave the immediate area where they are. Obviously probably move right away. The farther away you are from them, the less likely that they will try to come and find you. (Michel)

Yeah, like when I get out [of the youth justice facility], I’m just not really going to associate with any of them [gang members] and that. I’m not going to call them and tell them that I’m out... I’m just going to go about my life like I wasn’t in a gang I guess. Like and if I see some of them on the street or that, I don’t really know what I would do. I guess just keep on going about what I was doing you know... Yeah and I use to live downtown but when I get out I am going to try to move to Bayshore or Kanata and try to just get completely out of the downtown core... because it lessens your chances a lot of seeing them. (Allister)

You could possibly leave in some ways... like after a certain amount of time you just move away from the area and stop associating with people but other than that, you’re there for life... Pretty much what you would have to do from the start is get rid of

everything that you have so it cannot be brought back on you. And also, switch places to like a better area where you can focus on yourself and hopefully do better. Also, do not call yourself a gang member because they are still going to call you associated if you do that. Pretty much just keep your name but try to change your lifestyle, right? So, get a job and then focus on yourself, don't have no contact with them, try to separate yourself as much as possible. (Juliano)

For these justice-involved youth, desistance appears to involve moving away from the gang abruptly and entirely. This is reflective of one of several possible routes identified in the research literature which suggests that individuals are thought to change their lives by severing themselves from harmful environments, undesirable companions, or even the past itself; a process referred to as knifing off (Maruna & Roy, 2007; Weaver & McNeill, 2015). In the context of the life-course perspective, knifing off is considered as marking a turning point leading to an abrupt shift in a life-course trajectory. The term is applicable to a variety of concepts, but for gang members, it can be characterized as cutting all ties to the gang, often by moving to a new city, neighbourhood, or school and thus eliminating or reducing criminal opportunities.<sup>106</sup>

Knifing off can occur through a variety of relational and environmental changes (e.g., gaining employment, entering into a romantic relationship, parenthood, incarceration; Carson et al., 2013; Sampson & Laub, 1993). However, as indicated by the justice-involved youth it may also be chosen by individuals themselves who decide to change on their own (e.g., changes in an individual's emotional and cognitive frames of mind; Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001; Maruna & Roy, 2007). Enduring self-change is thought to be made easier by breaking away from the current social environment and finding a new one where there is less pressure to conform to a past identity, in this case as a gang member. This 'geographic cure' as discussed by the justice-

---

<sup>106</sup> For examples, see: Carson et al. (2013); Decker & Lauritsen (2002); Decker & Pyrooz (2011a); Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule (2014); Decker & Van Winkle (1996); and Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb (2014).

involved youth is also well known in the addiction recovery world, where former addicts are told to avoid the people, places, and things associated with their old addictive behaviours to maintain their newfound sobriety (Anton, 1999). One youth justice practitioner also referred to the geographical cure stating:

I have had gang-involved youth who did the geographical cure, like I had a few gang members from Toronto come to Ottawa and so if you can give them a sense of moving into a place where they're not involved, that would be helpful... and I want to be quite clear this is not a case of banishment. But in the sense that the youth thinks yeah, you know what I need to make a change and therefore if that means you know what I have to move to a different part of town or out of the city, I'm going to do that. (YJP-5)

It is important to note that completely severing ties to the gang and the need for relocation may not be solely for the purposes of self-change but instead for the purposes of self-preservation. These justice-involved youth indicated that physical separation was necessary to protect themselves from the 'wrath of the gang' that they expected because of their departure. This threat of violence from the gang will be addressed in further detail in the section on motivations for leaving the gang, and in the following chapter on barriers to desistance.

Unlike the process of knifing off where individuals completely sever themselves from their former companions and activities, many justice-involved youth presented a more nuanced understanding of the process of gang desistance. In the context of the life-course perspective, this represents a more gradual, process-oriented understanding of turning points that focuses attention on new initiation points and incremental changes, which set in motion dynamic processes that shape a life-course trajectory (Rutter & Rutter, 1993). Proponents of the more gradual process of drifting away from the group<sup>107</sup> imply that gang desisters may continue to engage with the gang lifestyle through varying degrees of attachments and lingering ties to the gang as well as continued involvement in criminal activities, but that both will decrease over time.

---

<sup>107</sup> For examples, see: Decker & Lauitsen (2002); and Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb (2014).

For several justice-involved youth from both sub-groups<sup>108</sup>, their perspectives on leaving the gang involved the cessation of gang-related criminal activities, although connections to gangs and contact with gang members may remain. Like Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule's (2014) findings, interview participants described some ties as instrumental, while most were more symbolic:

Um, my perspective is like you'll always be a part of it. Like you don't have to do... stuff like illegal activities... I'm not out on the streets like selling crack or stuff like that. It's not worth the risk... Once I'm out they said you don't have to do anything like that for them... It's not really leaving, I guess. It's kind of like retiring almost, like uh... I don't know a good way to put it... they are never going to ask me to sell drugs, but they still consider me family, like a brother. Like I keep in touch with them.... We've been through a lot right, so it's kind of hard to leave them from my perspective. (Bob)

I'm going to rep [represent] my 'hood my whole life but I'm not going to do hustling and shit. I'm going to get out, I'm going to put some effort, so I can get a job and start a real life and shit, you know?... Well you keep yourself busy and shit, you know? Keep yourself busy, stay out of trouble and you should be good. (Costello)

Well I have fully left it's just that I still talk to them and stuff. But the way that I left was just like I just explained to them that I'm not like having that [serious drug using, witnessing gang-related violence], I don't want to die. I said easily that I would for sure like back them up somehow but not when it comes to this [illegal] stuff because like I said there's too much more in life... I didn't cut myself off completely I still have contact with them now but just not the same way. It's more like 'hey how's it going'; it's like 'not bad, how are you?' (FT)

I laid down the flag ... I just said that's it. Yeah, I don't talk to them no more. Except maybe one or two that I keep tabs on now and then... Most of them it's guys I met when I was 14 and up, the guys I said I'm going to keep tabs with are the guys that I knew my whole life... Just that when I see them I see them, and you know... when I see them I show love to them, but other than that I stand where I stand [no longer involved in the gang] ... Completely stop participating [in gang-related activities] ... 'cause you can't have one foot in it, you know? (Matt)

Persisting gang ties has been identified as an important aspect in the desistance process, and a factor associated with former gang membership (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002). Some gang members, even those who express a desire to leave their gang and change their lives, remain

---

<sup>108</sup> In this chapter and in Chapter 8, the use of the term 'both sub-groups' in the presentation of findings refers to justice-involved youth with and without experience in the desistance process.

enmeshed in a series of ties to their former network of gang members (Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2014). Past research has demonstrated that individuals may continue to hold social and emotional ties with members of their former gang.<sup>109</sup> Further, the routine activities of desisters may remain largely the same due to external factors such as residing in the same neighbourhood as gang friends or the fact that some of these same peers may be relatives or were friends prior to joining the gang (Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). This finding that those justice-involved youth who leave the gang may continue to maintain relationships to gang members, questions whether breaking all associations is necessary for desistance. Pyrooz, Decker, and Webb (2014) suggest that the ties of gang membership will reduce over time, however declaring oneself as an ‘ex’ gang member is not functionally the same as having no contact with former gang associates. Like Gormally’s (2015) findings based on desistance research conducted with gang-involved youth in Glasgow, these justice-involved youth did not see themselves as gang members if they ceased criminal behaviours, despite still having ties with other gang members.

Alternatively, one justice-involved youth discussed leaving the gang as separating himself from his former gang members; however, he acknowledged the difficulty in overcoming lingering ties to the gang:

I just had to convince myself to like stay away from them [gang members]. And yeah, some days I would wake up and go... in some situations I would like get into a fight with these guys, and I’m like yo I’m gonna call my squad and in some situations I’m like yo I need help and I need back-up and I felt like I do... I felt like I had to fight through myself, you know? Some days, like you know you think about what happened to this guy, what happened to this guy, should I go see this guy? Like you know... Should I go through the ‘hood and see who’s... should I go through and see who’s the big guys now? I just don’t do it, you know? I just try to stay away from it. (Johnny)

A few justice-involved youth, specifically those with experience in the desistance process, suggested that they did (or would) continue with criminal activities independent of the

---

<sup>109</sup> For examples, see: Carson & Vecchio (2015); and Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb (2014).

gang, reinforcing Feavel and Pyrooz's (2014) argument that desistance from the gang does not necessarily mean desistance from crime. Two interview participants discussed continuing to engage in criminal behaviours independent of the gang, by keeping it 'low key':

But still I would be in the gang but still my family and my stuff still I would do low key [criminal activities], you know? I'm not going to be just in the gang... I'm in the gang but I'm going to keep going to my family, sleep in my home, do what I got to do low key still. (Montana)

Yeah, like I'm not going to say that I'm not going to do more bad stuff, but I smartened up, ok you know like before I was like yeah, yeah go guns, this and that, you know? So, my perspective is like ok I gotta do smart, you know? And don't do nothing that will get you caught easily, you know? Like if you're going to do something then steal low key, you know? Like me the last three years I was low key you know, keeping out of trouble, avoiding like you gotta... like people don't understand that when you're in a gang, you're hot. You're a hot boy. Cops are like watching these guys, I can't meet with this guy, you know I don't want to get caught up too. There's guys doing this, so cops are looking for him, so I can't be seen with this guy. And if I'm alone it's low key, you know? I can handle myself... it's the best thing to do you know be, move smart, you know, move quietly, you know? If you gotta sell drugs, be smart with it, don't be stupid, you know? Either way, the drugs are going to be sold, either way. So, cops say we're gonna take down this drug dealer. You take down one drug dealer and another one is going to show up in his spot, you know? Like I move, like I stopped being a hot boy, like that what we call it, a hot nigga. You know, I stopped being a hot nigga, I started being calm, like cool, you know? (Johnny)

While they did not place a substantial emphasis on conceptualizations of leaving the gang, overall the youth justice practitioners seemed to support the more measured process of desistance, with one participant indicating: "I think it would be gradual. I think the pressure of leaving would be too much to just get up and leave right away. I think that it would take time" (YJP-6). Additionally, one youth justice practitioner discussed the gradual transition from gang-related illegal activities to legitimate employment:

So, a number of the young men have sometimes talked about the success stories of gang members who might still be involved on the fringe activities of the gang or gang lifestyle like drug distribution but now have put enough money aside to actually purchase legitimate businesses. So, there are not that many of them but there are some of those

individuals that... there's a former resident that we had that's now well into his adult age but owns a storage facility. Well he's never had a job in his life, he's only sold drugs, I know that. But he's a success story within the gang environment and for some of them that's it, I'm going to get to that point where I make my money and then I have a legitimate business, be able to buy it, be able to run it and perhaps they could do something through the back door as well, suspected but not confirmed, but basically, it's still a means to an end and they're going to leave the gang lifestyle. And that's their road to get there. (YJP-2)

Overall, the findings from this research project have demonstrated that there is a wide variability in conceptually defining desistance, particularly what it means to 'leave' the gang. An important insight is the difference in operationalization that was observed based on experience with the process of desistance. For several of the justice-involved youth without experience in the desistance process, their perspective on leaving the gang could be characterized as 'black and white', where desistance involves an abrupt turning point leading to a complete cessation of gang-related affiliations and gang-related activities. Alternatively, other justice-involved youth, some with experience in the desistance process, characterized leaving the gang in the context of 'shades of grey', where desistance is a much more nuanced and complicated process replete with varying levels of continued engagement with gang members and gang-related activities. In general, the youth justice practitioners also supported the more gradual process of desistance.

This variation in understanding of desistance from gang involvement has implications for interventions to promote and support leaving the gang. For example, current gang members with an absolute or ideal expectation of gang desistance may avoid engaging in the desistance process altogether if they do not foresee being able to completely cease involvement. As described by those with experience in the desistance process, pathways are more gradual and based on incremental change. Interventions are needed that acknowledge and promote the varied and dynamic nature of the desistance process for young people currently involved in gangs.



Another noteworthy insight on defining desistance from gang involvement relates to involvement in criminal activities. Krohn and Thornberry's (2008, p. 147) review of youth gang studies employing longitudinal panel designs found that: "Delinquency almost universally increases when adolescents join a gang ... [and] delinquency *typically* declines after the member leaves the gang" (emphasis added). While the evidence clearly supports a criminogenic gang joining effect, there is less certainty surrounding a gang leaving effect. Findings from this research project suggest that leaving the gang may involve a complete cessation in criminal activity, a gradual decrease in criminal behaviour, or a continuation of criminal involvement either with gang-affiliated peers or independent of the gang. As discussed in Chapter 6, in the context of the gang instances of crime and violence have an instrumental purpose.

The continuation of criminal activity (or not) may not be related to gang membership itself, but also may be dependent on the individual gang member's needs or motivations for seeking out involvement. For example, those seeking economic gains through membership in the gang may see gang-related criminal activities as significant money-making opportunities. When leaving the gang, if these illegal activities continue to remain the best opportunity to make money from their perspective, they may continue with them whether with the gang and its members or on their own independent of the gang. The gang may be a facilitator of, but not ultimately responsible for, an individual's involvement in criminal activities.

### **How Does One Go About Leaving the Gang?**

The methods of desistance, that is how gang members go about leaving the gang, have been the focus of a significant number of previous research studies. Although there is a popular belief that it is impossible to leave the gang, empirical research has demonstrated that most

members do eventually desist (Bolden, 2012, 2013).<sup>110</sup> The methods for leaving have been previously described as hostile/active exit or non-hostile/passive exit (Carson et al., 2013; Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Despite myths and sensationalized claims, for example that members must be beaten out of the gang or must undertake a series of exceptional and often illegal tasks to be permitted to leave, previous research indicates that the process is usually uneventful, and it is often driven by the individual and not by the gang as a group.<sup>111</sup>

Despite the prevalent ‘blood in, blood out’ rhetoric, only three justice-involved youth characterized the process of gang exit as hostile/active:

Sometimes in gangs, serious, serious, serious gangs you say oh I’m going to step away, I’m done. No, you’re not you’re not leaving; you’re not done until I say you’re done. You made a commitment to this, you can’t leave now, you can’t pull up. You say I’m leaving, they say you’re not. Sometimes it ends up you get stabbed, you get beat up brutally and you end up in the hospital... If you leave the game [the gang], you’re getting one of the most brutal beatings of your life. (KP)

I would think that if the gang thinks that you’re disrespecting them or something then of course they could either hurt you or just tell you that you’re not coming back or it’s pretty much whatever they decide to do. (Allister)

Somebody in your gang could also have problems with you and they could threaten you and be like why don’t you just go be a Crip or something, why don’t you just leave the gang you’re not wanted here. Others will start to follow along and yeah, let’s get this guy out... I think that they would send off some people to try to look around places that you’ve been, you know? So, say if you’ve had certain places where you chill and where your spot was, they’d send leaders kind of thing... They’ll get jumped and that’s one thing that makes them want to leave. (JG)

None of these three participants had indicated having previous desistance experience, so their perspectives are based on perceptions and/or expectations related to methods of leaving the gang.

---

<sup>110</sup> It is interesting to note that while two of the justice-involved youth indicated that it is not possible to leave the gang, stating: “It’s a way of life; once you are in you are not getting out... There is no leaving the game [the gang]” (MJ), and “When you get initiated really what it means is that you’re in there for your life. So, you made that choice to be into it, to stay there all your life because once you’re in, you don’t leave” (Juliano), later in their interviews both individuals went on to discuss the methods and motivations for leaving the gang.

<sup>111</sup> For examples, see: Carson et al. (2013); Decker & Lauritsen (2002); Decker & Pyrooz (2011b); Decker & Van Winkle (1996); Pyrooz & Decker (2011); and Quicker (1999).

There was a lack of consensus among the youth justice practitioners with respect to the hostile/active exit perspective. One interview participant indicated:

Like I haven't heard so much of the... there used to be old notions of beaten in, beaten out and I don't hear that as much. So... because I've had guys that do get away from certain lifestyles and they've had friends say, 'I wish I could do it man, more power to you'. So, some people have been decent, not all, like some people have been pursued. I don't even know if that's like been a code like you're beaten in, you're beaten out. (YJP-3)

While some were uncertain of the process, others appeared more confident with one interview participant indicating: "Some of them may feel that there is no way out. They may feel that ok I'm now in it, I cannot get out of it unless I get beaten out" (YJP-5). Other participants reiterated this viewpoint as demonstrated in the following focus group discussion:

And so, you're not going to, you know and in a big type gang situation like that where big-time drugs are involved, umm you don't just walk out of a gang. You don't just say 'I'm just going to go work my shift at McDonald's tonight and I'll catch up with you guys later'. No. there's fights, there's... it's deadly. So, it's, it's to exit a gang, it's not easy. (YJP-FG2)

The research literature suggests that an individual's level of engagement and embeddedness in the gang may affect the desistance process.<sup>112</sup> This perspective was shared by many of the youth justice practitioners who prefaced their comments on leaving the gang with statements such as the following: "I think that [leaving the gang] largely is dependent on where they sit in the gang structure and hierarchy" (YJP-2), and "Like I said, it [how they leave] depends on what type of gang they're in and what type of level they're on" (YJP-FG2). This finding is consistent with their focus on distinctions between the hardcore and wannabe gang members as discussed in Chapter 5. Further, the hostile/active exit process was often associated with 'serious' and 'big time' gangs suggesting that this practice may be more common among

---

<sup>112</sup> For examples, see: Bolden (2012); Carson et al. (2013); Hagedorn (1994); Klein (1971); Moore (1991); Pyrooz et al. (2013); Scott (2014); Spergel (1995); and Starbuck et al. (2001).

the more organized and stable criminal groups. This finding is supported by the work of others demonstrating that the more loosely organized the gang, the more likely that the exit process is calm and uneventful.<sup>113</sup> This implies that as the level of organization increases, the exit process may become more hostile/active.

The remaining 12 justice-involved youth, from both sub-groups, discussed gang exit as non-hostile/passive. For example, two interview participants indicated that you simply need to explain to the gang that you want to leave:

Like it's bullshit that you can't leave, like there are some like... Bloods and Crips, I've known people that got in, got out multiple different times. Like it's really not hard. But the way that I left was just like I just explained to them how I felt about it. Like other people like you said just cut them off completely, just ghost on them but that's not a smart way. But I explained to them how I felt and what was going on too. (FT)

No, you just tell them I want to go, like I want to be out and we're like it's all right, it's all good you know? They're not going to punish you or do something, you know? No, it's not part of that. But it might be in some other gangs, they might make you do something, you know? But all gangs are not like that. If you don't want to be there, it's all good. (Montana)

It is interesting to note that Montana, while acknowledging the non-hostile/passive exit process of his own gang, indicated that other gangs may engage in hostile/active exit processes, which serves to preserve the 'blood in, blood out' rhetoric as a common practice. This is like Decker and Pyrooz's (2011a) finding that even individuals who do not experience a hostile exit themselves continue to perpetuate the belief that gang members have considerable difficulty leaving their gang.

Findings from other research studies have suggested that if individuals leave the gang for what the gang considers to be a legitimate reason (e.g., health, family, employment), they would

---

<sup>113</sup> For examples, see: Bolden (2013); and Decker & Lauritsen (2002).

not face a hostile/active departure.<sup>114</sup> The findings from this research project also demonstrate that individuals leaving the gang due to these reasons were not met with resistance from fellow gang members. As KP noted:

Just go about your business. If you're going to go work then go work. You're not my friend anymore but go do your thing. I respect that. That's also the thing they respect that. Somebody tells me 'I want to leave, I want to achieve higher learning', I respect that, go do your thing. Worry about your family, that's how you're going to provide for your family, I respect that, go do your thing.

This perspective was also discussed by the justice-involved youth in one of the focus groups:

If you're doing good, people aren't going to want to drag you down, you know what I mean? Just do good, succeed, don't... like when you get out [youth justice facility], go to school. The last place gangs will see you is at school, you know what I mean? If they see you doing good, they're your family, they're your group, they're going to want you to do good. (JIY-FG2)

This reflects the functional perspective of the gang. There is interplay between gang members' decisions on what is best for them and the organization's decision as to what is best for it (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991, 2003). Gangs are willing to let people leave under certain conditions because a truly 'reluctant gangster', in Pitts' (2008) words, with full access to the secrets of the group, threatens the longevity of the gang and the freedom of its members. The gang is greater than the sum of its parts. On an aggregate level, this means that coming and going is an integral part of the organizational environment (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991). Most gang members are expendable and there are always other individuals lining up to replace them.

Several justice-involved youth discussed the non-hostile exit process of gradually walking away from the gang in the context of transitioning to other social arenas and engaging in more conventional environments (Moule et al., 2013; Sweeten et al., 2013). Allister made explicit reference to walking away from the gang and moving on with his life by focusing on

---

<sup>114</sup> For examples, see: Decker & Pyrooz (2011a); and Pyrooz & Decker (2011).

(re)establishing connections to prosocial institutions: “Yeah just try my best to forget about it all. Just keep on going about my life trying to better myself, trying to get a job and that, keep on going to school...”. Costello reiterated this point, highlighting the passive nature of gang exit:

Sometimes they’re [the gang] always doing their things apart, you do your things apart and shit, you know? It doesn’t have to necessarily be oh I am leaving right away, you know? Just do your shit together and start moving on with your life and shit and they are going to start forgetting about you.

FT discussed the process of leaving in the context of taking a chance for redemption by engaging in prosocial activities:

Like one of my buddies he actually... recently he went back to school and got his schooling all done, got himself a job now and he got out of it. Well everyone’s different, right? Like I said, my buddy went back to school and got out of the criminal lifestyle but I know some people that are doing life [imprisonment] right now because they did the exact same thing but stayed with it. They didn’t take a chance to redeem themselves really. They didn’t take the chance to be like well this is getting serious now. Like I have friends that are sadly buried in their graves but like it just depends on the person.

The youth justice practitioners also discussed the importance of (re)engagement with prosocial institutions in the process of desistance from the gang:

I think that for some of them [gang-involved youth] it’s that basically they find or are able to focus energy and concentration on something that is more positive either through employment, school, sports, where they find a sense of belonging and a sense of pride and where they can focus their energy and efforts. (YJP-2)

Well they [gang-involved youth] also have to have an option and the option is something that... and that covers everything housing, education and so they need an option that provides some stability in their life... and that’s the thing we have to give them positive options whether it be recreational things like getting them a gym membership or getting them involved in sports activities, it could also be helping them pick a high school and apply to a college course. (YJP-5)

It is important to underscore the developmental processes present here, as highlighted in the discussion of the life-course perspective in Chapter 3. As young people mature, they are likely to seek out and assume age-graded adult responsibilities such as completing school,

seeking out employment and ‘settling down’ with a significant other. The method of leaving the gang then may be linked to the strengthening of prosocial bonds and (re)attachment to conventional activities (Bjørger, 2002; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Vigil, 1988). This argument will be discussed further in the following section on motivations for leaving the gang.

Overall, the findings have demonstrated divergent views on the methods for leaving the gang that can be attributable in part to having experience with the desistance process (or not). For some of those individuals without experience in the desistance process, their perspectives tend to reiterate the myths of the hostile/active exit process that are held in popular culture and reinforced through gang member rhetoric, while for the majority of the justice-involved youth, their perspectives and actual experiences of leaving the gang have demonstrated that it is a much more passive and uneventful process (Bolden, 2013; Cassell & Weinrath, 2011).

Finally, several participants brought up the issue of autonomy when discussing the decision to leave the gang. Many of the justice-involved youth stressed that leaving the gang was a decision they had made on their own, without being convinced or persuaded by anyone else. As noted by JB: “You can just leave; it’s totally up to you. The group has no influence”. John also discussed his decision to leave the gang stating that: “It is hard but yeah you have to do it yourself. But now at times you have to do everything yourself”. Other interview participants further elaborated:

Nobody told me I can’t leave... like, you know? Nobody tried to tell me to stay, it’s like... The only person that I had to like fight for it with is myself. I had to convince myself. Because like, everyone fights themselves every day, you know it’s like talking to your conscience and everything... it’s like you know you shouldn’t, stop doing stupid things, you know? I started thinking about... I had to realize it by myself, you know? (Johnny)

Like I mean it's all about you if you are trying to change. If you're not trying to change, that's who you are. Some people have been in the game [the gang] since nine years old until 45 years old, you know? Some people are doing like 75 years for some dumb lick. Some people are doing some mad time, you know? But they are riding for their niggers that's the thing... I mean it's not them [the gang members] that make the decision, you know? (Costello)

Half of the youth justice practitioners who participated in interviews agreed with the perspective of the justice-involved youth that ultimately it was an individual decision to leave the gang. As noted by one interview participant in particular: "Well the final decision does rest with the youth, I mean that's the bottom line. The final decision rests with him" (YJP-5).

Only one justice-involved youth discussed the role that 'others' may play in the decision-making process as it relates to leaving the gang, but in the end, he reiterated that the individual needs to make the final decision:

I think it's your decision because you've pretty much had enough so now it is time to move on. But people could try to show you a better way to go, you know what I mean, so help you try to get a job or something like that... Some people like help and some people don't because the reason they also got into gangs is that they were also independent at first, right? So, they're quite independent so I think they would make the decision themselves and they're old enough to make the decision themselves. They might have like people giving them tips to find a solution but that's as much as they'll take. (Juliano)

The youth justice practitioners, on the other hand, identified a much larger role for 'others' to play in the decision-making process. As one interview participant noted about the process of leaving the gang: "I think it's just a really complex thing that plays out with them [gang-involved youth] that it's our job to help them straighten out and figure out" (YJP-3). Other youth justice practitioners referred to the role that positive influences play in the decision-making process:

I think that the only way that any of these young men will ever leave a gang is if they truly decide and want to leave a gang. How they get to that point I think is... that's a good question. I think that we can, I think that we exert influence... we suggest alternatives, we have some influence, but I think that through relationship building with positive role models and positive figures in their lives I think that that's what, I think that's the key to get young men thinking about the alternative to what they know. I think



that the more they're able to build rapport with positive role models or just positive influences in their lives I think that's what really starts to shift thinking in regard to self-worth and also not only self-worth but that they can start self projection, they can start to see themselves interacting with people in a different way, in a different environment, and from a different social or peer group structure. So, I think that of course if the motivation comes from them but I think that the influence of that motivation is done through relationship building. (YJP-2)

See you have to see what sort of relationship they have with peers and family members and mentor types. They can be more assistance than anybody when a young person is in the process of changing that lifestyle, because they're there. I mean us professionals we're not there all the time with them. And we learn from what we see and hear. (YJP-4)

The justice-involved youth appeared to exhibit a significant amount of agency in determining their outcomes. This favours an understanding of the life-course perspective where changes in the life course are understood as resulting in part from intentional choice. Individuals are placed at the forefront of the change process instead of being seen as passively influenced by forces outside of their control (Giordano et al., 2002; Lindegaard & Jacques, 2014; Settersten, 2003). Similar to their decision to join the gang, the justice-involved youth were not passive actors when it came time to leave the gang. The participants indicated that the decision was one they had made on their own, and for their own reasons. This conflicts with the view of youth justice practitioners who indicated that others including youth justice professionals as well as family, friends, and mentors can play an important role and can have an impact on the decision-making process. The difference in perspectives on the role that others play in the desistance process has implications for interventions that rely on formal or informal support mechanisms to assist gang-involved youth in the decision-making process as it relates to leaving the gang. The role of social supports in the context of the youth justice system will be discussed in detail in Chapter 9.

## **What Are the Motivations for Leaving the Gang?**

Motivations for desistance are the subjective reasons behind why gang members decide to leave the gang. Like the motivations for involvement in the gang, prior research has classified motivations for leaving as either push or pull factors.<sup>115</sup> However, this is not to say that they are the same (Carson & Vecchio, 2015). Leaving the gang is not simply the reverse of joining, as one process is not symmetrical to the other (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Several key motivation factors have been identified in previous research as influencing why gang members de-identify with and disengage from the gang.<sup>116</sup> While the specific details related to gang exit are unique to each individual, the main areas acknowledged and discussed by the participants in this research project include: the growing consequences of membership; disillusionment with the gang; and maturation and bonds and attachments to conventional people and activities. Each of these factors will be discussed in turn. In contrast to the findings on the conceptualization of and methods for leaving the gang where the perspectives of justice-involved youth varied based on their experiences in the desistance process, the motivations for leaving identified and described were similar across the two sub-groups, and so are presented together. The perspective of youth justice practitioners is also discussed where relevant.

### 'It's Not Worth It'

As discussed in Chapter 2, the decision to leave the gang may be based on the growing consequences associated with continued membership. For participants in this research project, these consequences were primarily addressed in the context of experiences of violence and

---

<sup>115</sup> For examples, see: Bjørgo (2002); Decker & Lauritsen (2002); Decker & Pyrooz (2011a); Pyrooz & Decker (2011); and van Gemert & Fleisher (2005).

<sup>116</sup> For examples, see: Bjørgo (1999); Bubolz & Simi (2015); Carson et al. (2013); Carson & Vecchio (2015); Decker & Lauritsen (2002); Decker & Pyrooz (2011b); Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule (2014); Moloney et al. (2009); Peterson et al. (2004); Pyrooz & Decker (2011); Sánchez-Jankowski (1991); Spergel (1995); Thrasher (1927); Vigil (1988); and Wood & Alleyne (2010).

involvement in the criminal justice system as motivations for desistance, and often they were discussed in combination. When Matt was asked his reasons for leaving the gang he stated: “Uh, because a lot of people I know died or went to jail. And it was clear to me I was going to end up in one of those places”. Johnny further indicated: “Ok, yo, it’s not worth it, you know? It’s not worth me doing 25 years; it’s not worth me being dead”. This sentiment was also shared by the youth justice practitioners, as noted by one interview participant:

I’ve heard things like ‘I’m sick of looking over my shoulder’... sometimes they see tragic things happen to people, they get killed, right? They get stabbed and they end up looking at.... They’re spending a lot of time in custody. (YJP-3)

### *Experiences of Violence*

The justice-involved youth identified a range of motivations associated with violence.

Allister indicated his own experience with violence was a reason why he would consider leaving:

I got cut right here [points to a spot right under right eye] by a knife on my face but that did not... like I don’t know it was pretty traumatizing like it makes you look at things like I could have gone blind and stuff. And it’s just like the more and more I get involved with it, the more serious it gets.

KP discussed witnessing violence as a motivator for desistance:

When things get a little too serious sometimes, sometimes you know in the gang life you see a lot of losses, you see a lot of people die in front of you. Some people just can’t handle it, so they get out; they’re not fit for the streets anymore, so they get out...

Several justice-involved youth noted that the potential for future instances of violence was a reason for leaving:

Yeah but like there’s been times where I’ve seen like AK-47s like right in front of me. Like I’ve never shot at anyone or anything but there’s been a few times where it’s been pretty close to life and death. Like I said I’m only 16, why do I want to chance dying right now? There’s so much more. (FT)

You worry about going to the wrong neighbourhood and getting jumped, if you’re not with your boys and you’re by yourself. You know you could get shot at, you could get killed, you could get shot, and you could get stabbed... They get paranoia too; paranoia is

a big factor. Looking over your shoulder making sure no one is following you, so you don't get shot or stabbed or something like that. (KP)

Reflective of the findings of past research studies<sup>117</sup>, some justice-involved youth, like KP, identified an accumulation of a variety of violent experiences as leading to a reconsideration of continued involvement (i.e., violence fatigue), while others, like Allister, were motivated to leave by specific violent events. Further, the perception of an overall increased risk of victimization can lead to a decision to exit the gang. As MJ put simply: "It's not worth it to be in the game [the gang]; as soon as you join, your life is in danger".

Finally, an interesting insight from one of the justice-involved youth was that the experience of violence may only be a temporary motivator for desistance:

I know dudes that got shot and they're like oh I'm going to get out of this gang life, or they got stabbed and oh I'm going to get out of this gang life, they're in the hospital bed and they're like oh I'm going to change, I'm a changed man and I'm a changed person and I'm done. A couple of days roll along and oh, I'm still alive, and I'm going to go back to the block. I know a dude that got shot by a shotgun, he can't see out of his left eye no more and he's still doing this thing. A guy got shot in his arm, he's still doing this thing, a guy got stabbed behind his ear and neck and he's still doing this thing. (KP)

This perspective is supported by Berger and colleagues (2017)<sup>118</sup> who believe that the period right after victimization is critical to gang desistance since it presents a prime opportunity for re-evaluating one's life, and consequently, for exploring other life options. This opportunity is more likely to be seized if the gang member is isolated from the influence of his gang peers (e.g., hospitalization, incarceration) and if he is exposed to more normative alternatives. However, without intervention, contemplation may stagnate, and the individual may continue with the status quo of the gang lifestyle.

---

<sup>117</sup> For examples, see: Bjørge (2002); Decker & Van Winkle (1996); Jacques & Wright (2008); Moore (1991); Pyrooz & Decker (2011); Spergel (1995); Vecchio (2013); Vigil (1988); and Wood & Alleyne (2010).

<sup>118</sup> Berger and colleagues (2017) conducted interviews with 39 core ex-gang members from the San Francisco Bay area and Los Angeles, California. The interview participants were asked to discuss their involvement in the gang, to identify the factors they associated with their desistance, and to describe the nature of the process.

Alternatively, the youth justice practitioners focused primarily on vicarious victimization experiences as the motivator for desistance from gang involvement. As noted by one interview participant: “So yeah, major loss like a member of a family or a good friend being killed. I mean that’s the ultimate” (YJP-4). Other youth justice practitioners also discussed the importance of specific traumatic events as reasons for leaving the gang:

I worked with a guy, this was a guy that transferred here from a facility near Toronto and he was... he identified to me as a gang member. Yeah, a really violent incident happened to a family member who had been gang involved... his relative who had exited the gang and was trying to get him to exit the gang... you know the violence that can be involved can be a big, big reason why people [leave]... (YJP-3)

I think that there has to be something really big that happens. Having like someone who’s actually related to them, like a cousin or brother, a best friend who gets killed or is sent to jail, I think that would be an eye opener... (YJP-6)

One youth justice practitioner referred to an overall increased risk of victimization that can lead the individual to desire a gang-free lifestyle:

You know what, it’s no longer fun anymore to have to walk out and look behind me three times to make sure that no one is trying to get me. They may just get tired of it. You know they just sort of feel that ‘hey, you know what I can just sort of I can do something better’. (YJP-5)

The findings from the justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners demonstrate the important role that violence plays in the decision to desist from gang involvement. In fact, several previous studies have indicated that violence is the most frequently cited reason why young people chose to leave their gang.<sup>119</sup> The various perspectives provided on the role of violence demonstrate that its influence is unique to the individual and their interpretation of the violent experience. For some a single traumatic event, experienced personally or vicariously, can be enough to motivate them to leave the gang, while for others it might be the accumulation of a

---

<sup>119</sup> For examples, see: Decker & Lauritsen (2002); Greene & Pranis (2007); and Vigil (1988).

number and variety of violent experiences over time, or the constant anticipation of violent encounters that can lead to desistance. Bubolz (2014)<sup>120</sup> also found that violence and victimization impacted members of his sample in different ways. What is clear is that there seems to be a limit to the tolerance that an individual gang member has for experiences of violence and that once this threshold is reached, there is a strong motivation to escape that violence (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). However, this incentive to leave may be short-lived demonstrating the importance of timely intervention.

### *Involvement in the Criminal Justice System*

Involvement in the criminal justice system has also been identified in past research as a reason for leaving the gang.<sup>121</sup> For the participants in this research project, this motivation was first discussed in the context of previous and current experiences of confinement in youth justice facilities. The justice-involved youth discussed the latter as an abrupt motivator, as indicated by Bob: "... a slap to the face and you've got to change it up" or as a more gradual realization, as noted by other interview participants who indicated having multiple experiences in youth justice facilities:

I'm just tired of it, coming back and in and out of jail. I'm tired of having my freedom taken away and that... just the more you're in here [youth justice facility], the slimmer your chances to get second chances and just like really thinking like do you want to go on like this for your life or do you want to do well? (Allister)

Yeah, they also consider that because you know what I mean they're sick and tired of always getting put back in jail, it gets outplayed after a while when you're in there and you realize that I'm just wasting my whole youth years in here [youth justice facility] that I could have been on the outside. (Juliano)

---

<sup>120</sup> Bubolz (2014) used life history interviews with a sample of 30 former gang members in Omaha to examine the motives for gang exit, what it means to be a 'former', and the residual effects of the gang identity in the time following gang exit.

<sup>121</sup> For examples, see: Carson et al. (2013); Decker & Lauritsen (2002); Decker & Pyrooz (2011b); Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule (2014); Decker & Van Winkle (1996); Hagedorn (1994); Moore (1991); Padilla (1992); Panuccio et al. (2012); Pyrooz & Decker (2011); Quicker (1999); Sánchez-Jankowski (1991); Spergel (1995); and Vigil (1988).

Whilst being held in a youth justice facility, either for pre-trial detention or post-trial custody, the justice-involved youth emphasized their ambition to desist from gang involvement. This finding has also been observed in other work on desistance from crime.<sup>122</sup> Confinement was presented as a sobering experience, allowing individuals to reflect on their past decisions and behaviours (Panuccio et al., 2012) and to reconsider the choices they had made in light of the unpleasant consequences they had to bear (Soyer, 2014). This perception of confinement as a turning point has been reflected in previous work on desistance from crime where narratives of current and former prisoners emphasize the deterrent effect of incarceration and these individuals describe their experiences of incarceration as a motivation to ‘turn your life around’.<sup>123</sup>

Second, avoiding future contact with the adult criminal justice system was noted by several justice-involved youth as a motivation for desisting from gang involvement. In this context, the age of 18 was often identified as an important threshold, as noted by FT: “So like everyone here [youth justice facility] is under 18, we can still change”. However, once you reach the age of 18 and transition to the adult criminal justice system, it becomes more difficult to change your ways, as illustrated below by other interview participants:

I don’t want to end up in adult custody and have an adult record... But I guess some people that already have an adult record and that and the door is already closed for them, then they don’t have much choice. But since I’m still under 18, I think I can still get myself out of it and turn my life around. (Allister)

I’ve never been charged with selling drugs, but I’ve done other stuff and they know me for that other stuff so it’s just not worth it. Because I am almost 18 now and I’m not trying to graduate to the big boy prison [adult correctional facility], you know? (Bob)

---

<sup>122</sup> For examples, see: Ashkar & Kenny (2008); and Soyer (2014).

<sup>123</sup> For examples, see: Ashkar & Kenny (2008); Laub & Sampson (2003); and Maruna (2001).

One of the youth justice practitioners reiterated the importance of the age threshold, where the age of 18 becomes a pivotal turning point, and described the distinction between the youth and adult criminal justice systems:

We have had a number of guys that have said that this was their last stint with us [in a youth justice facility], that they're 18 now that they don't want to go through the adult system... I think that for the more resilient and more brighter individuals that are gang involved or even on the fringe of the gang I think that they see it as more a means to an end and some of them have an expiration date, they see an expiration date on gang life. Some of them get caught up and then they don't expire out of it and end up in the adult system... I think that for some of the brighter ones that they're able to forecast that the consequences of the crimes that they've committed once they've reached the age of 18 and beyond, the consequences become greater. They're fully aware that, you know, what they've experienced here [youth justice facility] as incarceration is not reflective of what they'll experience in the adult system and they're aware that that's not where they want to be... So, I think for some of them it's that motivator that actually, the punishment is actually, you know I only have the term in French 'facteur de dissuasion', right so that's what's discouraging them from pursuing the gang career. (YJP-2)

Like findings from previous research studies<sup>124</sup>, for the justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners in this research project continued gang involvement was described as 'not worth it' and the desire to desist was motivated by avoiding future constraint, in this case specifically through confinement in adult criminal justice facilities. The participants also highlighted a clear demarcation between the youth and adult criminal justice systems.<sup>125</sup> They discussed this in the context of the breaking point between adolescence and adulthood, symbolized by an individual's eighteenth birthday. This viewpoint is reflective of the legal definition of adulthood where the age of 18 is a decisive time in an individual's life when they assume several legal responsibilities and the repercussions for infractions of the law become more severe. Tied to this is the notion that the ability to make changes in your life becomes inherently more difficult, which can be observed in the different purposes and provisions of the

---

<sup>124</sup> For examples, see: Panuccio et al. (2012); and Soyer (2014).

<sup>125</sup> The identified differences between these two systems will be discussed in detail in Chapter 9.



*YCJA* versus the *Criminal Code*. For example, sentencing principles of the *YCJA* are more oriented toward rehabilitation while those of the *Criminal Code* are more oriented to deterrence, and the *YCJA* has certain privacy provisions and allows for the sealing and/or expungement of youth criminal records.

Although the legal transition from adolescence to adulthood occurs at age 18, recently researchers have begun to question this artificial breaking point as young adult offenders aged 18-24 appear to be more similar to youth than to adults with respect to their offending, maturation, psychosocial capacities, and life circumstances (Corrado & Mathesius, 2014; Lösel et al., 2012). As discussed in Chapter 3 in the context of emerging adulthood, Arnett (2000, 2004) outlines how age-norms have changed because of the postponement of transitions to adult social roles in many Western countries during the past few decades. Individuals are leaving home later, are more highly educated – attending school for more years and delaying full time entrance into the labour force, are marrying later, and are delaying the birth of their first child (Beaujot & Kerr, 2007; Clark, 2007; Gaudet, 2007). As a result, the upper bracket of ‘youth’ may be extended into the early to mid-twenties. This delay may be further accentuated for individuals whose involvement in the criminal justice system can interfere with relationships, education, employment, and parenting (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Sullivan, 2004). This means that while justice-involved youth may perceive a clear breaking point between adolescence and adulthood as defined by involvement in the youth or adult criminal justice system, which they see as a motivation to desist from gang involvement, the reality of their maturational development and life course experiences may in fact impact their ability to do so at this point in their lives.

Finally, it should be acknowledged here that involvement in the criminal justice system, and particularly its deterrent effect on illegal behaviour, has been widely criticized by criminologists. Previous studies have shown that incarceration has a criminogenic effect and in fact increases the probability of future criminal justice system involvement.<sup>126</sup> However, perception and experience of the deterrent effect are quite different. For participants in this research project, deterrence is used in the context of a narrative of change, where the desire to avoid future contact with the criminal justice system is employed to induce a desire to reform one's behaviour (Gadd & Farrall, 2004). This should be understood as a cognitive exercise in meaning making. These findings demonstrate the discrepancy between the subjective framing and objective effects of incarceration (Soyer, 2014).

#### 'It's Not What It Was Supposed to Be'

As highlighted in Chapter 2, disillusionment with the gang has been commonly cited as a motivation for leaving the gang. It results from incongruence between the idealized expectations of the gang lifestyle and the everyday experiences of gang involvement (Carson et al., 2013; Carson & Vecchio, 2015). As was noted in one of the focus groups with justice-involved youth: "A lot of people don't realize what they are getting involved in until it's too late, you know? You only see it from the outside; so you don't really know what is going on until you're inside" (JIY-FG2). For some of the justice-involved youth, their expectations were based on the glamorized gang lifestyle presented by the entertainment industry. For example, Johnny discussed his early gang involvement by making references to 'Tony Montana' from *Scarface*<sup>127</sup>:

---

<sup>126</sup> For examples, see: Gatti et al. (2009); and Laub & Sampson (2003).

<sup>127</sup> *Scarface* is a 1983 American crime film telling the story of Cuban refugee Tony Montana who arrives in 1980s Miami with nothing and rises to become a powerful drug kingpin. The film has been referenced extensively in pop culture, especially in rap and hip-hop music as well as comic books, TV, and video games. Tony Montana has served as the gangster role model for heroic behaviour for over 30 years (see Prince, 2009).

You know when you are in a gang, you're like any moment, you gotta live... like when I was a kid I used to live everyday like as my only... I used to walk around like I was Tony. It's a joke you know? That's what we used to always say, you know you live every day like your only and walk around like Tony, you know? Like Tony Montana, you know?

One of the youth justice practitioners indicated that this glamorized view of the gang lifestyle is often observed among youth justice clients and stated: "It's time to get real with a lot of them. It's [gang involvement] no longer a fantasyland. And it's not glory; it shouldn't be glorified" (YJP-4). In many ways, then, young people are drawn not to the reality of gangs, but rather the mythology of gangs; an alternate reality that gangs strategically cultivate and selectively edit to attract new members (Densley, 2013; Felson, 2006; Howell, 2007).

Beyond the role of experiences of violence as a motivator for desistance as discussed previously, the discrepancy between what was expected and what was experienced when it came to the perpetration of violence in the context of the gang also generated feelings of disillusionment among justice-involved youth, as highlighted by two interview participants:

Yeah, sometimes you do stuff where you don't want to do it but you have to because you're expected to, you have to because that's what the group is doing and you have to go with them. So even if it was something that you really didn't want to do, if they asked you to do it with them, you'd have to. If I had to go after one of my old friends... Sometimes you'll feel that the person really doesn't deserve what they're going to get but there's nothing you can do about it... Just that this is getting to be too much, I don't know if I can handle this, I don't know if I can do what they're asking me to do. (Michel)

Like everybody is beefing everybody. Like at one point, like three, four years ago, everybody is friends. Last year, everybody's friends. This year everybody's after each other, everybody wants to kill everybody... You know like too much drama goes on in a gang. Way too much drama, unnecessary drama, you know? For all you know like I could be in a gang and my cousin is in another gang and then we are fighting, and guns go off and by accident I shoot my cousin, you know?... So, it's like... it's pointless, you know? (Johnny)

One of the youth justice practitioners reiterated this viewpoint based on what was learned through discussions with youth justice clients, and recounted one specific interaction:

He [referring to a gang-involved youth justice client] said you won't believe the shit I see every day. Like how awful it is, and he described some of the violent things he sees and how it didn't meet with his expectations about what gang life should be... he doesn't have the stomach for it. (YJP-3)

In Chapter 6, the perpetration of violence was discussed in the context of being instrumental to the gang's purposes for achieving the gang member's goals, based on their motivations and needs for joining the gang. Disillusionment seems to appear when individuals can no longer explain, justify, or qualify these gang-related violent behaviours as providing a means to an end from their perspective.

Disillusionment was also observed because of the discrepancies between some of the reasons why individuals initially sought membership, what they believed the gang could offer them to meet their needs, and their experiences of membership in the gang. As noted in Chapter 6, several justice-involved youth indicated that they sought out membership in the gang for a sense of belonging and saw the gang's ability to function as a surrogate family. Previous research has found that on the surface gang networks may appear loyal and supportive of one another; however, in actuality there is a substantial amount of disloyalty within gangs. Members frequently turn their back on fellow gang members and individuals may feel that they are being taken advantage of by their gang peers.<sup>128</sup> With respect to showing 'loyalty to the gang', the following two passages demonstrate the expectation of loyalty to the gang as described in one of the focus group sessions with justice-involved youth in comparison to one interview participant's actual experience of loyalty during his time as a gang member:

Yeah, it's loyalty, you know, loyalty isn't just there and then not there one day. That's how they see a lot. You know you come into a place like this [youth justice facility], you rep [represent] with someone on the outside and if you come in and all of a sudden

---

<sup>128</sup> For examples, see: Anderson (1999); Bjørge (2002); Decker, Pyrooz, Sweeten, & Moule (2014); Fleisher (1998); Hagedorn (1994); Levitt & Venkatesh (2000); Moore (1991); Padilla (1992); Sánchez-Jankowski (1991); and Vigil (1988).

change up... you're eventually going to leave you know, you're going to go back to the outside and then what? You gotta stay loyal the whole way through. (JIY-FG2)

Like when I got older, I started realizing that like there's different stuff you know? It's like everybody is looking out for himself, ok?... Like my own gang members snitched me out. So that's the thing you know? It's like everybody is your family and this and this until it comes time when everybody starts pointing fingers, you know? Everybody points fingers and then you leave town so that nobody knows where you are, you know, just to save your own ass... Like what happened to loyalty, you know? (Johnny)

Further, two interview participants discussed how they felt that they were being taken advantage of by other gang members, and that eventually the latter will turn their backs on them:

Yeah, that's why I want to get out of it like I think... that's the thing when you hang out with your friends and stuff or the gang members and that they kind of almost expect something back that they give you free stuff because they have money and they're doing stuff it's almost expected of you that you'll go out and get your own money and come back and support like the gang kind of thing yourself. Then there's break and enters and that and robbing people and that... and like them telling you to do something... kind of influencing you to do stuff and trying to see how much they can, how much you are almost scared of them and how much you will just listen to them and they kind of just see how far they can go with you. (Allister)

Even, you gotta understand the older guys will show you love, but it's for a reason. He wants you on his side. He wants you to do things for him. He wants you to sell drugs for him. He doesn't show you love, out of love. No, it's not like that. There's always a reason for it, you know? You feel like they are your family at one point, you know? Until like things start happening, you know like the guy that snitched on me. I felt like it was my brother. I fought for that kid like how many times, like you know? (Johnny)

One of the youth justice practitioners reiterated the discrepancy between expectation and experience in the context of 'having each other's backs', which was one of the key purposes of gang involvement previously identified:

The old term, even though I don't know if a lot of guys know what it really means but that they have my back. That's kind of a new way of saying that there's a code that we look after each other. It's not as strong as most of the guys think it is... [A youth justice client says] 'I just found out that nobody's fucking solid'... Yeah, because you get out and were these guys that made any effort of keeping in touch? Were these guys that went to see your families, say hi to mom once in a while to see if they needed anything? That doesn't happen a whole lot, especially with the younger guys. And so, you get out [of the

youth justice facility] and all these guys are there giving you the special shake and everything but where were they when the chips were down? (YJP-4)

As noted by another youth justice practitioner, gang-involved youth will come to this realization over time:

Realizing that it's not... like realizing further down the line that it's really not something positive and I think that even if they're in the gang for a long time and they think that it's family, but people will be stabbing them in the back all the time. (YJP-6)

In identifying and describing the important characteristics and attributes of gangs and their members in Chapter 5, the justice-involved youth highlighted the importance of various forms of reliability as fundamental to gang membership. Through the above findings, the justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners indicated that the determination that these attributes are lacking can be a motivation for leaving the gang.

Finally, disillusionment can arise from the discrepancy in the expectations and experiences of the financial success that can be achieved through gang involvement. As noted previously, economic prosperity is another common motive for individuals to join gangs.<sup>129</sup> All but two justice-involved youth referred to the primacy of the economic-oriented function of their gang. At the outset of their gang involvement, they expected that as gang members that they would 'be rolling in it' yet in actuality they were often poorly compensated for their efforts, their money-making activities were restricted by the gang, and they were limited in how they could spend their money:

To be honest it was actually... unless you're like really good at it, there's more money in actual... me, I wasn't making the greatest amount of money. It was fast money, but it wasn't a lot. Like when you're selling drugs it's hard to save up money you know... because you need to get a bigger re up [replenishment of drug supply] and maybe you get pulled over and the cops take all your stuff, you know and you've gotta start from scratch. Someone steals your stuff or you get robbed, you know... it's up and down for sure. (Bob)

---

<sup>129</sup> For examples, see: Decker & Van Winkle (1996); and Howell (2010).

I'd say if you're buying and selling drugs and stuff you can only really re up [replenishment of drug supply] or buy drugs again off your gang and like if you don't and if you're trying to make your own money that's how they... like you're trying to get a better price and make your own money and not trying to support your gang or whatever then they take that as you're disrespecting them and that you're trying to screw them over in a sense and do stuff behind their back. (Allister)

Like why do you think all these gangsters, and whatever they call themselves, why do you think... you see them with rings, gold rings, gold diamond chains, nice clothes, \$300 pairs of shoes, because that's all they can buy... you can only buy shoes, rings, hats, chains. They can't buy anything else. They can't buy a house, they can't buy themselves a car, if they do they have to lease it. So, like they have all this money... [and they can't spend it]. (Johnny)

Given that the overall purpose of the gang is to make money to survive, demonstrate independence, and show status, the inability of individuals to achieve these goals through gang involvement may lead them to reconsider their continued membership in the gang. Other research has also demonstrated that most gang members are unlikely to find gang-related activities to be financially rewarding.<sup>130</sup>

In the context of the life-course perspective, these two factors, 'it's not worth it' and 'it's not what it was supposed to be' can lead to a crystallization of discontent with gang membership, produced as a result of the individual's association of numerous negative life experiences with this identity (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). This cognitive shift can provide an individual the motivation to change and to seek out alternatives to the gang; or at least to reconsider continued membership. These findings reiterate the role of directed human agency and intentional choice in the desistance process.

These factors can be further examined using the rational choice framework which suggests that the decision to continue or give up offending is based on a conscious reappraisal of its costs and benefits; promoted by an internal re-orientation concerning the potential harms of

---

<sup>130</sup> For examples, see: Fleisher (1998); and Padilla (1992).

criminal behaviour. Persisters and desisters are reasoning decision makers (Clarke & Cornish, 1985; Maruna, 1999). Applied to the context of gang involvement, individuals believe that at the time of their decision to join, the gang can provide them with a number of advantages that would enhance the quality of their lives (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991). When this is no longer the case, and gang membership starts to become detrimental, the decision to leave the gang may be made. As such, the process of gang desistance may be characterized by an accumulation of perceptions that run opposite to the gang's function (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002). Individuals who join gangs looking for aspects of family support, protection, and economic success ultimately become dissatisfied with the extent to which the gang can provide these resources (Bubolz & Simi, 2016). The discrepancies identified are also in line with the 'deficiency needs' in Maslow's (1943, 1954) hierarchy of need model discussed previously, suggesting that the process of desistance may be predicated on the inability of the gang to provide adequately for the basic needs of its members (Berger et al., 2017).

Within this rational choice framework, there is also an acknowledgement that individuals exposed to the same environment experience it, interpret it, and react to it differently. According to Caspi and Moffitt (1995, p.485): "Each individual extracts a subjective psychological environment from the objective surroundings, and that subjective environment shapes both personality and subsequent interaction". This means that while gang members may weigh the pros and cons of their behaviour, they are doing so within a particular social context. Just like in the case of joining the gang, the decision to leave the gang is based on a socially-bounded rationality; individuals base their decisions on what they believe is best for them at that particular time (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991) and this cannot necessarily be reduced to an objective cost-benefit analysis.



### Getting On with 'Real Life'

Like the case of desistance from crime, the maturation hypothesis which is a core aspect of the life-course perspective, has been employed to explain why youth gang members decide to disengage from the group. Maturation reform is believed to account for a substantial portion of the desistance process (Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule, 2014; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). That is, gang-involved youth will eventually age out of the gang like the way many offenders age out of criminal behaviour. Steinberg and Cauffman (1996) argued that the transition out of crime involves increased maturity in several psychosocial characteristics affecting judgment. As adolescents mature, they are better able to control impulses, to consider others, to foresee consequences of actions, and to resist peer influence. As young people age and assume other responsibilities in life, many appear to naturally transition away from gangs and navigate toward other prosocial groups and more socially desirable activities (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Most gang members will at some point realize that the gang lifestyle is not compatible with the life they would like to live and former gang members often describe having 'grown out of the gang', or simply having 'gotten too old' for the gang lifestyle (Battin et al., 1998; Bjørge, 1999; Thornberry et al., 1994).

Many of the justice-involved youth reinforced this argument indicating that at a certain point it is time to grow up and get on with 'real life', desiring a lifestyle that is more typical of the average person (Bjørge, 2009). As noted by JG: "... some people grow out of it, they want to get back to their life and be normal" and by Costello: "I'm going to get out, I'm going to put some effort so I can get a job and start a real life and shit". Two other interview participants further discussed the maturational process and its influence on their continued gang involvement:

I grew out of it, you know? Like I grew out of it... And like the thing is that when you're younger you just want to you know I'm this guy, I'm mister tough guy, you know?... You

reach that age where you start looking at life in a different way, it's a phase, you know? Like before when I was a kid I wanted to go around like that, I wanted to earn my stripes, I wanted to go oh, I'm the big guy here, you know?... I started growing up like now and I applied to college a few days ago, you know? I applied to heating and cooling and like welding and stuff, you know? (Johnny)

It's really time to grow up. Sometimes you do, you get to that point where it's time to grow up, time to get a job and time to stop doing all this dumb nonsense... To be honest to get a high paying job you can convince your homies that you need to stop this and back away... You have family, you have a son and you have a daughter or something. Those are big things. You have a kid and the whole game changes. You think I want to be around to see my son or daughter and see them grow up, that's a big factor. Another factor is people searching for higher education who actually want to make something of themselves, figure out like what their purpose and what their goal is in life, like get the big house, get the nice car, and things like that. (KP)

Similar to KP, Michel discussed how becoming a parent could be a motivator for leaving:

I think that if I got married and had a kid that would definitely make me want to [leave the gang] because I wouldn't want to be part of something like that and have my wife or my kid know about that or have to be part of it or ever if I were to do something stupid in the gang, have it backfire on them...

In the context of the life-course perspective, these findings support the role of enhanced prosocial bonding in the process of desistance. The development of bonds to prosocial institutions can alter life-course trajectories (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Moloney et al., 2009; Sampson & Laub, 1993). The latter can act as external turning points that provide: (1) social control through attachment to and surveillance by the prosocial other; (2) routine activities that limit unstructured time; and (3) new relationships with people who reinforce prosocial behaviour and limit time with antisocial peers (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Mulvey et al., 2004).

As well, these findings support previous empirical research indicating that individuals may be motivated to relinquish involvement in the gang as they develop increased ties to non-deviant friends, significant others, and family members, and that the former may encourage them

to leave the gang.<sup>131</sup> As stated by Michel: “[I wouldn’t leave the gang] unless I had someone in my family very, very important to me that was begging me to stop”. Other justice-involved youth also discussed the role that their family plays in the decision to desist from gang involvement:

I don’t know, I’d say like mainly from my mom and like every time I call her she just tells me she still loves me and stuff but the more I go on with this, the more I keep on getting myself in trouble and getting assault charges and whatnot and robbery charges, she just says more and more that she’s not really going to be there for me when I’m 18 and just the warnings get more and more... like if I’m at 18 and still doing this like she’s not going to be there for me. (Allister)

I think I’m moving to Calgary again in two years so what’s the point of me staying if more of this shit’s going to happen and all my other family is out West right and if something bad happened to me out here they would like flip and they’re not the kind of people that you want mad. Not like threatening but like, yeah. (FT)

These narratives support the idea that the level of an individual’s attachment to conventional society may play a role in gang membership. In general, social control theory postulates that those who do not become involved in criminal activity have stronger bonds to conventional society than those that do become involved. The elements of this bond include attachment to others (e.g., family, friends, positive role models) and institutions (e.g., employment, school), commitment to conventional society, and belief in the general values of society (Hirschi, 1969). In applying this theory to motivations for desistance from gang involvement, members who leave the gang typically experience a combination of increased ties to non-deviant friends, significant others, and family members, and an increasing commitment to prosocial institutions all of which may discourage continued gang involvement (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Esbensen et al., 2001; Vigil, 1988).

Several youth justice practitioners also reiterated the findings that gang-involved youth will age out of the gang lifestyle, begin to assume other age-graded responsibilities (e.g., getting

---

<sup>131</sup> For examples, see: Carson et al. (2013); Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule (2014); Padilla (1992); and Vigil (1988).

a job, getting married, having a child), and start to see the benefits of a more conventional lifestyle, as noted in the passages below:

They may just get tired of it. You know they just sort of feel that hey, you know what I can just sort of I can do something better. How they tire of it, maybe they finally realize that yes, I can get a decent job and I can go to school and if I put my mind to it...I think it's sort of more a self awareness... they see something better for them and they see they're working at a job and they see individuals who yeah they're not making a lot of money but they see them doing ok, and so they take the positive reinforcement that a law abiding lifestyle is not completely boring, that they see that there's something to be gained from it, that they don't have to look over their shoulder all the time. (YJP-5)

Sometimes they are just late on learning skills and they get a job finally when they're 17 or 18 years old and they're able to make positive changes. It's very similar to like when a teenager separates from their parents, right? They develop the skills to go out in the world and that's the same philosophy but instead of a parent it's a social grouping – I've gained the skills, so I no longer need these people, they're bringing me down I understand that, so I'm going to distance myself now. (YJP-1)

However, two youth justice practitioners acknowledged that this is not true of all gang members; as some individuals may maintain longer-term involvement into the adult years:

Depending on age, youth will age out of gang-related activities, so that would become a factor... Yeah and they grow up into it and grow out of it just as well. Or some don't, don't get me wrong, I've seen kids come in at age 15 and I've seen them come in and out, in and out, in and out until they're 19 years old... and only to find out that yeah, they do eventually make their way into the adult justice system, um it's not uncommon. So, they don't grow out of it I guess... (YJP-1)

Some I think see it as long term; I think others see it as transitory. I think the ones who see it as transitory are usually the ones who are open to getting out of a gang. The ones who see it as long term, they sort of are the ones that are continuing to be involved in the adult [justice] system and therefore we see them, they're the ones that have the long-term commitment. (YJP-5)

Finally, in a different vein, one youth justice practitioner discussed individuals wanting to live up to the expectations of others and to make them proud, as a motivation for leaving the gang:

I've heard guys say that I want to live up to someone's expectation that was already there, that was always there of me, like somebody important in their life that may have recognized what they were doing and not approved of it... I've got a guy right now that

I'm working with and he's wanting to show his grandparents who have essentially raised him that he's more than what he has been and what he's been involved with, right? He would say that he wants them to be proud of him, right? I think his sense of making them proud wouldn't be doing gang-affiliated crap, it would be being legit, you know?... Or maybe there's someone in their life that stays constant and um that they do look up to like buddy who's saying 'I want to make my grandparents proud' so trying to make them proud a lot of the time he is deceiving them. He doesn't like that, that makes him feel awful right, but he wants their approval right, so that's the important person or two people, right? (YJP-3)

Overall, this combination of maturational reform and increasing ties to conventional people and activities in late adolescence and early adulthood acknowledges the temporal dimension of lived experience – the ways in which people and circumstances change over time – suggesting that young people do not spend all their lives in the gang doing gang 'stuff' (White, 2008, 2013). This is reflective of Sampson and Laub's (1993) age-graded theory of informal social control, which holds that desistance occurs as bonds to social institutions strengthen, typically when young people move into adulthood and establish new bonds to prosocial actors.

#### A Combination of Motivation Factors to Leave the Gang

While sometimes occurring independently, it is more frequently the case that push and pull factors are often intertwined and work in tandem during the desistance process (Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Both the justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners identified the interaction of multiple motivations for leaving the gang:

It's just like something that is going to push you off the edge is when you calculate all that stress and it just keeps getting worse by the years and then you just start thinking about it, you know what I mean, you have more time to think and then you think about leaving because all this stress is getting quite old... Maybe have a girlfriend or getting actual money that I can't get stopped for and having to be harassed every single day or watching over my shoulder when I mean I wouldn't be if I were getting a job. (Juliano)

I think for some of them, a very few of them, they get tired of the lifestyle. They're tired of the arrests, they're tired of the chaos that comes with the gang lifestyle and I think for some of them they just grow out of it, and they really mature to a point where the consequences don't outweigh the rewards... I think that really if any of them exit the

gang lifestyle it's because they grow out of it or they realize that the consequences outweigh the benefits for them. (YJP-2)

In other words, the typical gang member may experience a variety of factors which coalesce to initiate the de-identification and disengagement process as described in the first part of this chapter. Through the accumulation of push and pull factors, gang members become increasingly aware of the problems and adverse experiences associated with sustained affiliation with the gang, and of the conventional and age-graded options that are available for them outside the gang. Both internal motivations and external turning points appear to play important roles in the resolve to desist from gang involvement. They include a crystallization of discontent and a shift in an individual's openness to change, and exposure to a 'hook' or sets of hooks for change which act in interaction with their attitude toward that hook, especially the extent to which they regard it as incompatible with continued gang involvement (Giordano et al., 2002).

## **Conclusion**

The findings from this chapter demonstrate that desistance is a dynamic and evolving process. There was a general agreement among the participants that while the gang may serve a variety of functions for young people at particular points in their lives, for most the situation is temporary. This finding is reflective of the theoretical underpinnings of the life-course perspective and is consistently supported in the research literature. Some individuals may maintain their gang involvement for extended periods; however for most, gang membership is a transitory status (Carson et al., 2013). In fact, many empirical research studies have demonstrated that gang membership is most often short-lived, typically averaging two years or less.<sup>132</sup> It is clear from the participants in this research project, in conjunction with the findings

---

<sup>132</sup> For examples, see: Battin et al. (1998); Thornberry et al. (2003, 1994); and Weerman, Lovegrove, & Thornberry (2015).

from other theoretical and empirical works that leaving the gang is not only possible, but common.

Although there was a consensus that desistance from gang involvement is a process that involves a lessened association with group members and/or reduced participation in group activities, there was a wide variability in the thresholds employed for what it means to have left the gang. Justice-involved youth without experience in the desistance process tended to view leaving in absolute terms while those with experience saw it as a much more complicated process particularly as it relates to the continuation of involvement in criminal activities. A similar variation in perspectives was observed in the discussion of the methods for leaving the gang. Justice-involved youth without experience in the desistance process subscribed to hostile/active exit methods that reflect the ‘blood in, blood out’ rhetoric, while those with experience discussed the non-hostile/passive exit process that was more gradual and generally occurs with little fanfare or consequences. The clear discrepancies observed between justice-involved youth with and without experience in the desistance process demonstrate the perpetuation of gang myths and sensationalized claims that are only dispelled once individuals begin to engage in the desistance process. Further, descriptions of the desistance process from those with experience demonstrate that it is very personal and individualized.

The findings also demonstrated that there are a variety of motivations for leaving the gang. In general, it is a process in which individuals become more aware of the consequences of gang involvement, disillusioned with gang life, and experience feelings of maturity. The latter often develop in relation to turning points related to education, employment, and prosocial ties to others. For gang members, these experiences represent individualized internal motivations and external turning points, and relying on personal accounts appears to be an important means of

understanding the de-identification and disengagement process. For a summary of the main findings from this chapter, including the discrepancies between perspectives on the methods and motivations for leaving the gang, see *Table 5* at the end of Chapter 8.

This chapter has investigated the methods and motivations for leaving the gang, but it should be acknowledged that there may be a discrepancy between developing preferences for a non-gang lifestyle and following through with determined action. Young people may make decisions and begin to engage in the desistance process, but the social structure and social context in which they operate may limit their capacity to live up to these decisions and to follow through to exiting the gang. These barriers to desistance from gang involvement are the subject of the next chapter.



## CHAPTER 8 BARRIERS TO ‘LAYING DOWN THE FLAG’

In addition to the methods and motives, part of the process of leaving the gang involves addressing barriers to desistance. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, individuals may encounter a wide variety of problems when trying to leave, some stemming from the gang itself and others having their origin outside the gang (Mellor et al., 2005). The purpose of this chapter is to explore these factors from the perspective of justice-involved youth, and where possible in comparison to the perspective of youth justice practitioners, to gain greater insight into this component of the desistance process. As noted in Chapter 7, this knowledge can help to better inform the future development of prevention, intervention, and desistance strategies.

All participants in this research project were asked about their perspectives on the barriers that they believe impede the desistance process. Like in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7, analysis of the focus group and individual interview sessions with justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners demonstrated a substantial overlap in the themes identified. As such, to avoid repetition in the interpretation of results, the findings from the two groups have been combined and are presented thematically below.<sup>133</sup> As always, where there are divergences in perspectives between the two groups, these differences are highlighted and discussed. Again, similarities and differences in perspectives between the justice-involved youth with and without experience in the desistance process are also noted where relevant.

Several key barriers have been identified in previous research as influencing gang members’ abilities to de-identify and disengage from the gang.<sup>134</sup> As highlighted in Chapter 7,

---

<sup>133</sup> Within each theme, the order in which the findings are presented is based on the flow of information for ease of understanding and is not an indication of the preference of one perspective over another.

<sup>134</sup> For examples, see: Bjørge (1999); Bolden (2013); Cassell & Weinrath (2011); Carson et al. (2013); Decker (1996); Decker & Lauritsen (2002); Decker & Pyrooz (2011b); Decker & Van Winkle (1996); Descormiers (2013); Mellor et al. (2005); Pyrooz & Decker (2011); Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb (2014); and Pyrooz et al. (2013).

while the specific details related to gang exit are unique to each individual, the main barriers acknowledged and discussed by participants in this research project include: requirement of loyalty or fear of repercussions from betrayal; missing out on gang benefits; limited opportunities outside the gang; and the lingering gang label. The first two explanations refer to internal obstacles to gang desistance, while the last two refer to external barriers. Each of these barriers will be discussed in turn in this chapter.

### **Loyalty to the Gang and Its Members or Fear of Repercussions from Betrayal**

Given that loyalty was a concept often employed by the justice-involved youth to characterize the gang and its members, and that leaving the gang represents a breach of this criterion of membership, it is not surprising that it was identified as a barrier to desistance. Some of the justice-involved youth discussed how leaving could be perceived as ‘turning your back’ on the gang. For example, as noted by Allister:

You have your gang members, like people in the gang that almost if you want to get out of it, they almost take that like you are turning your back on them. So, they don't take it too lightly... Maybe fear of leaving I would say [is a barrier to leaving the gang]. Like I said if you would leave it, the gang could take it as you are turning your back on them. And then you could have them turn on you and you would be the primary target...

Other interview participants also discussed how this betrayal can lead to serious repercussions but that ultimately you will be brought back into the fold of membership:

Things go badly if you leave... They would see you as a trader and as a piece of crap that doesn't deserve anything... you could possibly get killed or they'll beat the shit out of you and then you're still in the gang, but you learned your lesson... I can't say that I've never had thoughts about leaving before but it's something that I think of for a couple of minutes and then it's over because I know it's not going to happen. (Michel)

So, say your release date [from the youth justice facility] if they found out you're being released, and you had somebody else picking you up, I think they'd follow the car or something and then they'd stop the car and say he's coming with us. He was with us at one point, he served his time in here and now he's coming back. And there's nothing that person can do about it if they said anything they'd be screwed over... Because you can

change your mind about it but once you get out, they'll track you down. It's like they don't want a loose rodent running around, going back to his normal life. (JG)

This point was also reiterated in one of the focus groups with youth justice practitioners:

There's this misinterpretation, you know, by all of these guys that, you know, leaving is... you're a rat or you're, now you're collaborating with the police so there's this stigma that they don't want to be, you know if I leave, the other gang members are going to see me as a rat and that will, you know I might be wanting to leave because of the fear like you were saying, and the violence. But if I leave, I'm going to have to look over both my shoulders all the time because somebody could be after me and take out the exit. (YJP-FG1)

While this barrier to leaving is touted as a requirement of loyalty to the gang and its members, in practice it appears to be more related to a fear of repercussions from betrayal. These findings appear to reiterate the hostile/active exit method described previously and support past empirical research that has found that individuals may maintain membership with the gang out of a fear of the perceived violence accompanying exit.<sup>135</sup> An interesting caveat here is that the consequences suffered do not lead to desistance but rather are characterized as punishment for a breach in loyalty and that the individual ultimately retains membership in the gang.

This in turn supports one of the oldest and most prominent aspects of gang lore that 'gang membership is for life'. As Decker and Lauritsen (2002, p.61) observed in their study of gang members in St. Louis, Missouri: "Most active gang members strongly expressed the belief that one can never leave the gang, despite having known members who had left". It should be noted that this finding was unique to justice-involved youth without experience in the desistance process and so was based on their perceptions of barriers to leaving the gang. As discussed in Chapter 7 with respect to the hostile/active exit method, this suggests the continued salience of gang myths in influencing general views of gang membership. Pyrooz and Decker (2011) have proposed that individuals leaving the gang are less often harassed by former gang peers than has

---

<sup>135</sup> For examples, see: Bolden (2013); Cassell & Weinrath (2011); and Decker (1996).

been demonstrated by popular myths. Findings from this research project suggest that fear of repercussions from betrayal in the form of threats of violence may have a strong impact on individuals who are contemplating leaving the gang, while these threats may not be a serious concern from the perspective of those who have left the gang.

Alternatively, in contrast to the fear of repercussions from betrayal highlighted above, several youth justice practitioners discussed loyalty to the gang by emphasizing notions of indebtedness to certain gang members who protected individuals throughout their membership:

Loyalty is often something... I do hear, though I can't turn my back on people that have had my back. So, the loyalty even when they're really committed to, there's close friendships that... and it's something we deal with like how are you going to deal with when people are asking you to do shit for them. And it's a real, like I've had people in real turmoil in thinking about how would they tell their buddy that has been beside them and in violent, violent situations that they would not back him the same way now. (YJP-3)

I think that one of the aspects also of being gang involved is again that soldiering up aspect where they feel indebted to the people in the gang that they perhaps have taken the rap or committed acts of violence that they might have been incarcerated or punished for in their defence or for them or on their behalf. So, there's that internal debt system I think that you're always, you're forever indebted to your gang members and gang friends because they've all done something for one another, etcetera. (YJP-2)

The focus here on the relationship criterion, that leaving the gang would upset the reciprocal connection between gang members, is reminiscent of notions of the prototypical family discussed previously where as members you are always there for each other. It is interesting that this barrier was specifically addressed by the youth justice practitioners, and not the justice-involved youth, the latter of whom heavily emphasized the relationship criterion when discussing the purpose of gang membership. This discrepancy may be explained in the context of the disillusionment that the justice-involved youth identified in Chapter 7 with respect to the reliability of their fellow gang members. For those with experience in the desistance process,

experiencing disloyalty within the gang appears to override the expectation of maintaining loyalty to the group. Therefore, loyalty to the gang and its members may only be a barrier to desistance for those who believe that this attribute of membership continues to remain intact.

### **Missing Out on Gang Benefits**

Since gangs are perceived to meet the unfulfilled needs of their members, individuals may be reluctant to leave out of a fear of the loss of these benefits. This view was first identified in the justice-involved youth focus groups, and in one case it was stated that: “Sometimes people decide that they’ve had enough but at the same time they don’t want to leave, they feel that they would miss out on the benefits of the gang” (JIY-FG2). This barrier was also discussed during the interviews with justice-involved youth. For example, when asked about barriers to leaving the gang, Michel said: “Not wanting to lose out on all the benefits of it, the money that you get, if you’re into drugs, the drugs that you can get, the protection that you have”. Three main benefits of gang membership, identified by both those with and without experience in the desistance process, will be addressed in this section: sense of belonging, protection, and luxurious lifestyle.

### **Sense of Belonging**

Several justice-involved youth identified barriers related to the sense of belonging offered by gang membership. As social beings, young people rely on social interactions with others to build a sense of connection. Johnny referred to a human’s inherent need for emotional and social ties: “Like, you know what’s a human’s worst fear... It’s to feel like he’s alone, you know? Like growing up, you run to guys or you’re on your own” while Michel talked about the need for support and for others to care about your existence:

Throughout your life you are always going to have hard times and times where somebody is going to be messing with you, where somebody is not going to be liking you very

much and doing stuff about it, and you need that support, you need to know that there's always somebody there to help you.

Since the gang addresses these needs, it is likely that individuals will maintain membership, especially in cases where they feel there is no alternative to the gang. As noted by AB when talking about one of his fellow gang members: "Yeah, it's pretty much his life. He's got nobody else, his mom hates him. Everybody hates him except for them [the gang]". As discussed previously, faced with the prospect of belonging to nothing and feeling alone, individuals may believe that they must join a gang. The same reasoning can also be applied to barriers to desistance from the gang. Leaving the gang may require rejecting one's friends and peers who provided the sense of belonging that was absent for many individuals prior to joining (Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2014). Gang members are unlikely to desist from gang involvement until and unless a suitable alternative to this support system has been found.

Further, the justice-involved youth often described the gang as a surrogate family when they did not see their own families as meeting their needs for acceptance, nurturance, and belonging (Miller, 2001), and they described gang members as being as close as brothers. So, it is not surprising some of the justice-involved youth discussed the difficulty of leaving the gang specifically in the context of connections to their 'brothers'. As noted by Bob: "...they still consider me family, like a brother. But like I keep in touch with them.... We've been through a lot right, so it's kind of hard to leave from my perspective." However, as noted by FT it was possible for this barrier to be overcome:

Um... well a lot of them it felt like I don't know it felt like they were brothers to me then. It was hard for sure but it wasn't a barrier that stopped me, like no I can't do this. It was more of a barrier like oh I feel bad for leaving all these guys behind.

In one of the youth justice practitioner focus groups the emotional and social ties to gang members were discussed as a barrier to leaving the gang, however in this case they were discussed in relation to intra-family gang involvement:

Well because a lot of those guys that we're talking about, because it's not just a friend, a peer group. It's family. It's family involvement that they, themselves and siblings, they've all been a part of it and so, yeah, it's not just ok move to a different neighbourhood. It's everyone I know is or has been involved in this and so, you know, it kind of boils down to how much of a choice do they have? (YJP-FG2)

These family ties identified by the justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners can hinder the desistance process. As discussed by both groups of participants in Chapter 5, gang members may have grown up with fellow members in the neighbourhood who not only protected them, but who fed them or gave them money and perhaps even saved their lives. In this sense, leaving the gang begins to feel more like walking away from family and that is much easier said than done (Bolden, 2013; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Padilla, 1992; Vigil, 1988).

Enduring ties to the gang were discussed in Chapter 7 in the context of the meaning of desistance. Recent empirical studies have found that one of the most prolific hindrances to desistance is the emotional or social ties that may inhibit an individual's ability to disengage from the gang, change social networks, and transition to a new lifestyle.<sup>136</sup> Based on information from previous research studies and findings from this research project, addressing family-related issues (e.g., absence of parental involvement, lack of positive family support, negative impact of surrogate family) may be one of the most important areas for prevention and intervention.

### Protection

The search for protection as a purpose and motivation for joining the gang has been supported by past research and was previously addressed. The justice-involved youth indicated

---

<sup>136</sup> For examples, see: Decker & Lauritsen (2002); Decker & Pyrooz (2011b); Pyrooz & Decker (2011); and Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb (2014).

that the gang protects against negative interactions with other individuals and groups and they described joining the gang as a response to perceptions and experiences of violence and intimidation. It is not surprising then that losing the benefit of protection was a barrier to leaving the gang. As noted by Montana:

Because as soon as I leave I know that I'm going to be the same way that I used to be and a lot of people that I know and a lot of people that I fought in the past are going to fight me back, you know?... And if I leave, that doesn't mean that I'm scared to fight back the others trying to fight me back. The thing is if it's one on one I'm cool with that but the thing is when it comes to gang, they don't come one on one they come as a group. A group on one, who's going to win – you already know. The group is going to win, you know. So, nobody's going to get jumped by a group, you know?

One of the youth justice practitioners also identified the protection provided by the gang as a barrier to desistance from gang involvement:

As I've said, I haven't run into a lot of the 'you can't leave or I'm going to give you the beats'. I had more instances of 'some people are after me because I did this kind of shit and I need to stay'. So that's a little different nuance though that they've had. They've done some things to other people and if they weren't with the gang they'd be concerned I'm going to catch it if I go to this area or there, what am I going to do when I run into these guys, right so. (YJP-3)

The risk and fear of violence from rival gangs may lead individuals to maintain ties to the gang for protection. Given that rival gangs are not likely to forgive nor to forget prior trespasses simply because an individual has disengaged from gang membership, Decker and Van Winkle (1996, p. 263) suggested that past antagonisms may “have the effect of drawing the ‘former’ member back into the gang or lead the ex-member to depend on the gang for protection”.

### Luxurious Lifestyle

Another benefit identified as creating a barrier for desistance from gang involvement was the glamorous lifestyle it reportedly provided for gang members. As noted by MJ: “Usually



gang members come from luxurious lifestyles, they won't leave because it can't be matched".

Further, John discussed that the amount of money offered by the gang was a motivation to stay:

It's just like the amount of money you can get... it's random though because like the next day, like one day you can make tons of cash and the next day you can make zero, you know? But it's a gamble but most of the time you make tons of cash, like better than a job at the supermarket could ever do, you know?

Given the primacy of the economic-oriented function of the gang for justice-involved youth and the importance of money as an indicator of success, power, and status for young men, relinquishing gang membership would be difficult. Based on the perception of justice-involved youth that legitimate employment opportunities may not be acceptable or are simply unattractive, the appeal to remain in the gang is high. In their work examining theories of desistance within the context of an intersectionality framework, Fader and Traylor (2015) noted that masculinity could be achieved through assuming prosocial roles such as 'working man' but that it could also be a barrier to desistance when young men are unable to meet their own or others' definitions of manhood through law-abiding means. Issues of shame and embarrassment are often related to the lack of access to what is perceived as 'proper masculine work' (Jimenez, 2014).

The youth justice practitioners also recognized the glamorous lifestyle as a barrier to desistance, as highlighted by one interview participant:

Going legit can be a long road in terms of if you've had money, nice cars, you can party, do whatever you want. Um, transitioning over to shitty wages, not a lot of money, maybe no car isn't... it's a tough one to get your head around... A lot of gang stuff is so immediate, it's quick, like you go out tonight and you've got a bunch of green [money] in your pocket, right – stacks these guys call it, right? These guys have that kind of cash in their hands, right, really fast. (YJP-3)

However, the most prevalent barrier to leaving the gang, identified in the three focus groups and half of the interviews with youth justice practitioners, was the discrepancy between the income

that gang-involved youth could make as part of the gang versus what they could make through legitimate employment, particularly through positions in the service industry:

They're [gang-involved youth] very honest and forthright about saying that, you know, they're making a lot of money and that they don't really... they're not really motivated to change the way that they behave based on the fact that this is working for them really well right now. It's... they're getting money, they're getting that respect, they're getting that... the name and the reputation and you know as long as they can avoid a breach on their probation or a criminal charge then they're quite content. (YJP-FG2)

He [gang-involved youth] sees, you know yeah, I can work at McDonald's or a fast food restaurant, they make minimum wage and you know how much that is, versus ok I can make 1,000 bucks in an hour by dealing drugs, you know and it's tax free [laughs]. So, it's all cash. You know it's tough. (YJP-5)

The inability to attain gainful employment rivaling that of their gang-related activities is a major concern for gang members. Limited employability may lead desisters to retain involvement with the gang for monetary gain (Carson & Vecchio, 2015).

The youth justice practitioners also discussed the benefit of the income gained through gang-related activities in the context of providing support to gang members' families:

A lot of times I hear well I need to go back home to help my mom because my mom's a single mom. I'm not going to leave my mom. What about the kids? And I know I need to go back home. I need to go where my mom is. I need to go take care of her, help her. (YJP-FG3)

And he [gang-involved youth] goes, 'listen, I'm supporting my mom, I'm supporting my dad, I'm supporting my brother, making 1,000 bucks a day or more selling drugs, why the hell would I go to a minimum wage job when I'm supporting three people'. He's 17 supporting his whole family. I can't blame the guy for going back and selling drugs because he's got three people who, not only depending on him, but they're telling him why the hell are you leaving the gang? That's how we eat. Don't go to that job, you have to go work with these guys. So, when your mom and dad are telling you don't leave the life because we need to survive on it, you literally have no one there who's giving you the confidence to go in because if you leave then now you're thinking well what's going to happen to my family? Are they going to get hurt? Are they going to be able to eat this week type thing? All because everyone around you is encouraging you to make that money. (YJP-FG2)

I remember visiting the mom and she had a nice leather sofa from a nice expensive store and I'm going ok, 'oh well my son gave it to me' and I'm going ok. So, you know it provides income to the family. Or they may have kids, you know my girlfriend has a baby and it's again providing monetary support. (YJP-5)

Like in the case of loyalty to the gang and its members discussed above, it is interesting that it is the youth justice practitioners who identified economic support for the family as a barrier to desistance given that it was the justice-involved youth who identified needing to support themselves and others as a motivation for joining the gang. These findings reiterate what has been found by other researchers, namely that the motivators of gang onset and gang desistance are distinguishable; they do not necessarily share an underlying motivational impetus (Laub & Sampson, 2001; Uggen & Pilliavin, 1998). While the need to support others may have initially fuelled the justice-involved youths' desire to become gang members, an inability to accomplish this goal through membership may not necessarily act as a motivation for desistance, nor does maintaining this goal always act as a barrier to desistance. Again, this reinforces the highly personal nature of the desistance process that is based on their individual subjective interpretation of their situation at a given time.

### **Limited Opportunities Outside the Gang**

External barriers, such as a lack of alternatives outside the gang, also present challenges to disengaging gang members, particularly the difficulties that many young people face when trying to make new lives for themselves. In the discussion concerning motivations for joining, many justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners indicated that based on individual circumstances and experiences of disadvantage that the gang was the best and only option. Bjørge (1999) suggests that membership may be sustained if individuals perceive there to be no alternative places to go outside the gang. For many of the justice-involved youth from both sub-

groups, the gang is the only world that they know. It is a space that is familiar, that they have learned how to navigate and manage. As noted by John<sup>137</sup>:

Like they stick with it [the gang] because that's the only thing they grew up with, that's the only thing that they did as a teenager... like if there's a new gang I would probably most likely join because it's all that I know how to do... So that was like the motivation to stay... It was something that I knew how to do. Like you know what to do and you know how to act and how to handle it and it was just easy.

Juliano made it clear that from his perspective staying with the gang is not a choice but a necessity: "I don't think they like it at all. It's just you know what I mean? They obviously don't like doing this [gang involvement] but this is the only thing they know to help themselves".

This viewpoint was also shared by the youth justice practitioners. As noted in one of the focus group sessions: "For them [gang-involved youth] it's a comfort zone and it's what they know and it's easier for them to go back to their old ways because that's their, you know, fight or flight sort of scenario for them" (YJP-FG1). In addition, one interview participant stated: "I think a lot of it is guys don't... they aren't able to see the realistic benefits of getting out of the gang because they don't know anything else" (YJP-4). This was further iterated by another youth justice practitioner who indicated that a reluctance to seek out an alternative to the status quo is not unique to gang members, but is largely representative of all human beings:

I also think that unfortunately for a number of them there could be an aspect that they're not really sure what else they could do. I think that they perhaps don't appreciate that there's an alternative for them or that they even are willing to consider... It's easier to stick to what you know than to venture into what you don't know. It's a concept that we all face that you stick to, you live in the same city that you've always lived in because an unfamiliar city is scarier than the one that you live in. I think for these young men it's the same thing, you know it's easier to stick around the same guys because you know what to expect, you know the players, you know where you stand in the pecking order of things

---

<sup>137</sup> It should be noted that John had a unique experience in that he left the gang because it dissolved:

Well when my friend, well the leader I should say, kind of dropped us all and took all our money. We all kind of just said what are we doing, you know he just kind of dropped us all and we all just kind of left like there was no butts about it, you know?

versus to go out on your own and start all over again can be an intimidating process. (YJP-2)

Combined with the perspective that there is no alternative to the gang, several of the justice-involved youth from both sub-groups indicated they believed that their opportunities outside the gang were limited based on a lack of education, limited employment skills, and experience in the criminal justice system. Two interview participants highlighted how these factors could impact the process of desistance:

Some guys can't leave because they have nothing else. Like some guys...like I have my boy, his name is Alex, he has nothing. His mom was a crack head, his dad he doesn't know... he told me he never met his dad in his life. He's not educated and smart. The guy is supposed to be like grade 13, but he hasn't even finished one credit yet. It's like the guy has nothing else but to like... but what I see is the difference between me and Alex is... Alex has nobody... me, my mom used to force me to go to school, you know? Just pick me up you know and drive me to school. Alex's mom doesn't care, there is no one forcing him to go to school, there is nobody telling him that you have to go to school. It's like education is not right there for him, you know? He has to do the best thing he can do, you know?... He doesn't see... what is he going to go back and finish high school? ... He is already like 19 already, you know? What is he going to do? (Johnny)

Sometimes people want to leave but they think 'oh me I'm too dumb, I'm too dumb I can't go to school, I'm not going to adult high school. Fuck that I ain't doing that'. They can't go back to high school, so they have nothing to fall back on, they have no family to fall back on... They have criminal records, they can't get proper jobs, and they don't want to work in no Wal-Mart. (KP)

Further, Costello discussed that he would try to 'go straight', but only for a limited time:

I know that when I get out [of the youth justice facility] I'm going to be off that shit, off the streets for like a couple of months and try to find a job and if that doesn't help then well fuck it, you know?

This last point was reiterated in one of the focus groups with youth justice practitioners:

I had one guy and he was... I'm not sure if he was a little bit older but he just, he just didn't believe anything could work, you know? And I was, you know, helping him get housing and, you know, I was trying to help him find an entry-level job, just all these different things. And he was 'well that's not going to work'. That's not going to work because he tried. He tried and he tried... (YJP-FG1)

The youth justice practitioners identified one final barrier to leaving the gang, returning to the same disadvantaged neighbourhood upon release from the youth justice facility:

I truly believe when they [gang-involved youth] speak to me, they believe they want to change. It's legit when I'm talking to them. And they work hard and they meet me weekly and but like we've all said, they walk out that door [of the youth justice facility] and they go right back to where they were before... (YJP-FG2)

You know returning to the same neighbourhood with the same faces, the same people and the same philosophy, mentality and lack of opportunity perhaps, or perceived lack of opportunity, that sucks them back into returning to what they know. (YJP-2)

Well one of the most challenging parts is that we do work with a large age spectrum where we'll get into a neighbourhood but he's 15 and lives with mom. Well you'd have to convince mom to move and if mom is on subsidized housing well if there's any room to move... it's just not feasible. It's just not there. So, so that's one of the biggest problems. They just keep cycling through the same neighbourhood and they have no opportunity of escape. (YJP-FG3)

But I would say basically that the big thing with gang-involved youth would be where they came from because that's usually what I find, especially those that want to stay out of a gang or get out of a gang is that they're living in an area that's a high gang area. There's a deeper struggle for them to get out. (YJP-5)

As discussed in Chapter 7, one of the motivations for desistance is that gang members aspire to lead a conventional life, particularly to obtain legitimate employment, to live independently, and to have a family. However, as discussed in Chapter 3 in the context of interlinked life-course trajectories, participation in the gang can limit the possibilities and opportunities for alternative means of social participation leading to increasingly marginalized lives that constrain an individual's capacity to live differently (Weaver & Weaver, 2013). The justice-involved youth are cognizant that their membership in the gang may have limited their ability to acquire education and technical skills for the workforce, thereby limiting their options for employment if they decide to leave the gang (Moloney et al., 2009). Their prospects lie in what Ritter and Anker (2002) term 'McJobs', unstable low-paying service sector occupations

that promise little in the way of career development or advancement. When combined with other forms of social marginalization, such as a lack of meaningful ties with others, the stigma of being in conflict with the law, and living in a disadvantaged area, these individuals are left with a sense of exclusion and pessimism about the future (Bania, 2009; Chettleburgh, 2007; Davies & Tanner, 2003). For them initiating, or even imagining, the process of desistance can be seen as much more difficult. Further, perceptions of limited opportunities may lead to perceiving the benefits of staying in the gang as outweighing the consequences of being a member.

Wanting to leave the gang does not necessarily mean that deficits in the social structural conditions which initially influenced the decision to join have been remedied. As discussed previously, while gang members come from a variety of ethnic, demographic, and socio-economic backgrounds, most of them tend to come from groups and areas that suffer from the greatest levels of economic inequality, disadvantage, and social disorganization (Chettleburgh, 2003; CISC, 2006; Wortley & Tanner, 2004). As demonstrated by the participants in this research project, a lack of educational achievement, lack of legitimate employment opportunities, neighbourhood isolation and segregation, conditions of poverty, and feelings of injustice are not immediately resolved simply because someone decides to leave the gang (Bubolz, 2014). As noted by two youth justice practitioners, while these young people are willing to leave the gang, they may not be able:

Ah, well you know based on my experience, everyone says that they want out, they're going to come out [of the youth justice facility] and they're going to do better, they're going to just chill and avoid conflicts with the law and they want to abide by their probation. So, I think that's an inherent want they truly have. Where they fail at that is they're easily persuaded just like anybody would be... you know it's easy for an alcoholic to fall back on, to alcohol if you live in that environment. (YJP-1)

I think unfortunately now a lot of the young men that we get in here [youth justice facility] are relatively... they have a very simplistic view of how they stop the gang lifestyle... Unfortunately, it's been part of what they've done for the last five to six years,

so it doesn't, it's not that simple because they don't have any alternative coping strategies or means of keeping their time busy or supporting themselves or supporting sometimes their family, they quickly fall back into what they know. (YJP-2)

In the context of the life-course perspective, while agency is an important component in the change process, the constraining effects of social structure must also be acknowledged (King, 2013). These social facts, over which the individual does not have control and cannot escape, shape opportunities for deviant and conventional roles (Lindegaard & Jacques, 2014). The process of desistance should therefore be considered in the context of the social arrangements, social relations, and social practices that influence the lives of gang members and how these factors may affect the distribution of opportunities afforded to those seeking to leave the gang. The latter should be considered in the future development of desistance strategies.

### **The Lingering Gang Label**

The 'de-labelling' process<sup>138</sup> assumes that an additional barrier to desistance is the stigmatization, segregation, and exclusion that individuals face because of being labelled a gang member; and this negatively impacts their ability to live outside of the gang. Continued public perceptions of the individual as a gang member and the stigma attached to former gang membership may limit opportunities as well as an individual's ability to leave the gang. The justice-involved youth from both sub-groups and the youth justice practitioners identified the lingering gang label as a barrier to desistance. As noted in one of the focus groups with justice-involved youth: "There are people that may not believe that they [gang members] want to change" (JIY-FG1). This was further explained by one of the youth justice practitioners:

---

<sup>138</sup> Drawing on the symbolic interactionist notion of the 'looking-glass self', where a stigmatized individual will come to view himself based on what he believes other people think he is (Cooley, 1902; see also Lemert, 1951), desistance may be best facilitated when the desisting person's change in behaviour is recognized by others and reflected back to him in a 'de-labelling' process. This adds an additional layer to the desistance process, where an individual not only accepts conventional society but also that conventional society must accept the individual as well (Meisenhelder, 1982).



Again, that could be something even more particular for these young men [justice-involved youth], it can be particularly difficult to change peer groups because now they have a reputation of being gang involved, violent, having served time, etcetera. They're again... could be not welcome or wanted in certain social environments or social settings or social groups because well they've been labelled that way. So that could be one of their restricting factors. (YJP-2)

Previous research has demonstrated how the gang member identity often remains fixed in the public's perception well after the decision to leave the gang has been made and acted on.<sup>139</sup>

The participants in this research project also identified various groups who may continue to see individuals as gang involved, and the impacts of this label. Some of the justice-involved youth, specifically those with experience in the desistance process, indicated that other gang members continued to see them as gang involved. This may have minor consequences as noted by Matt: "You know some guys still call me by my nickname, but I repeatedly said to not call me that, so sometimes people don't get the memo I would say". It can also create more severe consequences as discussed by FT:

Well the place I live now, that's what everyone sees me as. Like I don't know... Well it still affects me now but only by other gang members... Ok well I live there and every single person, like I don't want to say their names but like his entire gang hates me and there's other ones that hate me because I was doing what they do which is selling drugs but I was doing it better, right because I did it the smart way and everything like that. But it still affects me now though because they all still hate me for sure and I don't even do any of this stuff anymore... Yeah and then like it comes to the point now where if I'm walking alone and they drive by in the car well then, I'm fucked.

Other justice-involved youth indicated that the gang label impacted their relationships with family. As noted by John: "Even going back to family it's hard because like they don't accept you as a family member anymore, they just see you as a like a complete straight-up thief". As indicated by AB, it's also having an impact on the way they are treated by members of their community: "Like people will still walk down the street and call me fake Blood and oh

---

<sup>139</sup> For examples, see: Decker & Lauritsen (2002); Decker & Pyrooz (2011a); Decker, Pyrooz, Sweeten, & Moule (2014); Padilla (1992); and Peterson (2012).

gangster... Like they'll drive down the road and scream things, fake Blood, shit like that".

Michel, one of the justice-involved youth without experience in the desistance process, provided his perspective:

I think it would take them [the general public] a long, long time to actually get over the fact because you were in a gang, even if you weren't there for very long, you were still in a gang and according to them you could still possibly be part of that gang... They see me as something dirty or something that shouldn't be allowed to live.

Finally, the lingering gang label can affect an individual's relationship with the police. Johnny discussed how the latter continue to assume his gang involvement despite having left the gang:

Even to this day, I get in trouble; I'm never calling a cop, ever... Like you call and you try to act like, yo I need help, I need help. They come here and are like 'yo ok what is this, was that you?' You know trying to make you look like the bad guy, you know? Like didn't I call you guys?

In particular, this finding related to negative interactions with the police is supported by the work of Pyrooz and Decker (2011) which found that sustained identification as a gang member can lead to continued questioning and harassment by police officers. Further, being 'marked' as a gang member may have more enduring consequences including being permanently listed in police database(s) of gang members, resulting in frequent apprehension and arrest by virtue of mere suspicion of continued gang membership (Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Terry & Abrams, 2017).

The stigma of former gang membership may also impact an individual's ability to (re)engage with prosocial institutions. This was discussed particularly in the context of education and employment opportunities. Allister provided his perspective on how the gang label could impact future interactions with these institutions:

Well if somebody was trying to get out of it and they're already labelled as a gang member and stuff, it's hard to get out of it... Like say if you came in and you were labelled as a gang member and stuff, the teacher would be watching you very closely,

maybe doing locker searches on you just for no reason and if something happened, they wouldn't really let you off at all, they wouldn't really give you a warning right away, they would try to punish you or call the police or something to try and deal with it because they think they need to go to the extreme and that you don't really deserve any breaks even if they don't even know you... The same with employment, like if you were late for your shift or something, the boss would like be a lot more like he wouldn't be as forgiving...

Bob discussed the difficulty that he had in returning to school with respect to displaying 'colours' and how this also impacted him in the community:

Well the only school in Ottawa that would accept me was [inaudible segment] like I couldn't even get into Rideau High School... And then that school for sure... I would show up in a red jacket and they'd be like 'well you're wearing colours you have to leave and go home'... it's winter-time and this is the only jacket that I got and you're telling me that I'm wearing colours... so I mean just stuff like that for sure... like if I walk into a store and I don't really steal from stores like I'll actually go to buy stuff and you notice they will be following you around, they will be looking at you... any place you go you always get those looks...

John identified a similar issue with showing gang insignia and how this could possibly affect employment:

Well if you walked into a store with colours and tattoos all over your body, people are going to judge you right away, right?... some people won't even look at you. In society, it's not easy to get a job looking like that... It might continue, like you have to hide the tattoos, you might have to not represent in order to get a job...

As discussed previously, the inability to attain meaningful employment is a major concern for gang members. This may be especially true for desisters who have visible identifiers (e.g., gang tattoos) and who are still perceived to maintain a style of dress commonly associated with gang membership (e.g., displaying colours) (Carson & Vecchio, 2015).

The youth justice practitioners also reiterated the role of the gang label and stigma of previous gang membership in returning to school and gaining employment:

And the ones that are just – that you get info that they are on the peripheral, could be wannabes, associates, or whatever, I find those are hard too because sometimes they are so identified [as gang members] then all you focus on is the fact that they are identified

and it makes it hard to get them into school because then the schools are so concerned because the SROs [school resource officers] are in school. They kind of right away label the kid and it makes it difficult then to try to get past whether it's the label or, you know, the fact that they don't want them at their school or don't want them in that program (YJP-FG3)

I had a kid who told me, he goes, 'I just want to be able to go to school', he goes, 'and I just, I don't want nobody coming up to me going oh, do you have a five piece, do you have this? I just want to be able to go to school. I don't want to, you know'. So, he had looked into some alternatives where he could maybe go out of, out of bounds school, something like that because he just didn't want to go to a school where he was known as that, like that was his label. (YJP-FG1)

I think it can have, and that's why we have to be cautious of it, because if a youth is seen as gang affiliated it can impact them... they try to get a job they often are not given an opportunity because of suspicion of them being in a gang. (YJP-5)

The lingering gang label is an important barrier to desistance from gang involvement, particularly in the context of labelling theory. Braithwaite (1989) argues that when society's reaction to deviants is to stigmatize, segregate, and exclude, such individuals are left with limited opportunity for achieving self-respect and affiliation in mainstream society, but they may be welcomed among subcultural groups of like-minded individuals or similarly stigmatized outcasts. In the same vein, continuing to be labelled as a gang member and being stigmatized based on former gang membership following a decision to exit the gang may serve to reinforce gang values, thus pulling the individual back into the gang and gang activities and in some cases propelling them deeper into the gang subculture.<sup>140</sup>

It is one thing for an individual to declare that he has left a lifestyle or quit membership in a group, but quite another for others to accept this decision. In her study of group leaving, Ebaugh (1988) identifies the challenges faced by individuals who become an 'ex' member of the group. Whether the group was an order of nuns, convicts, alcoholics, or transsexuals, many

---

<sup>140</sup> For examples, see: Becker (1963); Bernburg et al. (2006); Bubolz (2014); and Caspi et al. (1989).

individuals found that members of their former group and the general public defined them and treated them as if they were still members of that group. Because self-perceptions influence our way of behaving and are shaped by interactions with others, finding a way to establish a new identity as a non-gang member and have it accepted by others is important to the process of desistance (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011b). This is not to say that formal institutions (e.g., law enforcement, education, employment) do not play a role in helping individuals leave the gang; rather as demonstrated above, it suggests that many institutions are currently ill-suited for meaningfully enhancing the dynamics of disengagement (Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule, 2014). This is an area to be addressed in the development of future intervention strategies and initiatives to promote desistance from the gang.

## **Conclusion**

The findings from this chapter add to the empirical work on the topic of barriers to desistance, further demonstrating that there are significant challenges involved in leaving the gang and highlighting that the process of leaving is often more difficult than joining. In this research project, the internal barriers to desistance identified included: (1) the relative importance placed on the notion of loyalty to the gang and the perceived consequences following a breach of this value; and (2) not wanting to lose out on the perceived benefits of gang membership (e.g., sense of belonging, protection, luxurious lifestyle). The external barriers identified included: (1) perceptions of limited opportunities available outside the gang, particularly for those with limited education and job experience, and living in environments not conducive to change; and (2) the lingering gang label where past behaviour and activities cause others to continue to treat individuals as if they were still gang members. While not as pronounced as they were in Chapter 7, some discrepancies were observed in the findings in this

chapter between justice-involved youth with and without experience in the desistance process. Again, this helps to demonstrate that the perpetuation of gang myths and sensationalized claims are only dismissed once individuals begin to navigate the desistance process. Further, perspectives on barriers to desistance are highly personal and based on subjective interpretations of the current situation. For a summary of the main findings, and discrepancies between perspectives on the barriers to leaving the gang, see *Table 5* at the end of this chapter.

Overall, the barriers to desistance identified are all great inducements to remain in the gang (Cassell & Weinrath, 2011). There is little incentive and a lot of uncertainty associated with the desistance process. Under the conditions described throughout this chapter, we can see why gang members may decide that leaving the gang is not worth the effort. Without offering viable alternatives to the gang and the perceived benefits that it provides; gang members may feel a sense of hopelessness in their ability to move toward a more conventional life. This hopelessness may undermine their motivation to leave the gang leading to helplessness and apathy for many (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). Without hope, sustained desistance from the gang becomes less probable. Perceptions of failure, negative events, and a lack of recognition from others that an individual has changed may draw the gang member back into the gang, returning them to the comfort of a known lifestyle (Bolden, 2013). These significant barriers to desistance should be considered when devising programming to facilitate gang desistance for justice-involved youth. We need to do more for those who are trying to leave the gang; not just helping them to ‘go straight’ but rather helping them to ‘go somewhere new’ (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016).

### **A Final Note on the Desistance Process**

The desistance process is often described as a ‘teeter-totter’ as individuals move back and forth between gang membership and a non-gang life (Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule, 2014). Pyrooz,

Decker, and Webb (2014, p.18) suggest that leaving the gang is a “complex process replete with pushes and pulls to conformity and back to the gang”. The pathways to desistance are rarely linear and are not unidirectional; they are better described as dynamic and uncertain and happen in response to a given situation (Maruna, 2001). Cassell and Weinrath (2011) note that the lengthy periods of contemplation coupled with the in-and-out pattern of gang membership underscores the transitional nature desistance can take on. It is a fluid process, and individuals have varying degrees and types of association with the gang over time (Esbensen et al., 2001; Klein, 2012; Maxson, 1998).

In Chapter 3, I presented a conceptual model of the process of desistance from gang involvement that demonstrated a complex interrelationship exists between a variety of factors in the desistance process, and that these factors operate through a dynamic, interactive process (Bottoms et al., 2004; Le Blanc, 2004). Support for this model was reflected in the findings from this research project which demonstrated that a combination of motivations acted in concert with one another to initiate the de-identification and disengagement process. As discussed previously, Giordano and colleagues (2002) emphasized that cognitive shifts or transformations are essential to the process of desistance. When individuals experience a crystallization of discontent, in this case sparked by consequences of gang involvement, disillusionment with gang life, and feelings of maturity, a conscious decision to leave the gang is made. This is coupled with hooks for change which present more appealing alternatives to gang life which can come in the form of life transitions in the areas of education, employment, romantic relationships, and/or parenthood. The crystallization of discontent does not necessarily mean that the individual will leave the gang. It does, however, typically initiate some serious reconsideration. Individuals begin to assess the

options, and many actively begin searching for alternatives to the gang lifestyle (Baumeister, 1991; Carson & Vecchio, 2015).

One caveat to this conceptual model relates to the role of involvement in the youth justice system in the process of desistance from gang involvement. Incarceration has been identified both as an internal motivation for leaving the gang and as an external turning point for desistance. As demonstrated in Chapter 7, previous and current experiences of confinement in youth justice facilities and avoiding future contact with the adult criminal justice system were noted by several justice-involved youth as a motivation for desisting from gang involvement. However, the perception of incarceration as a life-changing event which encourages a cognitive shift or transformation, and the ability of that incarceration experience to act as a turning point leading to the alteration of a given life-course trajectory, may be quite different. To gain additional clarity on the issue, the context of incarceration, and the larger role of the youth justice system in the process of desistance are further explored in Chapter 9.

While prior research has supported the idea that internal motivation precedes desistance (LeBel et al., 2008; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009), the latter is enacted within the constraints of one's social environment. A range of internal and external factors in the life course (relations, structures, contexts), some of which are beyond the control of the individual, may present barriers to the process of desistance (Farrall & Bowling, 1999). These barriers may affect an individual's potential to succeed in making the transition into the prosocial world (Farrall et al., 2010). Therefore, to support their cognitive transformations, individuals need a variety of social supports and legitimate opportunities (e.g., education, employment, housing) to revive their hope for change and to assist them in engaging in prosocial lives. When unaddressed, these social and structural components are frequently cited as reasons why individuals may return to their gang



lifestyles (Harris, 2011). To desist from the gang requires commitment coupled with adequate resources and sustainable alternatives. This emphasizes the interplay between agency and structure (Moloney et al., 2009). In sum, desistance from gang involvement is not only about personal determination (i.e., being willing to leave the gang) but as illustrated throughout this chapter, is also about the environment individuals are situated within and the social and structural supports and opportunities they are (or are not) provided (i.e., being able to leave the gang).

The insights gained throughout this and the previous chapter on the various factors involved in leaving the gang, and the nuances of the desistance process as perceived and experienced from the perspectives of justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners have helped to set the stage for the following two chapters. Not only can this knowledge help to inform the future development of prevention, intervention, and desistance strategies for those at-risk of and involved in gangs, which is the topic of Chapter 10, but it can also help to explain varying perspectives on the role that the youth justice system does and should play in the process of desistance, which is the subject of the next and final findings chapter.

Table 5. Summary of Perspectives on the Gang Desistance Process

Justice-Involved Youth	Youth Justice Practitioners
<i>What Does It Mean to 'Leave' the Gang?</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For some participants without experience in the desistance process, leaving the gang means a complete cessation from gang members and activities, often through relocation ('knifing off').</li> <li>• For most participants, from both sub-groups<sup>141</sup>, leaving means a gradual departure from the gang. For this group, there is usually a cessation of criminal activities, although connections to members may remain. Particularly for those with experience in the desistance process, criminal activities may continue independent of the gang.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• While they did not place a substantial emphasis on conceptualizations of leaving, overall participants seemed to support the more gradual process of desistance from gang involvement.</li> </ul>
<i>How Does One Go About Leaving the Gang?</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Only three participants characterized the process of leaving as hostile/active, none of whom indicated having previous desistance experience. Thus, perspectives are based on perceptions and/or expectations related to methods of leaving the gang.</li> <li>• The remaining participants, from both sub-groups, discussed gang leaving as non-hostile/passive, particularly when exiting for a 'legitimate' reason: (re)establishing connections with prosocial institutions and engaging in prosocial activities.</li> <li>• Many participants, from both sub-groups, indicated that leaving the gang is an autonomous decision.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was a lack of consensus among participants with respect to the hostile/active exit process. Several individuals believed that level of engagement and embeddedness in the gang may affect the method of desistance.</li> <li>• Several participants provided support for the non-hostile/passive desistance process and discussed the importance of (re)engagement with prosocial institutions.</li> <li>• Several participants indicated that leaving the gang is an autonomous decision, however, a role for 'others' in the decision-making process was also identified (positive influences).</li> </ul>
<i>What Are the Motivations for Leaving the Gang?</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants indicated a range of motivations associated with violence: own experience with violence, witnessing violence, and potential for future instances of violence. Some indicated the need for an accumulation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants focused primarily on vicarious victimization experiences as motivators for desistance. Others discussed specific traumatic events as reasons for leaving the gang.</li> <li>• One participant noted the importance of</li> </ul>

<sup>141</sup> Here 'both sub-groups' refers to justice-involved youth with and without experience in the desistance process.

<p>of a variety of experiences, while others suggested only one specific event was necessary. Experiences of violence may only be a temporary motivator.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants confined in youth justice facilities described this as an abrupt motivator or as a more gradual realization related to desistance. Avoiding contact with the adult criminal justice system was also noted by several participants as a motivating factor.</li> <li>• Participants indicated disillusionment with the gang as a motivator for desistance; particularly discrepancies related to the glamorized lifestyle, the perpetration of violence, and various forms of ‘reliability’ associated with the gang.</li> <li>• Participants indicated that getting on with ‘real life’ was also a motivation for leaving the gang (post-secondary education, employment, parenthood) as was establishing ties to prosocial others (family members).</li> </ul>	<p>the age of 18 as a pivotal turning point as it relates to involvement in the criminal justice system as a motivator for desistance.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• While they did not place a substantial emphasis on this motivating factor, participants discussed disillusionment with the gang; particularly discrepancies related to the glamorized lifestyle, the perpetration of violence, and unwavering support from the gang and its members.</li> <li>• Participants indicated that age-graded responsibilities (e.g., getting a job, getting married, having a child), the benefits of a more conventional lifestyle, and wanting to live up to the expectations of others were motivators for leaving the gang. However, two individuals indicated that this is not true of all gang members; some maintain involvement into the adult years.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants from both groups identified the interaction and accumulation of multiple ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors as motivation for leaving the gang.</li> </ul>	
<p><i>What Are the Barriers to Leaving the Gang?</i></p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants without experience in the desistance process identified not wanting to breach loyalty or to ‘turn your back’ on the gang (important membership criteria) as barriers to leaving the gang. They identified a fear of repercussions from the gang for this betrayal.</li> <li>• Participants from both sub-groups identified a fear of loss of gang benefits as a barrier to leaving the gang. These included sense of belonging (need for emotional/social ties and support, often provided by surrogate family of ‘brothers’), protection (against experiences of violence and intimidation), and the glamorous lifestyle (amount of money offered by the gang in comparison to legitimate employment opportunities).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• While participants identified a fear of repercussions from the gang for a betrayal of loyalty as a barrier, there was more focus on notions of indebtedness to other gang members. Leaving the gang upsets the assumed reciprocal connection between gang members.</li> <li>• Participants identified a fear of loss of gang benefits as a barrier to leaving the gang. These included sense of belonging (intra-familial gang involvement), protection, and the glamorous lifestyle (discrepancy between income made through gang activities versus legitimate employment in the service industry, need to provide support to family members).</li> <li>• Participants identified limited opportunities outside the gang as a barrier to desistance; this is based on familiarity</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants from both sub-groups highlighted limited opportunities outside the gang as a barrier to desistance; this is based on familiarity and comfort with the gang lifestyle (only world that they know), the lack of education and employment skills, and experience in the youth justice system.</li> <li>• Participants from both sub-groups identified the lingering gang label as a barrier to desistance; others continue to see them as gang involved which has both minor and major consequences. The stigma of former gang membership can impact an individual's ability to (re)engage with prosocial institutions (education, employment opportunities) and is affected by the presence of gang symbols (colours, tattoos).</li> </ul>	<p>and comfort with the gang lifestyle (only world that they know) and returning to the same disadvantaged neighbourhood upon release from the youth justice facility.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants identified the lingering gang label as a barrier to desistance. The stigma of previous gang membership can impact an individual's ability to return to school and gain employment.</li> </ul>
--	--

## **CHAPTER 9**

### **‘ON THE INSIDE’: THE ROLE OF THE YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEM**

As discussed in Chapter 7, more than half of the justice-involved youth cited ‘experience in the youth justice system’ as a motivation for leaving the gang. Some scholars believe that desistance may be sparked by an external shock or sanctioning experience such as incarceration and its resulting transformative abilities that are generated either by deterrence or rehabilitation.<sup>142</sup> Given these findings, the role of the youth justice system deserves further examination. This chapter seeks to provide an in-depth description of how involvement in the youth justice system is understood and to examine how this experience influences motivations and actions to leave the gang. The goal is to produce a fuller understanding of desistance from gang involvement among justice-involved youth. In turn, assessing the effects of the youth justice system in assisting desistance from gang involvement (or not) can provide information to help improve youth justice policy and practice.

All participants in this research project were asked about their perspectives on the role of the youth justice system in the process of desistance. Specifically, they were asked to discuss their perceptions on the experience of confinement in a youth justice facility and the role that youth justice practitioners play in supporting desistance from gang involvement. Like in the previous three chapters, analysis of the focus group and individual interview sessions with justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners demonstrated a substantial overlap in the themes identified related to the youth justice system itself as well as the experience of confinement in a youth justice facility. As such, in the first part of this chapter the findings from

---

<sup>142</sup> For examples, see: Aresti et al. (2010); Ashkar & Kenny (2008); Barry (2006); Farrall & Calverley (2006); Giordano et al. (2002); and Mulvey et al. (2004).

the two groups have been combined and are presented thematically below.<sup>143</sup> However, with respect to the role of youth justice practitioners in the desistance process, divergent perspectives were provided by the two groups and so the findings from the justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners are presented separately in the second part of this chapter. It should be noted that unlike the two previous chapters that examined the desistance process, in this chapter no differences were observed between the perspectives of justice-involved youth with and without experience in the desistance process. The findings from these two sub-groups have been combined and presented together.

This chapter begins with a discussion of perspectives on the differences between the youth and adult criminal justice systems. From there, two main themes are discussed in relation to the effects of the youth justice system on leaving the gang: whether experience in the youth justice facility is seen as ‘marking time’ or as a ‘turning point’ in the life course; and the type and extent of the role that youth justice practitioners play in the desistance process. Each of these themes is discussed in turn.

### **The Youth Justice System as Distinct from the Adult Criminal Justice System**

The justification for distinct youth and adult criminal justice systems is historically based, in part, on assumptions of fundamental differences between young people and adults with respect to the principle of responsibility. The validity of these assumptions has been supported by empirical research demonstrating the developmental differences between these two groups in decision-making processes (Hartley & Somerville, 2015; Reyna & Farley, 2006). The gap between cognitive decision-making (e.g., inductive reasoning, deductive reasoning, identifying risks and benefits of a behaviour) and psychosocial factors (e.g., an individual’s psychological,

---

<sup>143</sup> Within each theme, the order in which the findings are presented is based on the flow of information for ease of understanding and is not an indication of the preference of one perspective over another.

emotional and social capacity) in young people increases the likelihood of participation in risk-taking behaviours such as criminal activities and reinforces the long-standing legal principle of diminished responsibility for young offenders (Corrado & Mathesius, 2014).<sup>144</sup>

Further, we have come to expect a great deal from the youth justice system. On one hand, the system is tasked with keeping communities safe, using theories and approaches that are common to the adult criminal justice system. At the same time, the youth justice system is expected to consider the best interests of the young person and to realize the human potential of young offenders (Mulvey et al., 2004). For example, section 38(1) of the *YCJA* states: “[T]he purpose of sentencing ... is to hold a young person accountable for an offence through the imposition of just sanctions that have meaningful consequences for the young person and that promote his or her rehabilitation and reintegration”.

As discussed in Chapter 7, the participants in this research project highlighted a clear demarcation between the youth and adult criminal justice systems. In addition to identifying a breaking point between adolescence and adulthood, at which point the ability to make changes in your life is perceived to be more difficult, the justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners identified a clear distinction in the way individuals are treated in youth justice facilities compared to adult correctional facilities. The acknowledged differences largely reflected differing emphasis on various sentencing principles in the two criminal justice systems; deterrence in the adult system and rehabilitation and reintegration in the youth system.

From the perspective of several justice-involved youth, in comparison to adult correctional facilities, youth justice facilities are ‘soft’, not considered ‘real jail’, and offer youth

---

<sup>144</sup>According to Corrado and Mathesius (2014, p. 146): “While cognitive abilities may be fully developed, on average, by mid-adolescence, psychosocial abilities continue to develop throughout adolescence and even into the early adult years. In effect, age-based psychosocial deficits are constraints in the utilization of key cognitive skills associated with avoiding risk-taking and potentially both self-harming and victimizing behavior such as serious criminality”.

justice clients better treatment by youth justice staff members. Three interview participants highlighted the distinctions between youth justice facilities and adult correctional facilities:

Yeah, like I knew I was going to have to do time and stuff but I think here [youth justice facility] it just separates you from it all and like you have time to think about it and think about do you really want to go on to Innes [adult correctional facility] because I've seen it in my friends and that and Innes is not fun at all, the same with super maxes like Lindsay [adult correctional facility] and Kingston [adult correctional facility] and that, they are not fun at all. Like everyone says youth jail is kind of like a bit of a joke, like not a joke but it's not as harsh at all as real jail. (Allister)

I've been here [youth justice facility], I could have done five years [in the adult criminal justice system], and I'm here for four months. I have 11 days left. This place is like boarding school, this place is soft and I'm chilling here, I'm getting fed, I have no problems here, you know? I'm going to the gym, I'm getting what I need, the help.... I was talking to one of my boys the other day at Innes [adult correctional facility] and he's like I'm fasting right now because like something about they're not getting rec [recreation] time, I don't know... It's just crazy and they're all fasting, right now, you know... just telling you it's not good... Here [youth justice facility], it's not too bad, you know? I feel safe here, I feel 100 per cent safe here. I get a meal everyday, I know there's a meal. I go to school, I get to watch TV, you know? (Johnny)

That's the big difference, that's the really big difference. You go to Innes [adult correctional facility] or something like that, Lindsay [adult correctional facility] even the Roy [youth justice facility] for example, that's the youth centre, that's like Innes for youth. In these places, like look over there what does that look like to you [points to outdoor recreation space]? ... it doesn't look like jail. They make it over here, they sell to you that it's kind of fun, it looks fun, there's baseball diamonds, that looks fun. Lindsay, Innes, the Roy, Brookside [youth justice facility], those are actual jails. You go there the first day, if you don't get into a fight people are going to pick on you, call you their bitch for your whole stay. So, they kind of push you to do those things. The same with like... guards and stuff like that, COs [correctional officers] and stuff like that they won't treat you with the same respect that these people will. These people will treat you like a human being. There they're not calling you by your name, they're not even calling you by your last name, they're calling you by your cell number or your barcode or whatever the hell they do over there... It's a different thing; it's a totally different thing. It's not like this at all. (KP)

The youth justice practitioners also referred to the differences between the two systems. In an interview, one of the youth justice practitioners discussed the discretion and flexibility that is allowed under provisions of the *YCJA* to address 'lapses in judgment' using alternatives to



enforcement. For example, not automatically breaching a justice-involved youth on a probation order for an administrative infraction if he is making incremental positive progress in the community (YJP-5). Another interview participant referred to the differences in services and supports offered in youth justice facilities in comparison to adult correctional facilities:

So now it's convincing them [justice-involved youth], not convincing them, but working with them to make use of services properly in the youth [justice] system because there are no services in the adult [criminal justice system]. And I say that openly to guys. Youth custody is not a big punishment; it's a service that unfortunately has to be shoved down your throat at the beginning because you're hurting people out there [in the community]. (YJP-4)

The participants in this research project highlighted the deterrent effect of the adult criminal justice system and its potential as a motivator to 'turn your life around' by discussing avoiding contact with it as a reason for leaving the gang as well as by identifying the differences between youth justice facilities and adult correctional facilities. Given the participants' initial portrayal of youth justice facilities as more rehabilitation-oriented and youth justice practitioners as more supportive than those in the adult criminal justice system, the argument can be made that involvement in the youth justice system may likely be perceived positively, and as playing a role in the process of desistance from gang involvement. The veracity of this argument will be examined throughout the remainder of this chapter.

It should be noted that other demarcations were also identified within the youth justice system itself. The youth justice practitioners discussed the distinction between being in a youth justice facility for pre-trial detention versus post-trial open or secure custody as it relates to the services and supports that are available to justice-involved youth. As highlighted above by KP, several justice-involved youth identified the distinction between youth justice facilities operated by the YSB – Youth Justice Services and other youth justice facilities in the province of Ontario (e.g., the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre, Brookside Youth Centre). Both issues are discussed in

later sections of this chapter. The first is explicitly addressed in the context of barriers to working with justice-involved youth that stem from the structure of the youth justice system. The second is implicitly addressed in the context of the youth justice practitioners' approach to working with gang-involved youth justice clients.<sup>145</sup>

### **Experience in the Youth Justice Facility – ‘Marking Time’ or ‘Turning Point’**

For the justice-involved youth, experience in a youth justice facility had a variable impact on their lives and was dependent on the individual's interpretation of the situation. As noted in a focus group with justice-involved youth:

The way I see it, you come into a [youth justice] facility like this and you're either going to re-offend and come back soon after you leave or you're going to change your life, you know get a job, do school, stuff like that. (JIY-FG2)

As was identified in Chapter 2, there are competing perspectives on the nature of the impact that incarceration has in the lives of justice-involved youth; it has been shown to have both negative effects on future life outcomes and positive effects in relation to the process of desistance. Some justice-involved youth indicated that confinement in a youth justice facility can produce both outcomes depending on the individual. For example, as noted by John:

It [incarceration] can change you or it can make you worse and it depends on the person. Like the people in there can make you worse or they can encourage gang members and joining a gang and selling and all that stuff or the staff or the counsellors there can help you. It's just a big scramble, you know? You don't know what to do, should I go back or should I get my shit together, you know?

---

<sup>145</sup> In the province of Ontario, youth justice facilities are either operated directly by the MCYS or through transfer-payment agreements with community-based agencies such as the YSB. While beyond the scope of this research project, future research studies could investigate similarities and differences between the policies and practices of these two types of youth justice facilities and the implications for the role of the youth justice system in desistance from crime in general and desistance from gang involvement in particular.

An individual's attitude toward their experience in the youth justice facility, based on their overall motivation to change their life (or not), was identified as a key distinction in the perspectives provided. As Juliano discussed in detail:

It depends how you think about it right? So, if your attitude is like I'm not going to change, I'm going to do the same then you're obviously going to have that mentality that you're going to stay in the [youth justice] system. So, if you're planning on... like if this place taught you some different skills, like life skills, you might be able to come out and try to find a better path to live... They [youth justice practitioners] could give you some advice and some thoughts about it, so definitely it could help you to a certain degree. So, trying to do that is actually a good thing like trying to give them a better path, like getting them a job and getting their life straight on the road. But this person, you know what I mean doesn't want it then you know what I mean? If this person has the mentality to just come in here [youth justice facility] and is like I'm only here for a little bit and then I'm going back to my cell then they are going to act like they want the help but they are just trying to play the game so that they can go on with their life.

#### Negative Interpretation of Confinement in a Youth Justice Facility

A few of the justice-involved youth believed that being in a youth justice facility had no impact on desistance from gang involvement, they were just 'marking time' until their release:

Coming here [youth justice facility] for us is a pit stop nobody thinks of it as anything else. It's not like we want to be here. We are court sanctioned and forced to be here. Nobody wants to be here. (KP)

Sometimes you're alone in a box [room] every night thinking about how you're a real nigger here about how you're holding it down, but some niggers try to beef you and shit, while you're just here [youth justice facility] to do your time and get the fuck out of here, you know? (Costello)

Further, Bob discussed how in addition to not influencing him to leave the gang, confinement in a youth justice facility served to increase his status as a gang member:

This place [youth justice facility] doesn't really scare kids away from doing gang activities. It's like a group home pretty much and I've been in those 11 years. It sucks, no doubt but the first time I came here I was planning on going right back in. If anything, it made me more cocky because I would have time on my belt or whatever, I guess.

Several justice-involved youth identified the negative impact that their involvement in the youth justice system had on their lives. AB, Costello, and Montana talked about how being in the youth justice facility made them mad and that they ‘fucking hated it’. Two interview participants identified consequences of their time spent in youth justice facilities:

I lost everything. I got a house, I got a cat, I got a pet rat, I got a girlfriend, I got all of this nice stuff, all of it and now I’m going to lose it if I stay here [youth justice facility] and don’t get released Tuesday... I’ve been arrested; I’ve done six months. Three months got out for three weeks, went back in for three months... At the end of the day I’m going to be on the streets. (AB)

I was going to Algonquin [college] too at the time to do a credit program and I messed that up coming here [youth justice facility]. I failed. I had two classes left, and I came here and failed by missing two classes. Yeah, it sucks. (Bob)

Several youth justice practitioners reiterated the point made by the justice-involved youth that confinement in a youth justice facility equates to ‘marking time’ until release. As noted during one of the focus groups: “The mentality is you’re just doing your time. I’m just here [youth justice facility] doing my time” (YJP-FG2). Several youth justice practitioners moved one step further to suggest that while they do not necessarily buy-in to the services and supports that are offered during their confinement, the justice-involved youth will often ‘play the game’ while in the youth justice facility to make their lives easier or to expedite their release:

Sometimes when they’re [justice-involved youth] on [pre-trial] detention [in the youth justice facility] they’ll do more programs because it makes them look better so willingness versus what I need to do are two different things... I mean I had a kid who... he did the Courage Program and Anger Management Program and everything, but I mean I knew it was a joke to him. He was never going to change when he got out of here and he was, you know, the whole family was involved but he did that because it looked good and he knew what he needed to do to look good. (YJP-FG2)

Like one of my youth right now, like he is telling me he wants a job and stuff like that, but I think it’s just to prove to his probation officer, I want a job so I’ll have a job when I get out [of the youth justice facility]. But from what I hear him saying, he’s not going to keep that job when he gets out. He’s just going to go back to his old ways. (YJP-6)

I think the [youth justice] system as a whole fails them. Because you can be a good little boy in a place like this [youth justice facility] and have no intention of changing anything. I've seen it happen, and to point a finger, that's not doing any good. You've gotta remember, most of these guys are intelligent and they're natural cons and they can chew you up and spit you out pretty good because they get bored easily. Sorry but that's the way it is, you see it happen. (YJP-4)

These findings are consistent with Fader's (2008) and Soyer's (2014) previous work on the role of youth justice facilities in the process of desistance from crime. In both studies, justice-involved young men submitted to participation in institutional programming, not because they were convinced that any intervention would help them to desist from criminal involvement, but rather because they understood they needed to 'walk the walk' if they wanted to win back their freedom. This approach has been called a 'fake it' strategy (Abrams, 2006), and those who adopt it are often resistant to changing their behaviours and/or their lifestyles (Marsh & Evans, 2009), preferring to return to their previous ways upon release.

#### Positive Interpretation of Confinement in a Youth Justice Facility

Several justice-involved youth indicated that confinement in the youth justice facility provided them with an opportunity to reflect on their decisions to date and if they should reconsider their continued gang involvement:

Being in here [youth justice facility] it separates you from it all and it really gives you time to think and you also don't hear from anyone in the gang, you only hear from people that love you and who want to see you do well. (Allister)

But like if I kept coming here [youth justice facility] like multiple times, I'm sure I would think this is retarded... Well maybe not reconsider the gang but reconsider the choices that I was making while in it. (FT)

Further, they discussed how if they wanted to change, services and supports offered to them within this context could benefit them upon release to the community and help them to move toward a more prosocial pathway:

So, if you are looking to change, education can definitely help you when you get out because you can earn your [school] credits faster than on the outside. Because I find here [youth justice facility] that you concentrate more on school here and you do what you have to do rather than when you are on the outside because you wouldn't be going to school on the outside. So, this will definitely help you if you are trying to take a better path. It all depends on you if you want to change. (Juliano)

Yeah, there's opportunities for you to get a resume, to get a job for before you even get out [of the youth justice facility], help with housing and all that stuff, getting schoolwork done, getting your credits. Because when you're on the outs and you're in a gang most of the time you skip school, you don't really hang out at school, you don't do your work really. (Michel)

Yeah, I mean here [youth justice facility] is helping me to make a plan and stuff. Actually, here it's really easy to get school, that's something positive about being here... So, I'm doing job training right now, getting paid to do like WHMIS [Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System] and all that. (Bob)

I did my WHMIS [Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System]; I'm about to get my certificate soon. That might be helpful when I'm trying to get a job when I get out [of the youth justice facility] ... I got five [school] credits here and I'm doing woodworking, I think that will be helpful too. (Montana)

However, one justice-involved youth did note the temporary influence of institutional programming:

They have a couple of programs and stuff, you know that you can do when you're on the outs [in the youth justice facility] but most of the time these dudes they're like oh I want to do these programs, I want to do these programs. They get out, they see their friends, and I don't care about these programs. Or their friends are like 'what you got to do right now', oh I got to go to this program, 'oh so you changed, you're going to do these programs now, oh I didn't know you're this person'. No, I don't do it like that. It's like that basically. (KP)

This type of future orientation has been highlighted in past research as being important to the desistance process, whereby successful moves away from delinquent behaviour have been associated with the would-be desister having some form of plan or vision for an alternative future (Maruna, 2001). In this case, the justice-involved youth largely referenced preparing for legitimate employment. However, while this motivation to seek out a new, prosocial future

existed in the youth justice facility, there was a lack of follow through in the community. In her study examining young male offenders' perspectives on their treatment in residential correctional facilities, Abrams (2006) noted that the most significant barrier to lasting behaviour change was the disconnect between 'lessons learned' inside the institution and the reality of life 'on the outs'. Even those individuals who identified wanting to change their behaviours and lifestyles while in the youth justice facility had difficulty translating this desire into practice once released into the community. As discussed in Chapter 3 with respect to the importance of social context in the process of desistance, confinement in a youth justice facility can act as a 'truncated turning point' (Soyer, 2014). It reinforces an affirmation to change among some justice-involved youth, but this desire to change is not necessarily put into practice after release from the youth justice facility.

For the youth justice practitioners, some of them believed that confinement in a youth justice facility can act as a turning point for gang involvement, particularly for those who are more entrenched in criminal activities:

If they're [gang-involved youth] removed from their lifestyle long enough most of them will start thinking that there's something else out there. I'm not a big believer in locking young people up but sometimes it is necessary. Not only for public safety, I mean that's number one, but also to be able to encourage this guy to tweak his thinking. And then he still makes his own choice at the end of the day. (YJP-4)

The whole push for custody as a last resort, I think is a very good way of going for the fringe, for the not so criminally involved [gang members]. But I think that for those youth that are deeply involved or on the verge of being deeply involved, greater periods of custody actually create an opportunity to have them break with the gang lifestyle, to have that break with the influences in the community... I think that again it gives us much more opportunity to actually do work with them in a very focused manner. And I don't see custody, when it's built the way we do it, as necessarily a negative thing. (YJP-2)

The youth justice practitioners indicated that they believed that the work they are doing through the services and opportunities that they are offering to justice-involved youth in the context of the youth justice facility are beneficial:

They are learning good skills here [youth justice facility]. Like I see it. I see guys, they leave here, six months later they're calling me for, you know, their WHMIS [Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System] certificate or they need another copy of their resume. So, they are using the skills that we're providing them while they're here. (YJP-FG2)

We work with youth to give them experiential learning opportunities for them to discover that they have skills and talents and likes in trades or trade-related fields... that we give them opportunities, realistic opportunities, as alternatives you know to surviving monetarily, if I can use that term, in everyday life. I think that the Trades Centre<sup>146</sup>, my perspective of it is that it offers an opportunity for young men to discover that they have true talent and likes of different trades, different tasks, different working elements if I can say that are true alternatives to what they're doing... So, I think that some of the interventions for example like that is that it truly starts to get them thinking about alternatives that... perhaps it gets them to start thinking, that it's not a stretch to think that you could be part of a construction crew instead of a street corner crew. You know it's not a stretch for them to be part of a... you know an organization that's a business instead of a street-level organization. (YJP-2)

From the perspective of the justice-involved youth in this research project, confinement in a youth justice facility can have a variable impact on an individual's decision to desist from the gang. At worst, it can solidify an individual's status as a gang member and at best, it can act as a truncated turning point. While avoiding future involvement in the criminal justice system was readily identified by many justice-involved youth as a motivation to leave the gang, the actual experience in a youth justice facility had little effect on behavioural change, unless the individual already had the intention to leave the gang. In general, there did not appear to be the 'shock value', as described by Mulvey and colleagues (2004), associated with confinement in a

---

<sup>146</sup> A YSB initiative, the Tamarack Trades Training Centre teaches justice-involved youth marketable construction trades skills that will help them become wage-earning citizens, instill a sense of confidence and excitement about their futures, and provide them with viable career path options. The focus of the trades program is to provide graduates with the skills they need to gain entry-level employment in residential and commercial construction.



youth justice facility. This finding is not altogether surprising as based on their own accounts of their histories, many justice-involved youth may have grown accustomed to experiences of institutional confinement and other out-of-home placements such as group homes.

As a caveat to Laub and Sampson's (2003) belief that structurally-induced turning points serve as a catalyst for long-term behavioural change, confinement in a youth justice facility may only act as a turning point if it is recognized and valued as such by those who are already inspired to change (Farrall, 2002). The first stage of Giordano and colleagues (2002) theory of cognitive transformation is that the individual needs to be open to the possibility of change. For those who are not open to or interested in changing their behaviour, they appeared to be committed to the continuation of their current lifestyles.

Further, there are also structural forces leading to behavioural change. Rungay (2004) states that opportunities are required to fulfill new identities available within the immediate social environment and that such opportunities need to be accessible and more highly valued than present circumstances. While they were provided with opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills in the youth justice facility that they believed would be beneficial to them in the community, once released the justice-involved youth did not immediately experience benefits and/or opportunities that they valued over continued gang membership. As discussed in Chapter 8, motivation to change is not a guarantee that desistance will occur. Changes in social circumstances are also necessary. The pressures that justice-involved youth face when returning to their communities can be overwhelming; as such, they need additional support and guidance to maintain their goals for lasting behaviour change (Abrams, 2006).

While the youth justice practitioners acknowledge that confinement in a youth justice facility equated to 'marking time' until release, they appeared to be more optimistic than the

justice-involved youth that it could also be a turning point for desistance. They believed that the knowledge, skills, and opportunities that the justice-involved youth were provided in the youth justice facility would serve to promote desistance from gang involvement.

### **Different Perspectives on the Role of Youth Justice Practitioners in the Desistance Process**

As acknowledged in Chapter 2, there is an emerging body of assisted desistance research which specifically examines ‘what helps’ people through the process of desistance (McNeill, 2012). Several scholars have highlighted the importance of the ‘relational’ aspect of the desistance process.<sup>147</sup> The qualities of relationships between youth justice practitioners and justice-involved youth in institutional settings have been hypothesized to serve an important rehabilitative function (Norman, 1990; Roush, 1993). Specifically, it is believed that youth justice practitioners are important and powerful role models who most effectively encourage change when they have positive connections with justice-involved youth in an environment of respect and safety (Roush, 1996). The extent to which these relationships are perceived by justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners to act as a vehicle through which desistance from gang involvement can be encouraged and supported is addressed in this section.

#### Justice-Involved Youth Perspective

In the individual interviews, justice-involved youth were asked to discuss the role that they believed youth justice practitioners play in addressing their gang involvement and/or their decision to leave the gang. Out of 15 participants, 10 indicated that the primary role of youth justice practitioners was simply one of surveillance and control. They did not trust the youth justice practitioners in general. They believed that the latter were only ‘doing their job’ and that

---

<sup>147</sup> For examples, see: Barry (2007); Burnett (2004); Healy (2010); Maruna (2001); McCulloch (2005); McNeill (2006a); and Weaver (2012).

they did not have a vested interest in the lives of their youth justice clients. Several justice-involved youth provided detailed accounts of these reflections:

They're [youth justice practitioners] kind of just here to keep me in here [youth justice facility]. The staff, like my prime worker sets up my meetings and stuff but really the day-to-day staff just make sure that I'm doing good and not fighting people, following the rules and stuff like that... Like it's hard to talk to them because I'm not trying to self-incriminate and stuff because like everything I say they can write down... It's hard to trust the staff too because like if I was selling drugs with these guys, this and that and they're like alright we'll write that down and all of a sudden the next day I am getting charged for selling drugs so... (Bob)

Some staff [youth justice practitioners] try to get me mad. Like some staff sometimes act up on me. Some staff give me a hard time sometimes, you know? I usually get mad quick so when I see staff trying to manage me, trying to get me mad, I usually try to ignore them as much as I can and if I start getting mad, I might start talking you know. Sometimes I feel like the staff here [youth justice facility] they are not being fair, you know? ... You can talk about that stuff [gang involvement] and they say they won't tell nobody, but the thing is if you know that they're going to tell somebody, there's no point of telling them, you know? They're going to snitch on you too you know? So, I don't believe them, I don't trust this staff here. (Montana)

I don't trust them [youth justice practitioners]. I don't trust them. Anything we say can be used against us here [youth justice facility] ... Like how about I tell you, like I got a guy in my unit and he was writing his gang name on his notebook... and then some guy caught it and he told him 'I have to report this to the Guns & Gangs Unit that you're affiliated'. The guy's like what... 'we have to by our job description'. So, you know, I can't trust them, you know? (Johnny)

They're [youth justice practitioners] annoying as fuck... If you talk about like your crime and shit they act like it's going to affect the people in here [youth justice facility], you know? But the thing is, they don't give a fuck about real shit. The only shit they care about is coming in here and making papers [money] and feeding their families back home and shit, you know? But they don't give a fuck about us. They're being paid, you know?... The staff is like I told you, like I could be sitting here, and they'd be like no don't talk about that, don't talk about that, go to your room, you know? You know say you have some examples and shit, they're not going to sit us down and talk to us about what's your strategy or what you're in for. No, they're not like that. They don't talk to us so we can stop doing some stupid shit on the outside. They're just doing their job, they don't care, and they don't give a fuck. That's how I see it. (Costello)

Nobody, it's not like it's their [youth justice practitioners] job here [youth justice facility] to help us. It's their job to keep us here until we're legally released, until we're legally allowed to leave. They say they're here to help us to guide us on the right path but they're just doing their job. At the end of the day, this is what they get paid to do. (KP)

While some of the justice-involved youth acknowledged that the youth justice practitioners attempted to play a 'helping' role, the former believed that it was not their place and that they did not understand their experiences:

I'd say that they [youth justice practitioners] don't really talk to you, well some of them will talk to you one-on-one like occasionally, but they kind of just state the obvious like 'what did you think was going to be different this time when you did this', like 'did you think you weren't going to come back to jail when you did the exact same thing', and like get you to think about it. But not really sitting down... I'd say probably not as the right person because they haven't really been through it. I would say the same thing with drug addictions, like drug addictions counsellors that haven't really been through it don't really know how it is. So, I would say that you probably have to talk to someone that was gang affiliated before but is not now and got out of it and how they got out of it and like just someone speaking from experience. (Allister)

I don't think anyone would want support from the staff [youth justice practitioners] here [youth justice facility], they don't really know what you're going through. They may have met people that have gone through the same stuff as me, but I know that there is no way that they could fully understand it. (Michel)

Further as noted by FT: "Well I'm sure that you can probably talk to them one-on-one, but how are they supposed to help you when they haven't gone through the same thing?" and by Matt: "It's not the place for youth justice practitioners to help individuals who are thinking about leaving the gang. They haven't had the same adversity, similar experiences".

The prominence of the surveillance or control role of youth justice practitioners was also found in other research studies examining assisted desistance. For example, in his work examining transitions toward desistance among individuals under probation supervision, King (2013) found that it was common for youth participants to say that part of the probation officer's role was to 'keep an eye on' the individual, which may imply a form of surveillance and control.

Cassell and Weinrath (2011) found that most of their gang-involved adult offender participants believed that there was nothing that justice practitioners could have done for them. Further, as noted by Weinrath, Donatelli, and Murchison (2016) in their study examining recidivism outcomes among high-risk young offenders, the role power differential between the youth justice practitioners' position and that of their clients is thought to negate their ability to create a meaningful helping relationship.

Relatedly, the justice-involved youth indicated that the youth justice practitioners did not (or could not) understand their lived realities, limiting the ability of the latter to assist them in the desistance process. This finding is consistent with past research examining the relational context of desistance. For example, Giordano and colleagues (2002) suggest that people tend to learn from those whose behaviour previously mirrored theirs and has since changed. More generally, Kelman (1958) indicated that individuals are more receptive to influence where the change-agent is someone with whom they can identify. Similarly situated individuals can communicate a sense of hope that the same benefits or outcomes can be achieved by them and they may be more likely to recognize the benefits of responding to this influence (Weaver, 2012). Because the youth justice practitioners have not lived the experience of gang involvement, they do not have the necessary 'street credibility' to provide advice and support to the justice-involved youth. As noted by Allister, this would be better accomplished by a former gang member who has left the gang and engaged in a more prosocial lifestyle. The argument for employing peer-based support will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 10.

Alternatively, some justice-involved youth acknowledged that the youth justice practitioners did play a supportive function in the desistance process. This role was largely 'expressive' in nature, they were someone that the justice-involved youth could talk to, who

could provide advice. As noted by Juliano: “They [youth justice practitioners] could give you some advice and some thoughts about it [desistance], so definitely it could help you to a certain degree”. Further, John indicated:

Talking to anybody here [youth justice facility] is helpful because you can’t really talk to your peers in here. Well you can but you can’t talk about that stuff and whatnot. So no, it’s like your mind is telling you that you can only talk about the good things, yeah so they’re helping I’d say.

However, as noted by KP, this support did not lead to any significant changes in his life:

The only thing they [youth justice practitioners] can do is oh they can say ‘yeah, I’m proud of you, keep it up. I don’t want to see you in here [youth justice facility], I don’t want to see you in these jails, I want you to change your life around’. They can only give you good words, you know what I mean like words of hope like a good luck, keep trying, nothing to really steer you in the right direction, except for their words.

Allister was the only justice-involved youth to indicate that youth justice practitioners provided practical assistance that he found to be helpful:

Yeah like I don’t know, I have like a community support worker like if I don’t want to bus places or if I don’t feel safe busing places or walking places because like it could be through where I could see some of the gang members or something then I can get him to drive me. Also like addictions counsellors and stuff like help me like to not... because drug dealing is kind of an addiction itself, like the fast money and stuff and like break and enters and all that it’s kind of like an addiction because it’s just so fast like the money that you get and stuff and talking to those counsellors just to stop that and to just stop doing drugs and that and getting supports and advice and people to talk to.

The justice-involved youth indicated that the youth justice practitioners largely provided expressions of encouragement and advice with respect to desistance from gang involvement.

Unlike previous findings from the literature, the justice-involved youth did not indicate that the support provided by the youth justice practitioners helped to foster the internal motivation for desistance.<sup>148</sup> While Allister identified some practical support provided by the youth justice practitioners, this was limited in nature. The justice-involved youth were not receiving the type

---

<sup>148</sup> For examples, see: Maruna (2001); and Maruna & LeBel (2003).

of ‘direct help’ that Farrall (2002) suggests is needed from youth justice practitioners (e.g., securing housing, finding employment, mending damaged family relationships). Overall, relatively few justice-involved youth commented positively upon the assistance that they received from youth justice practitioners during their time spent in the youth justice facility.

### Youth Justice Practitioner Perspective

In the interviews and focus groups, youth justice practitioners were asked to describe their approach to working with gang-involved youth in the youth justice system<sup>149</sup> and what they believed their role to be in addressing gang involvement and assisting justice-involved youth in the desistance process. First and foremost, many of the youth justice practitioners reported employing a ‘client-centered’ approach to working with their gang-involved youth justice clients.

A detailed description of this approach was provided by one youth justice practitioner:

Absolutely, [my approach is] client centered. I mean you can’t force anybody to leave [the gang], it’s what the client wants to do and you as a clinician, as a youth worker is to form a relationship and have them talk and trade hopefulness... And to build a therapeutic relationship you need, it’s got to be client centered so it’s got to be working with the client, you can’t force them to do anything and it’s got to be a lot of positive regard and empathy to build that relationship and create hopefulness. And I think your actual intervention strategy, whether it be CBT [cognitive behavioural therapy], motivational interviewing or solution-focused therapy, I think that’s less important than having it be client centered because the client is going to choose what to do and offering unconditional positive regard toward the youth. And support the decisions that they make when they start to talk about change and... explore why they want to talk about change. If they’re talking about sustained talk and sustaining the way they live, the way they are, you know, try to empathize and understand where they come from. At the same time try to challenge what it would be like to not have a criminal record, to not have a probation officer, to not have to deal drugs to get some money... I mean if the client is feeling that gangs are important values in their lives, I would kind of challenge it, and let the client dictate on what it is, if they do start talking about change and wanting change and exploring that ambivalence, I would support it... But you’re right, the ultimate decision

---

<sup>149</sup> In several instances, the youth justice practitioners provided in-depth accounts of their approach(es) to working with youth justice clients in general. While it was not possible to include all the details in this chapter, these accounts would be important to examine in future work investigating the relationship between practitioners and clients in youth justice practice.

lies with them and you're best to try and preserve a working relationship than to be aggressive and dissuade them... (YJP-1)

A central tenant of a client-centered approach is accepting that the individual's perspective may be different from the service provider's perspective (Fitzpatrick & Irannejad, 2008). Within this framework, the justice-involved youth actively collaborates with the youth justice practitioner in the decision-making process. The latter's role is to be active as a partner in a process influenced by the justice-involved youth's desires and abilities, generating options based on these desires as well as their own expertise (Schwalbe & Maschi, 2011). One youth justice practitioner emphasized the importance of this collaborative process through the identification of notions of 'success':

It's really very client centred and it depends on the things that they want to work on too. I think it's being very careful in finding out information about people so that your intervention isn't something that is going to make them feel shitty. And that's going back to some of the things, I think a lot of the things that we do don't... you know they are meant to help but they just keep making people feel worse, right? So, figuring all those things out is I think usually important. Inside the work, when I do it, I want to find out about their story and what's important to them in the story... So being willing to step outside and trying to make something work... and not getting stuck in our own notions of success... what is successful for us shouldn't make them successful. I'm a middle-class dude, I grew up in a middle-class family, my sensibilities for how life works might be totally different that what theirs has been and I shouldn't put my shit on him... (YJP-3)

The essence of the client-centred approach is the development of a strong working relationship or affective bond between the youth justice practitioner and the justice-involved youth (Schwalbe & Maschi, 2011). Merton and colleagues (2004) found that relationships based on trust and mutual respect are highly valued by young people and often stand in contrast to other adult relationships in their lives which have led to rejection or negative experiences. In addition to the importance of trust, elements of genuineness, warmth, empathy, guidance, and advocacy have been identified as essential for helping relationships with young people (Drake et



al., 2014; France & Homel, 2006). Through the development of a working relationship, youth justice practitioners can collaboratively identify the needs of their justice-involved youth clients and respond to them (Ilan, 2010).

The youth justice practitioners largely believed that their relationships with justice-involved youth are a vital aspect of the youth justice system experience and they highlighted the importance of developing ‘trusting’ relationships with the latter. They believed that it is important to establish a relationship based on mutual respect and confidentiality. To develop a relationship, the youth justice practitioners attempted to establish a rapport with the young person by being ‘real’ with them, listening to their stories and trying to understand their background and position, as noted by one participant: “...understanding the way they think about themselves and how they think about situations” (YJP-1). Other youth justice practitioners elaborated on these points:

I approach them [justice-involved youth] all the same anyway because the main thing is still this old belief that you don’t initiate any change with anybody unless you have a rapport and you have to build a relationship with them. Without that you don’t go anywhere. (YJP-4)

I think one of the things that we do really well is that we have a very personal approach with the youth in regard to... it’s all about relationship building, trust building. The more that youth feel a connection to the staff, the more influence you can have on that youth. I think not only the more influence, the more you can actually find out about the youth. I think that we probably find out more about young people’s lives than a traditional [youth justice] system ever could because we interact with them, because we sit on the couch and play cards and build a relationship and eventually they feel comfortable enough to share something, not everything but something, and that gives us more insight and a better means of intervening with them. (YJP-2)

A huge factor is they haven’t been able to trust a lot of people in their lives and trust is huge. And if you gain their trust, then that’s half the battle right there. Then you’re able to now start working with these youth. You build, you build that rapport and once you have that rapport, then you can really start working letting them recognize that, ‘hey, I don’t really have to go back to that’ [gang lifestyle]. (YJP-FG1)

And those guys are usually really hard to get trust of. I find gang members who are in the [youth justice] facility for a long time will tend to open up and maybe even tell you, 'yeah I'm in a gang' once they know that they can trust you that you're not going to go talking about them and you'll hold their confidence. So yeah, confidentiality I think is the number one thing to really, really let them know, let them have time to see that you are a person who will... and I constantly check in with them about it. (YJP-3)

It is important to note the juxtaposition between participant perspectives as it relates to the relationship between youth justice practitioners and justice-involved youth. For example, while the youth justice practitioners emphasized the concept of 'trust' as fundamental to their work, several justice-involved youth indicated that they vehemently 'distrusted' the latter. Given that it has been suggested that the practitioner-client relationship is at the heart of youth justice practice<sup>150</sup> and that trust is a crucial part of developing a client-centered, positive relationship; it is important to acknowledge that one of the parties may not 'buy-in' to this relationship. This has implications for the development of interventions that rely on the ability of the youth justice practitioners to gain the trust of justice-involved youth to offer guidance and advocacy.

In discussing their work with justice-involved youth, participants placed an emphasis on employing cognitive-behavioural principles which emphasize the roles of beliefs, attitudes, social skills, and problem-solving capacity in the development of conditions, such as antisocial behaviour, as well as in their resolution. Prototypical interventions using these principles focus on challenging faulty or unhelpful belief structures and on increasing skills for social engagement (Goldstein, Glick, & Gibbs, 1998). The youth justice practitioners reported addressing criminogenic factors in their work with youth justice clients, including challenging criminal attitudes, beliefs, and values, and questioning continued antisocial behaviours:

We try to address some of the criminogenic factors that have brought them to us, behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs, so we adapt to a cognitive behavioural therapy program where we believe that behaviours and mentalities are learnt and that they can be

---

<sup>150</sup> For examples, see: Burnett & McNeill (2005); McNeill (2006a, 2006b); and McNeill & Maruna (2008).

unlearned, and new ones can be adopted by the population as well. So that being said, you know, we strive to accomplish that, you know to enable the young men to explore and consider different options in life as opposed to the lifestyle that they might have adhered to up to this point... So, we look at alternatives to that or at least try to look at alternatives to that weighing the plus/minuses you know to try and really establish how can it possibly be worth obviously the money that they are making versus the risks, the incarceration, everything that comes with the gang life and of course it's also exploring what are they getting out of it other than money. (YJP-2)

I like to have more direct conversations about, ok, you know, where do you see this taking you? And let's talk about what some of the outcomes can be. And you get into scenarios like, ok, if you're on this track, like, how do you see this working out down the road? You know, you've already been caught for something, you know. You might be looking at this as a legal consequence. Like how do you feel about that? Like, you know. Like how do you feel about that you might go to detention or custody ... (YJP-FG3)

My role as a youth worker is to try and find out why they're [justice-involved youth] not doing well and help teach them skills to do well. Usually that involves a lot of understanding self-talk and your cognitive functioning... (YJP-1)

The youth justice practitioners believed that encouraging the justice-involved youth to question their attitudes, values, and beliefs could facilitate or reinforce a decision to exit the gang as individuals would begin to reinterpret past actions as incongruent with the values that they wanted to live by in the future (Weaver, 2009). It should be noted that there has been some criticism of the use of a cognitive-behavioural approach in that there is little evidence that altering thinking patterns is associated with desistance in general (Maruna, 2001). The focus is on correcting individual deficits as opposed to promoting things thought to be associated with desistance (e.g., strong social bonds, prosocial involvements, social capital) (Farrall, 2002).

The youth justice practitioners also focused on the strengths of the justice-involved youth. A strength-based approach provides supports and opportunities that enable personal growth. The underlying motivation is to assist young people in transitioning to a lifestyle deemed more conventional and appropriate (Ilan, 2010). The Ontario MCYS provides training to youth justice practitioners using the Relationship Based Strengths Approach. It is designed to cultivate

and enhance young people's strengths, resiliencies, and potential to help motivate and empower them to adopt a more prosocial lifestyle. Unlike the cognitive-behavioural approach, the focus is not on problems and deficits, but on identifying and using the strengths of young people to cope with and overcome challenges (MCYS, 2012). The theme of broadening horizons and introducing hope to young people was also an important goal for many participants:

I look and try to encourage them [justice-involved youth] to obviously look at strengths-based counselling, looking at you know how, what they're strengths are and how they can use them in a positive way, you know whether it be superior organizational skills; instead of running a drug dealing can you look at maybe getting into a business. But you know and so that's the other thing that we look at as well is looking at strengths and how they can do it in a prosocial manner. ... and that's the case they're almost grasping literally one piece whether it be 'hey you're good in math have you thought about engineering or have you thought about technical drafting or something like that'... you know he gets connected to a teacher or a counsellor and the two of us could try to work with the kid. (YJP-5)

I think number one we should be looking at their strengths, you know? Almost like a counsellor at school, like a school counsellor, where they take a look at, ok so what is it that you want to do in life or whatever, you know? I want to do x, y, and z or I'm good at this, and then really highlight all those strengths, and then tie whatever resources that we have, outside of the box resources... let's face it, these youth they have skills, entrepreneurial skills so therefore if you can transfer the skills that they have with money and you transfer it to maybe helping them with business or, and some kids, you know, they might be into music and rapping. Well then, getting them connected with music and rapping... (YJP-FG1)

We try to identify some strengths whether you know, whatever that may be, whether it be a business sense, a music talent or some, you know, because I think we have to sort of think outside the box with respect to what skillsets are. And, you know, to channel that skillset into something and sort of make them see that, you know, yes, you have an entrepreneurial skill, and have you thought about doing business as opposed to keeping a ledger sheet on the drug desk? Now obviously it depends on the entrenchment the youth has, but that's what we sort of try to do is sort of look at, ok have you thought about how can you take this talent you have further, and have you thought about how much money you could make and not have to worry about looking over your shoulder? (YJP-FG3)

As you build relationships you get to know their strengths and then you try, well I try and use their strengths, work with them and their strengths in order to find out what's working in their lives and what's worked and try to use more of what works to help them

you know ultimately problem solve, really that's what it comes down to, like collaborative problem-solving with youth with regards to various life issues, social issues that got them into trouble. (YJP-1)

Several youth justice practitioners believed that by identifying strengths of the justice-involved youth (e.g., organizational and entrepreneurial skills) and channelling them into prosocial outlets (e.g., business opportunities), they could help motivate their clients to desist from the gang lifestyle. This approach represents a shift from a focus on individual deficits as defined by 'experts' to one that seeks to promote 'good lives'<sup>151</sup> as defined by the individual (Burnett & Maruna, 2006; Ward & Maruna, 2007). Motivation is given a central role in understanding the change process, the 'interests' identified by the youth justice practitioners need to be clearly relevant to the justice-involved youth and the possibility of living better lives (Prochaska & Levesque, 2002).

Many youth justice practitioners believed that their main role in the process of desistance from gang involvement was to promote a lifestyle change using the approaches described above, and further to support the justice-involved youths' ability to live outside the gang in the community:

We basically start trying to form relationships with the youth, and through forming relationships we try and work toward goals, attainable goals, short-term goals typically inside the facility – these are just your day-to-day working on interpersonal communication skills, how youth and staff and peers interact amongst each other, trying to promote positive prosocial values and really just get to know the youth and get to know who they are as people, where they come from... We're involved in setting up some long-term goals so basically talking about discharge planning and you know once the youth is released in the community, um providing some services, helping them get access to services, advocating on their behalf when it comes to accessing services as well as justice services that are available for them... (YJP-1)

---

<sup>151</sup> The Good Lives Model (GLM) is a strength-oriented rehabilitation theory responsive to individuals' interests, abilities, and aspirations. Rather than being preoccupied with risk management, it suggests practitioners develop intervention plans or good lives plans, which help individuals acquire the capabilities to achieve personally meaningful goals (Ward & Gannon, 2006; Ward & Stewart, 2003).

Trying to like build goals for him [justice-involved youth] once he is released, making sure that he has those prosocial things to go to or he's going back home he's not going to live on the streets, so just making sure when he's released that he has all of or as many resources as possible. (YJP-6)

I just think as much programming as you can possibly do while they're in here [youth justice facility] and I've said that, and I will continue to say it. Everything, whether it's life skills, whether it's job preparation, whether it's what I do, whether it's what the staff do on a daily basis. Like it's really, it's all about preparing them for life on the outside and teaching life skills that they don't have and that they need. It's about educating them on what is available and what opportunities they have as well. (YJP-FG2)

I'm talking basic needs that are sustainable over the long term and so that involves schooling, education, housing, all of those kinds of things. I think we need to put that in place or find people that can like... we have people in the [youth justice] facility that can, there's an employment person, there's this person, there's that person... I refer them to educational facilities, maybe refer them if they want to look at medication for a psych assessment, I may refer for, you know if there's some concern and they're wanting to try school again try to get them psycho-eds, anything along those lines... So, I think that's all really important that we have lots of resources, lots of connections to be collaborative, a lot of room to just do whatever you need to make it work, right? (YJP-3)

So, everything we talk about or do while the youth is in [the youth justice facility], and they're aware of this all the time, is directed toward them being successful when they get out [of the youth justice facility]. It's important how they do while they're in but that's not the main focus, the main focus is what are you going to do when you get out. And that's where lifestyle change becomes the focus; gang-involved, not gang-involved, affiliated but not a member, it really doesn't matter because you're looking at lifestyle change. (YJP-4)

In addition to helping justice-involved youth to think about what would constitute a good life for them, the participants also focused on capability-building, involving the development of knowledge and skills, and the acquisition of internal and external resources for capacity-building, all of which is needed to implement 'good lives' plans (Maruna, 2001; Ward & Fortune, 2013). As discussed in Chapter 2, McNeill (2009) argued that there are three necessary roles that criminal justice workers need to fulfill in their work with justice-involved youth for desistance to be facilitated: (1) they must foster motivation and increase capacities; (2) provide practical

support and opportunities; and (3) support the development of alternative identities. The youth justice practitioners have indicated their beliefs that they play an important role in encouraging motivation within justice-involved youth, in helping to develop their skills and capacities, and to a lesser extent, in advocating for opportunities for them. They felt that all of this is likely to be of assistance during the desistance process. This is reflective of Panuccio and colleagues' (2012) work that suggests that social support provided by institutional and community-based program staff plays an important role in triggering the motivation to desist, and in helping to sustain that motivation over time by providing specific and realistic means for achieving goals.

Participants placed more emphasis on the development of human capital meaning the motivations and capacities for change, than on social capital meaning the resources and opportunities to support desistance from gang involvement. In Chapter 8, several justice-involved youth identified perceptions of limited opportunities available outside the gang as a key barrier to desistance from gang involvement. As such, there should be more of a focus from youth justice practitioners on advocating for and providing justice-involved youth with opportunities for paid employment and other constructive and creative activities once they are released from the youth justice facility. The attraction to the gang signals that there is a lack of alternatives to gang membership and opportunities for young people, which become particularly marked at the point of release from the youth justice facility. It is at this moment when justice-involved youth need help with forms of assistance that provide attractive alternatives to gang membership (Boduszek, Dhingra, & Hirschfeld, 2015). Further the focus of the youth justice practitioners on agentic factors, to the relative neglect of structural factors, may be a consequence of developments within the youth justice system in recent years. On one hand, there has been more of an emphasis on responsabilization and individualism (Raynor & Robinson,

2009), and on the other, there has been increased pressure to contract out services (e.g., education, employment, addictions) such that external organizations may soon become solely responsible for the socio-structural aspects of desistance (King, 2013).

Through their work, the youth justice practitioners indicated playing both an expressive and instrumental role in the lives of justice-involved youth. This might suggest that helping relationships must always be partly affective and emotional, but partly pragmatic as well (Butts et al., 2010). As noted by two of the youth justice practitioners:

Because I have had a few gang-involved youth who decide ok they want to get out of the gang, in which case we then look at counselling supports, we look at educational supports, and that can run the gamut from simply having conversations with them to perhaps putting in funding requests for vocational support or any type of support that may be helpful... And then basically from all ends everyone is supporting that individual, that they're on the right track, that they're providing positive reinforcement to them. (YJP-5)

I think just providing them with any kind of resources or just letting them know that I'm there to help them if needed. Or letting them know that there's other people out there that would help them if they needed it. (YJP-6)

One youth justice practitioner emphasized that in working with justice-involved youth, it is important to maintain the expressive role and to avoid becoming simply a 'cheerleader':

Cheerleading is the worst thing you can do with gang guys or any of them to tell you the truth. So, I think often we work too hard at making them feel good or trying to make them feel too good... like 'you have a lot of potential, I could see you could do really well' rings very hollow to me and I think it does to them as well. (YJP-3)

Some youth justice practitioners reported providing expressive support through expressions of encouragement and by championing their justice-involved youth clients to others (Farrall et al., 2014; Maruna, 2001; Vaughan, 2007). They reported providing instrumental support through the provision of tangible resources – identifying and making referrals for health and housing needs, educational resources, support with skills and training, access to employment



opportunities – which are especially important for individuals who have been incarcerated (La Vigne, Visher, & Castro, 2004; Martinez & Christian, 2009).

Some participants also acknowledged that they had to balance their helping role with an ‘enforcement’ role, especially for those justice-involved youth who were not open to or interested in changing their lifestyles. As noted by one youth justice practitioner:

The youth that are not willing to change, they’re usually resistant, they’re not usually... and that’s the case of they cancel appointments; they’re not engaged in the process. And normally what happens is that it becomes more of an enforcement relationship as opposed to a personal relationship... because as I said earlier the youth that want to change, they’re engaged in it and they want to be part of the process and we make sure they are part of the process. The youth that are definitely not, the gang-involved youth who are really not at the stage of change, they see nothing wrong with what they’re doing, sure we try to counsel them, we try to encourage them, we don’t give up on them but usually what I find is that if they keep on being involved in it, the relationship tends to be one of more of an enforcement piece as opposed to a counselling piece. (YJP-5)

Further, they believed that the perception of this enforcement role sometimes impacted their ability to work with justice-involved youth:

Because whether these [justice-involved] youth want out [of the gang] or not they don’t see us, like they won’t admit to us all the time because they think we’re against them, they don’t think that we’re there to actually help them. (YJP-6)

Because, you know, let’s face it, as probation officers, we’re an authority figure even if you build good rapport with kids. I mean there are certain conversations that they are maybe going to be reluctant to have with you (YJP-FG3)

He [justice-involved youth] wasn’t aggressive or abusive or really challenging but you just, you know, there was always that kind of resistance and more that sense of, ‘you know I’m going to give you – I’m just going to tell you what I want to tell you and, but it’s not going to be very much’... it was challenging and I think that’s the particular challenge with some of those guys [gang-involved youth]. (YJP-FG3)

The comments from the youth justice practitioners above are congruent with the general perspective of the justice-involved youth discussed earlier that the role of the former is largely viewed as one of surveillance and control, and less of support. While many of the youth justice

practitioners believed that they were demonstrating professional commitment to their youth justice clients by establishing trusting relationships, promoting the development of skills and capacities, advocating for opportunities, and demonstrating overall encouragement, the justice-involved youth did not necessarily interpret this as evidence of concern for them as people or an interest in their overall well-being. And so contrary to previous findings on justice-involved youths' commitments to desist (see Rex, 1999), for many of the participants in this research project, their relationship to youth justice practitioners did not appear to play a significant role in influencing their motivations and/or assisting them in the process of leaving the gang.

It is also important to acknowledge that the youth justice practitioners themselves were reflexive in considering the limits of their role in supporting the desistance process. For example, some of them recognized that they are not the only, or even the most important, resource in the lives of justice-involved youth:

See you have to see what sort of relationship they have with peers and family members and mentor types. They can be more assistance than anybody when a young person is in the process of changing that lifestyle, because they're there. I mean us professionals we're not there all the time with them. (YJP-4)

Again, I think that it's very complex to find those people because you can make use of a lot of different things and people in different locations that are important. It could be that they [justice-involved youth] want to honour a piece of wisdom that they liked and they'll hold on to that right, that thought that stands outside of what they're doing... If they like what someone taught them and it stands outside of a criminal lifestyle, that's a beautiful thing to ask them how they're going to enact that wisdom, right? Yeah, and I think that's crucial to find those things, right? Often people that are much more important than someone like me, or some professional right, because it's in their life and they're likely to be there after interventions are done, right? (YJP-3)

One participant also identified needing to be careful in making assumptions about 'help':

And I think many times... a lot of well meaning things go wrong, right and aren't working for people. They just don't at times right, and there's an assumption that because we're helping someone that help is help. But not all help is the same in some people's

lives, right? Like I can be doing something, inflicting more damage on them than what I'm trying to do. I've certainly been there. (YJP-3)

The youth justice practitioners also identified barriers that they believed hindered their ability to work with gang-involved youth justice clients to support desistance. They discussed the challenges they encountered when trying to get justice-involved youth to 'buy-in' to supports and legitimate opportunities:

They [justice-involved youth] have to basically develop a buy-in for a lack of a better phrase to the supports so it's seen not as my PO [probation officer] wants to take me there, that may be the initial piece but hopefully after they have a few sessions with the counsellor or the other supports that they get buy-in and therefore they see that 'yes there is some benefit for me'. And that's a big key, they have to see that there's some benefit to them... I know one particular youth that I've referred to a counsellor and I remember the counsellor said to me, he knows exactly what needs to be done to get out he just refuses to do it. He's just not interested. He's aware of all... he knows yup if he wants to get out of a gang he can do this, this, this, you know everything, but he says no, 'hey I'm happy', so if I'm happy he's not going to want to change. (YJP-5)

And even getting him to buy-in to that [education] has been a struggle because he can make more money doing other things, so getting him to buy-in to... that's one of the biggest challenges that, you know, we have. (YJP-FG3)

So, I think that, you know, there's different motivating factors. That person [justice-involved youth] is not going to buy-in to the game and it's of no fault of anybody's here [youth justice facility]. They're not going to buy-in to [a youth justice practitioner] trying to get them a job, they're not going to buy-in to what I do, they're not going to buy-in to it because at that age it's all about status and about promotions [in the gang]. (YJP-FG2)

As discussed in one of the focus groups, some youth justice practitioners also identified barriers to working with justice-involved youth that stemmed from the structure of the youth justice system itself:

The challenge is, how do you, you know, in four or five sessions that I have with them [justice-involved youth], how do I teach them to, or get them to buy-in to that type of thing... So, it's, trying to change a whole way of thinking in a very... and even for us here [youth justice facility], I mean sometimes we only have a youth for a couple of months and how do you change that mentality without it being very intense? Like it's almost like a daily thing to try and change that, that mentality. (YJP-FG2)

And that's what I think the struggle for, you know, those of us that work on the floor in the units [of the youth justice facility], their [justice-involved youth] world here is totally different than the world on the outside and we, you know, we can kind of identify their outside world to them but they're going to be whoever they want to be in here [youth justice facility] and then once they're out, you know, they're totally different people. So you know, in here, you know... these guys are smart so they know what they have to do to get by in here and I mean those are skills that they learned on the street and, you know, being involved in whatever they're involved in, but I find that we're limited in what we are able to do here and how we're able to help them because at the end of the day they leave here and they're going back to the same community with all the same people. So, yeah, we can do the best we can to help them find resources outside of that environment but, you know, you're always going to go back to what's familiar nine times out of 10 because, yeah, you're going to go back to the world where you made 1,000 bucks a week. And so, I find it's very difficult being a front-line staff, having much of an impact on the ones that get released from here. (YJP-FG2)

In particular, a few youth justice practitioners commented on the distinction between pre-trial detention or 'dead time' and post-trial open or secure custody and its impact on their work:

I think that a barrier that we face with a lot of our guys [justice-involved youth] is... it's the barrier that the legal system, particularly lawyers, throw up in front of us. So, for example, we have a lot of guys who do a ton of dead time... The process is dragged out and then they end up getting sentenced to a very short sentence because they've been in... time served, time served, time served... What's a trouble with that is that it's not a victory for anyone because the year and a half or 18 months or whatever that they spent with us, that's exactly the best we can describe it is dead time. Because there's only so much you can do, you know? The person can't leave these walls [youth justice facility]. You can't really set up a reintegration plan. You can't really start planning because we don't know what's going to happen. And then all of a sudden, yeah, court's done; he's out next month. And then you scramble where are you going to go? Where are you going to live? You can kind of plan, but you can't get the wheels in motion. (YJP-FG1)

I'll say that probably one of the challenges of why we don't see as much of the strategy around them [justice-involved youth] leaving the gang or coming out with strong structure in relation to gang exit is that a lot of our guys do dead time and it's very difficult for us to... you can plan with a goal plan but if you don't have immediate gratification for things that they do, they lose motivation quickly. And I might be leap frogging here but maybe it's to explain as to why we don't see a lot of success directly that I can speak to is when young men do dead time and serve their time in detention it ties our hands in regards to a lot of activities that we can do with them. As opposed to when young men serve custody, there can be a correlation, a stronger correlation between what they are accomplishing here [youth justice facility] and how it transfers to the

community, you know through employment, education, supports, there's a lot more opportunities that are available to them and unfortunately, well to be honest, a lot of them are cheated out of that and I'm not really sure why defence lawyers continue to push for dead time and time served because it's actually of no benefit to them. (YJP-2)

Given the perspective of the justice-involved youth that the youth justice practitioners did not (or could not) understand their lived realities, and the youth justice practitioners' own reflections on the limits to their role and the barriers they face in supporting the desistance process, the latter may only have a partial role to play. In their work examining the transition to adulthood among formerly incarcerated youth, Abrams, Terry, and Inderbitzin (2017) have cautioned that service providers must consider that not all their youth justice clients are necessarily open to receiving support, particularly from agents of the state. Further, Flanagan and Hancock (2010) have suggested that 'hard to reach' groups, including gang-involved youth, often engage better with voluntary sector organizations than they do with the statutory sector. As such, youth justice practitioners may be better placed to work in collaboration with 'credible' others and community-based organizations responsible for the socio-structural aspects of desistance, sharing their expertise and offering support where needed in the development of pathways for desistance from gang involvement for justice-involved youth.

Additionally, as discussed earlier, the justice-involved youth did not indicate that the support provided by the youth justice practitioners helped to foster the internal motivation for desistance, while the youth justice practitioners reported that it was difficult to work with individuals who were not motivated to change and/or those who were motivated to stay in the gang based on the continuation of its perceived benefits (e.g., money, status). Therefore, the motivation to change and engage in the process of desistance appears to derive primarily through individual agentic resolve, so the ability of youth justice practitioners to support the desistance process may only be relevant to those who have already decided to leave the gang. As Panuccio

and colleagues (2012) found, no matter how much support an individual has, desistance will not occur without motivation. An individual must have a desire to change before they will accept help in changing their lifestyle. Given the limited time and resources of youth justice practitioners, perhaps they should not focus their energy on encouraging justice-involved youths' willingness to leave the gang, but rather on their ability to do so once a decision has been made. Decisions about the kinds of interventions to be used with and for justice-involved youth should be based on understandings of their individual change processes and on how youth justice practitioners can best support these processes (McNeill, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

The findings from this chapter demonstrated that while involvement in the youth justice system was touted by many participants in this research project as a motivation for leaving the gang, the perspectives of the justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners varied on how experiences of confinement in youth justice facilities and the role of youth justice practitioners influenced decisions and the process of leaving the gang. For a summary of the main findings, see *Table 6* at the end of this chapter.

Despite the justice-involved youths' initial portrayal of youth justice facilities as more rehabilitation-oriented and youth justice practitioners as more supportive than those in the adult criminal justice system, involvement in the youth justice system was not widely perceived as a turning point in the process of desistance from gang involvement. They acknowledged that confinement in a youth justice facility could have a variable impact on an individual's decision to leave the gang – from solidifying status in the gang to inspiring a vision for an alternative future outside the gang. Whether confinement was perceived as marking time or a turning point was largely a result of an individual's own pre-determined intention to leave the gang. While the

youth justice practitioners echoed these findings, they tended to err on the side of optimism believing that time spent in a youth justice facility was an opportunity to encourage, promote, and support the change process with a ‘captive audience’.

The findings from this chapter have also illuminated the varying perspectives on the form and function of helping relationships between justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners. Overall, relatively few justice-involved youth commented positively on the assistance that they received from youth justice practitioners during their time in the youth justice facility. Many of the justice-involved youth believed that the role of the youth justice practitioners was simply one of surveillance and control, that they did not have the lived experience necessary to offer advice, and they could only provide ‘expressive’ support. The youth justice practitioners believed they played a more prominent role in the lives of justice-involved youth employing client-centred, cognitive-behavioural, and strength-based approaches to encourage desistance, and cultivating trusting relationships needed to support them through the process of leaving the gang.

Although a large disparity was identified in the perspectives provided by participants, it is important to remain cognizant of the context within which feedback was provided. In this research project, the practitioner-client relationship was examined while the justice-involved youth participants were involuntarily confined in a youth justice facility. The nature of their current situation and their thoughts and feelings toward the youth justice system in general could have negatively skewed their attitudes concerning the role of youth justice practitioners. More investigation is necessary to understand the complexity of this relationship, perhaps by retrospectively examining the perspectives of justice-involved youth once they have been released back into the community. As a case in point, in one of the focus group sessions, the

youth justice practitioners referred to encounters they had with their youth justice clients post-release. These former justice-involved youth appeared to see the youth justice practitioners in a different light once they were back in the community and acknowledged the support and assistance they were provided while in the youth justice facilities:

I mean I see almost all the guys in groups from here [youth justice facility] that are all hanging out outside at probation [office] and I've never seen a group of people more excited to see a familiar face. The best sessions that I have are with the kids that I worked with here on the floor. They're so excited to be sitting down and doing something with somebody that knows them and the situations that we use are real situations that happened while they were in here... I think that, you know, for staff to be able to have that different type of interaction with kids outside of here for a little bit, you're getting something back that you might not be getting while you're in here as a staff, you know? I mean there's people that I thought couldn't stand me when I worked here and they're like tripping over themselves trying to talk to me while I'm, you know, and their interactions are totally like they're genuinely excited... You're sort of seen in a different role when you're outside of here. (YJP-FG2)

I'll run into these guys [justice-involved youth] on the outside at the mall or sometimes at the gym, and they really like to tell me, 'oh listen I'm doing good in this area, I'm doing good in that area, thank you'... I find for them to be able to give us successful stories about themselves empowers them more, encourages them to do better, for some of them. (YJP-FG2)

Further, while the youth justice practitioners were asked to share their perspectives on the role they played in addressing gang involvement and assisting justice-involved youth in the desistance process, it is acknowledged that the views they presented are likely to be in line with the overall mandate and goals of their employer and of their profession. Given the widely promoted suggestion that the practitioner-client relationship is at the centre of youth justice practice, it is not surprising that the youth justice practitioners believed that they played a prominent role in the lives of justice-involved youth. In fact, this perspective is to be expected as it serves to justify or legitimize their position in the context of the youth justice system.



Finally, the findings from this chapter have again emphasized the importance of the individual's intention or internal motivation to change. Confinement in a youth justice facility was largely acknowledged as a turning point by justice-involved youth who had already indicated a desire to leave the gang, and the youth justice practitioners acknowledged difficulty in encouraging and supporting desistance among those wanting to persist in gang involvement. In the context of the conceptual model presented in Chapter 3, these findings support the idea that internal motivation precedes desistance (LeBel et al., 2008; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009), but that the latter is enacted within the context of one's social environment. Therefore, the role of the youth justice system in the desistance process appears to depend on how the individual understands and interprets their youth justice system experience in the context of their motivation to leave the gang (or not). To support their cognitive transformations, justice-involved youth need help from youth justice practitioners to sustain changes over time. This means there should be more focus on the development of social capital through advocacy for and provision of specific and realistic opportunities (e.g., education, employment, housing) for justice-involved youth to achieve their gang desistance goals (Panuccio et al., 2012). The information provided throughout this chapter can help to inform the future development of policy and practice to support gang-involved youth in the youth justice system.

This concludes the findings section of this doctoral dissertation. In reflecting on the knowledge and insights gained throughout the last five chapters, the next chapter examines implications for the future development of prevention, intervention, and desistance initiatives for those at-risk of and involved in gangs. This discussion is supported by specific suggestions and recommendations for moving forward from the justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners involved in this research project.

Table 6. Summary of Perspectives on the Role of the Youth Justice System

Justice-Involved Youth	Youth Justice Practitioners
<i>The Youth Justice System as Distinct from the Adult Criminal Justice System</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participants indicated that in comparison to adult correctional facilities, youth justice facilities are ‘soft’, not considered ‘real jail’, and offer youth justice clients better treatment by youth justice staff members.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participants indicated that in comparison to the adult criminal justice system, the youth justice system allows for flexibility and discretion in the application of the law and allows for more provision of services and supports.</li> </ul>
<i>Experience in the Youth Justice Facility – ‘Marking Time’ or ‘Turning Point’</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A few participants believed that being in a youth justice facility had no impact on desistance from gang involvement, and in one case confinement served to increase status as a gang member. Further, several individuals identified a negative impact on their lives (e.g., feelings of anger and injustice, losing possessions, declining relationships, academic failure).</li> <li>Several participants indicated that being in a youth justice facility provided them with an opportunity to be separated from the gang where they could reflect on their past and reconsider continued gang involvement. If they wanted to change, services and supports offered to them within this context could benefit them upon release to the community and help them to move toward a more prosocial pathway. One individual did note the temporary influence of institutional programming; it wanes upon release to the community.</li> <li>Participants indicated that experience in a youth justice facility had a variable impact on the individual’s life and is dependent on the latter’s interpretation of the situation. At worst, it can solidify status as a gang member and at best, it can act as a ‘truncated’ turning point.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Several participants indicated that confinement in a youth justice facility equates to ‘marking time’ until release. Others suggested that while they do not necessarily buy-in to the services and supports that are offered during their confinement, justice-involved youth will often ‘play the game’ while in the youth justice facility to make their lives easier or to expedite their release.</li> <li>Some participants believed that confinement in a youth justice facility can act as a turning point for gang involvement, particularly for those who are more entrenched in criminal activities. Here, they are removed from the gang lifestyle long enough to allow for reassessment of current choices. The services and opportunities that are offered to justice-involved youth in the context of the youth justice facility are beneficial (e.g., employment-related skills).</li> <li>While participants acknowledged that confinement in a youth justice facility could be equated to ‘marking time’ until release, they appeared to be more optimistic than the justice-involved youth that it could also be a ‘turning point’ for desistance from gang involvement.</li> </ul>
<i>The Role of Youth Justice Practitioners in the Desistance Process</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Two-thirds of participants indicated that the primary role of youth justice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The participants largely believed that their trusting relationships with justice-involved</li> </ul>

<p>practitioners was simply one of surveillance and control. They did not trust the youth justice practitioners in general. They believed that the latter were only ‘doing their job’ and that they did not have a vested interest in the lives of their youth justice clients.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• While some participants acknowledged that the youth justice practitioners attempted to play a ‘helping’ role, the former believed that it was not their place and that they did not understand their lived realities.</li> <li>• Alternatively, some participants acknowledged that the youth justice practitioners did play a supportive function in the desistance process. This role was largely ‘expressive’ in nature, they were someone that the justice-involved youth could talk to, who could provide advice. However, this support does not necessarily lead to significant changes in the individual’s life. Only one participant discussed the ‘instrumental’ support provided by youth justice practitioners, and this was limited in nature.</li> </ul>	<p>youth are a vital aspect of the youth justice system experience.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many participants believed that their main role in the process of desistance from gang involvement was to promote a lifestyle change, and further to support the justice-involved youths’ ability to live outside the gang in the community.</li> <li>• Participants indicated their beliefs that they play an important role in encouraging motivation in justice-involved youth, in helping to develop their skills and capacities (human capital), and to a lesser extent, in advocating for opportunities for them (social capital).</li> <li>• Through their work, participants indicated playing both an expressive role (e.g., encouragement) and an instrumental role (e.g., provision of tangible resources) in the lives of justice-involved youth.</li> <li>• Some participants also acknowledged that they had to balance their ‘helping’ role with an ‘enforcement’ role.</li> <li>• In employing responsible reflexivity, participants considered the limits of their role in supporting the desistance process (e.g., not the most important or pertinent resource) and identified barriers impacting their ability to work with gang-involved youth justice clients (e.g., getting buy-in, the structure of the youth justice system).</li> </ul>
--	--

## **CHAPTER 10**

### **WHAT'S NEXT: IMPLICATIONS FOR PREVENTION, INTERVENTION & DESISTANCE**

The development of effective strategies related to the issue of youth gangs requires a sound knowledge and understanding of gang involvement and the process of desistance. Throughout the preceding findings chapters, the justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners have provided their perspectives on what constitutes a gang, why young people become involved, the methods, motives, and barriers for leaving the gang, and the role of the youth justice system in the desistance process. The knowledge and insights gained on these topics can be used to inform initiatives to prevent gang involvement among at-risk youth, to intervene with active gang members, and to support desistance by helping motivated gang members to pursue alternatives to gang life.

Several researchers have endorsed the importance of seeking input from those with first-hand experience to better inform the development of future strategies.<sup>152</sup> Through the data collection process for this research project, the justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners were given the occasion to put themselves in the role of policymaker and program developer. In the focus group and individual interview sessions, participants were able to offer suggestions on how to prevent gang involvement, how to intervene with gang-involved youth, and how to better assist and support the latter to navigate the desistance process. Taken together, these insights and suggestions form the basis for the following recommended areas of focus for prevention, intervention, and desistance initiatives for at-risk and gang-involved youth.

Further, the information gathered throughout this research project supports the need for a shift in our current policy and practice orientation to effectively address the desistance process.

---

<sup>152</sup> For examples, see: Dickson-Gomez, Quinn, Broaddus, & Pacella (2017); Sharkey et al. (2015); and Winterdyk, Fillipuzi, Mescier, Hencks, & Ruddell (2009).

To contribute to continuing the dialogue on this issue, I conclude this chapter with some general considerations in moving forward and offer a possible framework for a comprehensive, multi-systemic, multi-modal approach to address desistance from gang involvement.

### **Recommended Areas of Focus for Prevention, Intervention, and Desistance Initiatives**

The following recommendations for areas of focus are by no means exhaustive as there are many considerations in the development of strategies to better address the needs of at-risk and gang-involved youth. The themes presented below are those that I found to be most relevant given the general findings presented in the last five chapters as well as the specific suggestions offered by the justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners themselves. Given that this research project entailed a case study in the city of Ottawa, I also highlight implications of these recommendations for the YSB – Youth Justice Services and MCYS – Probation Services, the local context more generally, and where possible I identify alignment with priorities in the revised *OSVGS* (2017-2020).<sup>153</sup> Some examples of evidence-informed initiatives that fall within these areas of focus are presented in Appendix A.

### Acknowledge and Address Trauma

Increasing attention has been drawn to the potential effects of trauma in gang membership and gang-related activities. Gang-involved youth are exposed to a range of traumatic experiences, as both victims and perpetrators, before and during their involvement in the gang (Kerig, Wainryb, Twali, & Chaplo, 2013). Experiencing chronic and repeated instances of trauma in childhood has been identified as a driver for gang involvement and violence (Ross

---

<sup>153</sup> Following the first three years of the Ottawa Gang Strategy and its evaluation in 2016, the Strategy's Steering Committee wanted to ensure that it was responsive to the shifting realities of gangs and street-based violence in the city of Ottawa. A series of consultations were conducted between May and August 2017 to inform the *OSVGS* moving forward. These included a variety of activities (i.e., an online survey, reviewing existing community surveys, needs assessments and reports, focus groups and one-on-one interviews with individuals with lived experience, a public consultation, and discussions with the Steering Committee partners) to seek ideas and input from residents and service providers alike (Bania, 2017).

& Arsenault, 2018; Totten, 2012; 2013). In this research project, justice-involved youth identified joining the gang for protection because of perceptions and experiences of violence and intimidation (e.g., bullying at school, potential to get 'jumped' by gang members, and/or experiencing fights in the neighbourhood). Once in the gang, the lives of gang members are riddled with traumatic events, often in the form of violence (Bocanegra & Stolbach, 2012). Individuals involved in gangs report disproportionate levels of exposure to violence when compared with community youth and non-gang members (Pyrooz, Moule, & Decker, 2014). A key finding from justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners was the important role that violence played in the decision to desist from gang involvement. Both groups made references to gang-related instances of trauma through first-hand or vicarious victimization experiences during membership. Further, they both identified the discrepancy between expectation and experience when it came to the perpetration of violence.

Experiences of trauma prior to or during gang involvement have been associated with many, often untreated, mental health issues among young people, including substance abuse, anger management issues, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and post-traumatic stress (Harper, Davidson, & Hosek, 2008; Huebner et al., 2007; Kelly, Anderson, Hall, Peden, & Cerel, 2012; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Madan, Mrug, & Windle, 2011). Several of the youth justice practitioners in this research project identified the effects of trauma and resulting mental health issues among the gang-involved youth justice clients with whom they work. As noted in one of the focus groups:

I think one issue is that we do have youth, you know, involved in gangs who have mental health issues... we do have some youth who do witness trauma as a result of it, either from their family or from what they're doing. (YJP-FG3)

These comments were supported with the acknowledgement from one youth justice practitioner that mental health issues are becoming more prevalent among justice-involved youth in general:

The youth we're getting now [youth justice system] are less criminal, there's more mental health, it's more mental health based... the cases that we do get are more serious, right; they're more mental health problems. In short, they're more challenging clients to work with. (YJP-1)

It is also possible that these experiences of trauma, and any associated mental health problems, may continue to affect former gang members in the time that follows gang involvement. If left untreated, these conditions may reduce the likelihood of individuals transitioning to a conventional life outside of the gang (Bubloz, 2014). The findings from the general research literature and this research project suggest that we need to acknowledge and address experiences of trauma in the lives of gang-involved youth. The development of trauma-informed interventions for current and former gang members is only emerging (Bailey, Smith, Huey, McDaniel, & Babeva, 2014). However, recognizing and addressing the consequences of traumatic experiences should be considerations moving forward for the YSB – Youth Justice Services and MCYS – Probation Services youth justice practitioners as well as for community-based organizations working with young people in gangs in the city of Ottawa. It is important to ensure that all sectors and services that support gang-involved youth are sufficiently equipped with the tools and resources required to provide trauma-informed care. This includes developing and implementing trauma-informed practices and supports that are designed to address the consequences of trauma and facilitate healing.

#### Provide Family-Focused Supports

Based on information from previous research studies and the findings from the current research project, addressing family-related issues may be one of the most important targets for prevention and intervention. Research has consistently demonstrated that poor family

functioning is related to risk for a number of poor outcomes for young people, including gang affiliation.<sup>154</sup> The most consistent empirical evidence points to the importance of several family factors, particularly lack of parental supervision/monitoring, lack of parental discipline, lack of parental role models, parental substance abuse, familial criminality, and gang-involved family members, in putting young people at risk of joining a gang and providing them with a home environment that reinforces gang-related behaviour (Alleyne & Wood, 2014; Howell, 1998; Klein & Maxson, 2006). Findings from the justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners in this research project support the important role of family risk factors in impacting gang affiliation. Both groups highlighted a lack of family involvement and support and a lack of positive attachment between parent(s) and their children as motivations for gang involvement. In these instances, the gang may assume the role of surrogate family, taking care of its members, and providing them with a sense of belonging missing from their own home environment.

There is evidence that family support initiatives may help prevent and reduce gang membership (Howell & Egley, 2005; Shute, 2008, 2013). Family-focused supports not only prevent negative behaviours, but also increase the likelihood of the kinds of positive outcomes that lead to successful and productive futures. Several youth justice practitioners identified the importance of prevention and early intervention initiatives that target family-related issues. As noted by one participant: “The only way that you’re really going to put a dent in anything, I think is being able to intervene with family at an early age” (YJP-4). This point was reiterated by others:

So, I think you also got to look at, even before they get involved [in gangs], what sources are available, supports for families, because when you look at it, it’s probably cheaper in the long run for society to have [early] interventions... It has to be tailored to their needs, whether they be newcomers to the country or whether they be family members who have

---

<sup>154</sup> For examples, see: Farrington & Welsh (2007); Gorman-Smith, Kampfner, & Bromann (2013); Shaffer (2014); and Simon, Ritter, & Mahendra (2013).



a lot of issues because I think that a lot of gangs, at least from my experience with some of the gang guys I have, there's usually a lot of issues with family involved and... and so if we I think help from that end, do a lot of the pre-intervention on a social service level as opposed to in the criminal justice system. (YJP-5)

A lot of these parent groups and all of that are excellent here at any stage but really are more effective at the earlier stages, whether it be in conjunction with CAS [Children's Aid Society], local community centres, you know... going out to them and bringing them to resources at their community level at an earlier stage. (YJP-FG3)

Research suggests that the effects of healthy early childhood development including positive parent-child relationships are far-reaching and include improved physical and emotional health, higher education, improved employability, and greater engagement in positive social exchanges (Gorman-Smith et al., 2013). Early prevention initiatives are the most cost-effective because the benefits to child and parent cut across behaviours and risks from mental health, to physical health, to academic and employment success, to community safety (Duncan, Ludwig, & Magnuson, 2007; Heckman, 2006). Interventions may also be implemented later in an individual's life and can target both those at highest risk for gang involvement and those currently affiliated with gangs (Gorman-Smith et al., 2013). These initiatives may include reducing/mediating family conflicts, helping individuals build their relationships with family members and/or significant others, teaching parents of gang members more effective family management skills, and providing opportunities for families to spend positive time together (Young & Gonzalez, 2013). Both a youth justice practitioner and justice-involved youth referred to the importance of interventions for gang-involved youth that target family-related issues:

So, in case management meetings and I guess family counselling would be a big thing too for ensuring or helping ensure relationships with parents or families are positive so that they [gang-involved youth] see more positives over the negatives. (YJP-6)

And [interventions are needed] that try to keep families together, like not to fight every day and maybe like... I don't know how to put that, but you can't really stop people from like drinking and whatnot but that's not a big help either when dad's drinking and

whatnot and parents drink, and some do drugs and stuff and families collapse, that's how they collapse. (John)

It should be acknowledged that the success rate for intervening with gang-involved youth is lower and that the returns for intervention also diminish over time, making it more difficult and less cost-efficient to wait until the young person has arrived at the point of gang involvement.

The future development of family-focused supports must not only be evidence-informed but also be both acceptable to families and sensitive to the contexts in which they are offered (Shute, 2013). Building on the recommendations of Shute (2008) and Aldridge and colleagues (2011), acceptable and effective support for families of at-risk and gang-involved youth should be family-mediated but youth-focused, voluntary, supportive, and non-stigmatic, and based in high-quality functional relationships. In addition, it was noted in one of the focus groups with youth justice practitioners that information and services must be easily accessible for families and resources should be multilingual:

I mean, there may be with certain families, certain challenges it may have... essentially the fact that some parents are working two to three different jobs, so they may not have the time, so making sure that they have information available too, that quick, easy, down and dirty so therefore they can be aware of it and therefore whatever time they do have, they can be able to attend... I mean like... so it's sort of making sure that information is available to them and obviously, and be available in multiple languages because obviously, again I spoke to it earlier, there is a number of gang-involved youth at risk, they don't speak either one of Canada's official languages, so we have to be open to that as well. (YJP-FG3)

Family-focused supports are also likely to need extensive preparatory work that tackles misconceptions about services, denial of problems, and fear of blame and stigmatization (Aldridge et al., 2011; McGrath, 2007). Finally, they should be 'gang sensitive' in that they identify gang membership, address key family-level predictors, and challenge pro-gang attitudes and beliefs (Shute, 2013).

In moving forward, the YSB – Youth Justice Services and MCYS – Probation Services youth justice practitioners can use a variety of techniques to engage and foster improved relationships between gang-involved youth justice clients and their families. This includes identifying a wide range of family members who can provide short- and long-term care for these young people. These individuals should be identified as soon as the gang-involved youth enters the youth justice facility and family member engagement and the provision of family-focused supports should be part of the justice-involved youth's case management / reintegration plan. At the same time, community-based organizations can offer family outreach programs which provide gang sensitive supports to at-risk youth and families of gang members. In Ottawa, one such example is the Supporting Families program implemented by YouTurn Youth Support Services. Based on a community service model, the initiative provides support for youth and their siblings in a family context with the goal of a reduction in involvement in gang activities. Continued support for approaches such as these which aim to promote positive family relationships and provide family-focused supports are needed to address the youth gang issue in Ottawa.

#### Offer Informal Supports through Mentoring and Recreational Activities

The level of an individual's attachment to conventional society plays a role in gang membership. In general, social control theory (Hirschi, 1969) postulates that those who do not become involved in criminal activity have stronger bonds to conventional society than those that do become involved. In this vein, preventing gang involvement and reducing gang membership may be accomplished by encouraging and increasing attachments to prosocial friends and positive role models and engagement in the prosocial world through participation in community-based activities (Ngo, 2010). This perspective was reflected by some of the youth justice

practitioners and justice-involved youth in this research project who indicated the need for community-based alternatives for gang membership:

We need to have mentorship-type activities or organized sport activities for the young men that are between the ages of 16 to 21 because that's a little bit of a no-man's land. If you are not studying and don't have any money, it's kind of a tough place to do anything because everything costs money and if you don't have any, well you're not doing much. (YJP-2)

Yeah, just like filling your day with activities and that and things you have to do like going to school and leaving the rest of your day open to kind of figure out what you want to do yourself. Just finding programs to get into and finding ways to keep your mind in that state that you don't want to be in the gang anymore or you don't want to be affiliated with them or you don't want to sell drugs anymore and that. (Allister)

Initiatives that focus on social support have been defined as “systematic activities designed to change the existing quality, level, or function of an individual’s social network or to create new networks and relationships” (Budde & Schene, 2004, p. 342). Prosocial networks expose individuals to social controls that influence adaptive normative behaviours, providing individuals with predictability, purpose, and a sense of stability and belonging (Pettus-Davis, Doherty, Veeh, & Drymon, 2017). A burgeoning literature base has suggested that important benefits can be provided by informal social supports. In contrast to formal social supports (e.g., youth justice practitioners), informal social supports arise from naturally occurring relationships, or individuals who do not receive pay for their efforts (McCamish-Svensson, Samuelsson, Hagberg, Svensson, & Dehlin, 1999).

Mentorship has traditionally been used to describe a process in which an older person (mentor) volunteers to engage in a relationship with a younger person (mentee) that serves to assist the latter’s personal development. The mentor can work as a role model, a teacher of social skills and values, and as a counsellor (Weinrath et al., 2016). The mentorship and related literature finds proper implementation and appropriate mentor behaviour can facilitate the

adoption of prosocial behaviour (Bouffard & Bergseth, 2008; Hart, O'Toole, Price-Sharp, & Shaffer, 2007). A strong personal relationship between the mentor and mentee is the key to any benefits derived (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002). While the gang literature does not often address the use of mentorship as an intervention, it is a strategy that has been rated positively in recent meta-analyses and program reviews demonstrating decreases in drug use, aggression, and delinquency, and increases in academic achievement (Bradley, 2018; Tolan, Henry, Schoeny, Lovegrove, & Nichols, 2014).

Given the perspectives of the justice-involved youth and the youth justice practitioners on the limited role of the latter in supporting the desistance process and the general belief that power differentials are likely to hinder the development of meaningful relationships, community-based mentors may be more likely to achieve a close relationship with at-risk or gang-involved youth. Further, since gangs are often described as surrogate families that provide young people with a sense of belonging, it may be that community-based mentorship can serve and replace this family function in a way that youth justice practitioners, no matter how well meaning, cannot (Weinrath et al., 2016).

Informal social support can also be provided through community-based initiatives that offer young people things to do and places to go other than being on the streets and/or with gangs (Halpern, Barker, & Mollard, 2000). Keeping young people busy through extracurricular activities is commonly viewed as a community-based protective factor for gang involvement (Bynner, 2002). Badger and Albright (2003) suggested several potentially effective alternatives to gang membership including structured activities, non-competitive activities, affordable sporting activities, and cultural camps. In their study examining how to help youth get out of gangs, Sharkey and colleagues (2015) found that nearly half of their participants reported the

need for young people to stay busy in positive, non-gang related activities. Sports were commonly discussed as having multiple positive influences on individuals trying to leave gangs (e.g., outlet for aggression, social activity).

As noted previously, both the justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners in this research project identified the potential of recreational activities, and like the findings above, sports-based activities were recommended for at-risk and gang-involved youth. As noted in the focus groups with justice-involved youth: “I mean like sports programs and stuff like that... people like to play sports, so if you offer them sports then that’s something they can look forward to” (JIY-FG1), and:

Any sports, keep them [at-risk youth] busy. We get 10 games in high school and after that it’s done. If there’s no other sports, then what do you think is going to happen? If you can’t keep us busy, we are going to find ourselves things to keep us busy. (JIY-FG2)

The potential contributions of sports-based programs have been identified within the existing delinquency literature as ‘diversion’ and ‘social development’ (Coalter, 2007; Hartmann, 2001; Nichols, 2007). Diversionary activities, usually in the form of subsidized community sports and leisure, aim to prevent participants from engaging in antisocial behaviour for the duration of the activity. Programs tend to be targeted at geographical areas with high levels of crime (‘hotspots’) and/or scheduled at ‘peak times’ of offending. Social development activities, sometimes referred to as ‘plus-sport’ initiatives, tend rather to work with smaller numbers in a more intensive way. Here, sport is conceptualized as a ‘tool’ or a ‘hook’ for attracting participants to programs that aim, often in partnership with other youth services, to address health, welfare, and educational issues as well as antisocial behaviour (Kelly, 2012). As noted by Borduin and colleagues (2009) and Ryan and colleagues (2010), inspiring healthy choices and safer actions on the part of young offenders through cognitive behavioural therapy

that is complemented by recreational opportunities is an approach that can contribute to the prevention of recidivism.

In recent years there has been an increasing focus on the potential for sport to provide a transformative experience that may trigger desistance actions, particularly among young men (Deuchar, 2009; Nichols, 2007). Participation in sports-based activities is important to the restoration of identity, the reduction of stigma, and the prevention of harm. Individuals can rediscover and re-emphasize their positive selves and by maximizing positive social interactions, they can learn to replicate prosocial as opposed to harm-generating interactions (Gervais, 2015).<sup>155</sup> These sports-based programs have also been shown to be applicable with gang-involved youth populations.

There is a need to explore the effectiveness of different types of informal supports in the development of future initiatives to address youth gang involvement. While sports-based activities currently exist in the YSB youth justice facilities, more structured initiatives may be implemented moving forward. For example, custody-based sports programs can include intensive coaching of a sport (e.g., football, basketball, boxing), fitness training, and games including some against visiting community teams, as well as group activities (e.g., goal setting, thinking skills, team skills training, presentations from guest speakers, peer review exercises). These activities can be delivered by the youth justice practitioners in collaboration with community-based partners, specifically community coaches and ‘transition workers’, who can play an important mentoring role. Corresponding sports-based initiatives should be offered

---

<sup>155</sup>It should be acknowledged that there are critiques in relation to supporting young offenders’ ‘right to play’, that these individuals are not deserving of any rights, and certainly not recreational ones. However, in an article highlighting the importance of standing up for sexual offending youths’ rights, Gervais (2015) argues that providing young people with positive recreational experiences should be part of a comprehensive approach to address both rights and responsibilities. Such an approach may be more productive given that it is supporting young people more restoratively rather than responding to them only punitively. Moving beyond judgment and focusing on support are essential steps toward restorative healing and constructive rehabilitation – both of which are arguably in the broader interest of public safety (Koss, Bachar, & Hopkins, 2006; Ryan et al., 2010).

following the young person's release into the community such that the informal supports can be maintained. Additional initiatives to promote the development of these types of informal supports are also needed for youth at risk of gang involvement in the city of Ottawa. As indicated in the *OSVGS*, more attention needs to be paid to providing youth at risk of gang involvement with consistent mentors and role models to whom they can relate. Further, increased access to affordable, engaging, and well supervised sports is needed for young people in their own neighbourhoods (Bania, 2017).

#### Provide Support for Housing and Meaningful Employment

Chalas and Grekul (2017) suggest that the period following release from a criminal justice facility is a critical time for gang intervention. It is at this stage that individuals need help with resettlement, health and housing needs, supports with skills and training, access to employment opportunities, and other forms of assistance that provide attractive alternatives to gang membership and help individuals sustain their motivation to leave the gang (Boduszek et al., 2015; Harris, 2011). Two of these areas of support were specifically identified by the participants in this research project. As noted by MJ: "Youth need help with housing, help getting a job, not a minimum wage job, give them more than what they were offered as a kid", and by one of the youth justice practitioners: "You know we're looking at systems, in the sense that we have to provide good jobs and even decent housing" (YJP-5).

It was suggested in Chapter 6 that individuals who do not have their basic needs met by their families and socio-economic environments may seek out gang membership to fulfill them. By offering alternatives to gang membership to meet these physiological needs through supportive housing and opportunities for employment, gang-involved youth may be willing to disengage from the gang lifestyle. Further, independent living and gainful employment represent



conventional means to achieve manhood and reflect idealized notions of hegemonic masculinity (i.e., demonstrating independence and economic success). The latter were identified by the justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners as being important to gang-involved youth.

Several youth justice practitioners identified the need to provide new independent housing options for justice-involved youth who will not or cannot go back home upon release from the youth justice facility. They discussed the limitations of the current supportive housing options and the need for independent dwellings that are outside of traditional gang territories and where gang-involved individuals are not located together:

There are only so many options for young men who are not going to go back home. Umm, like if there's some who can't go back home, the choices to go for supportive housing... they're mostly, all of them are located in the central core [of the city]. They're going to go back to these supportive houses, that are with other youth who are, you know, from similar situations as them. And they're all in bad neighbourhoods... We're setting them up for failure sending them back in the lion's den like that, you know?... Like even if it was you know, smaller conglomerations throughout the city where you have, where guys have an opportunity to actually move away from neighbourhoods and move away from the influence and the drugs. (YJP-FG1)

Talking about some of the structure or the programs that exist now, so for example some of the supported housing units or like ADS [A Different Street] and etcetera, the young men's shelter. Well of course they're located in areas that are perhaps easier to access for young men, but they're also located in areas that are known for high crime rates. So, I think that part of that also would be giving the young men that opportunity to restructure their life in a new environment where there isn't that familiarity... I think it's just a lack of opportunity and diversification in regard to the services that are provided and the location where they're provided I think plays a role in success or lack thereof. (YJP-2)

Some of the justice-involved youth also discussed the importance of housing. As noted by Allister: "Like supports in the community. I'm not really sure like I'd say just finding a nice place to live and that and getting away from it [the gang]." The problems with the current housing options were also discussed in one of the focus groups:

You know what they can offer is like housing and support but in the end you put a bunch of ex-gang members in the same housing, you can't do it you know what I mean? Like

ADS [A Different Street] that's not necessarily the best place to be putting people, you know? (JIY-FG2)

Having secure and supportive independent housing options provides the stable base from which to launch other aspects of young people's lives such as education, employment, and a movement toward desistance from gang involvement. Finding a place to call home is not just logistical, but is also symbolic of independence (Abrams et al., 2017). Creating supportive housing options has historically been a complex, multilevel challenge (Tam, Freisthler, Curry, & Abrams, 2016).

In the city of Ottawa, there is a need for alternative housing options for gang-involved youth to help them in their transition to a conventional lifestyle. There are several organizations that currently offer housing services to young people including the John Howard Society of Ottawa, the YMCA-YWCA of the National Capital Region and the YSB. They provide emergency shelters for individuals seeking temporary housing, as well as transitional and long-term housing programs. While these services are filling a need in the Ottawa community, based on the responses provided above, new strategies in constructing semi-independent housing facilities and independent housing options in different locations throughout the city should also be explored. In the interim, the YSB – Youth Justice Services and MCYS – Probation Services youth justice practitioners can work with gang-involved youth justice clients on an individual basis to identify and secure suitable and affordable housing options following release from the youth justice facility.

Overall, the participants in this research project highlighted the economic orientation of the gang where the main purpose is to make money for survival, to demonstrate independence, and to show status, often through illegal means. The gang's function is not to tie its members to criminal lifestyles, but to offer alternative economic opportunities through criminal behaviour for

those who need it (Dickson-Gomez et al., 2017). Legitimate employment, and more specifically a lack of perceived access to opportunities for it, was a pervasive theme throughout the findings chapters. Accordingly, employment-focused interventions, emphasizing opportunities for legitimate paid work, may be an important component in supporting desistance from the gang (Smith, Huey, & McDaniel, 2015; van Gemert & Fleisher, 2005; Vigil, 1988).

Several justice-involved youth, including Juliano and Matt, discussed the importance of legitimate employment opportunities in the context of the process of desistance and the need for support from others to obtain well-paying jobs. JB put it simply: “Help to get a trade, get a job”. Further, as Cassell and Weinrath (2011) reported, employment plays an important role in the gang exit process by providing structure to the individual’s daily activities, as well as a rationale to spend less time with the gang, giving the individual positive feelings from earning a legitimate income. This viewpoint was reiterated in one of the youth justice practitioner focus groups:

I think employment, well as soon as they get out [of the youth justice facility] is a crucial aspect because a lot of the time these guys get out and they have a circle of friends that they hang out with and it’s almost impossible to cut friends from their social life and that’s one of the requirements to step away from the gang life and it’s negatively viewed whenever they do that. They are looked at as a weak person or they’re labelled as a certain individual that none of these guys want to be. Therefore, I find if they have less time to hang out with their friends, that’s a little bit of a legitimate excuse for them to say, I have to go to work. So, if they’re constantly busy with work and have less time to hang out with their friends then there’s less time to do crime, less time to be involved in various things. (YJP-FG2)

It should be acknowledged that the availability, quality, and nature of work are important considerations in designing employment-based initiatives. The modern ‘service-driven’ and ‘information-driven’ economy found in many urban communities has made it increasingly difficult for young people to secure employment, especially low-skilled, entry-level jobs that offer a degree of social respect and income (Spergel, 1990). For example, Johnny noted the lack

of unskilled trade positions currently available, which he believes are important for leaving the gang lifestyle behind:

Unless there is a way that we can get to a trade without finishing school, maybe, you know? Like before, people used to look at Alberta, you know? I know a lot of my guys in the gang used to go to Alberta for the oil fields. But now, everything is like going down, you know? So yeah, so it's like what is everyone going to do, you know?

In recent years, the wages of lower-skilled workers have also decreased. This downward trend in wages is often attributed to the 'dual' or 'segmented' nature of the post-industrial labour market that financially rewards highly-skilled workers, but offers limited economic opportunity for low-skilled workers (Crutchfield, 2014). Further, the nature of low-skilled work in the service-driven economy is often seen as unattractive to gang-involved youth. As noted by several youth justice practitioners, their justice-involved youth clients are unwilling to seek out 'McJobs' because the compensation is poor, they do not personify an image of toughness or respectability, and they are perceived as more socially degrading than employment in other occupations:

They're [gang-involved youth] making, you know, 1500 bucks every week and then you give them the idea of, you know, McDonald's, sort of like, work your way up and then they're like oh, what's the salary? Oh well \$10.25, you'll be making about 300 bucks every two weeks... They're like 'well I've worked so hard for three years building my clients or whatever and then now I got to start over again, no'. (YJP-FG1)

You won't get any of my guys [gang-involved youth] trying to go work at Tim Horton's or McDonald's like that is totally below and they believe 'I'll never make the same amount that I'm making' [while in the gang]. (YJP-FG3)

It is likely that employment-based initiatives for gang-involved youth will prove ineffective if careful consideration is not given to these dynamics (Watkins, 2017). The youth justice practitioners acknowledged the importance of providing more meaningful and well-paying employment opportunities for gang-involved youth to support their desistance, as noted in one of the focus groups:

There's a lot to be said about that, about, about paying kids. To motivate them. Like they keep them in their community to work... So, to have money available to pay these kids a decent wage to do something in their community... What I'm saying is they need to feel like they're making a difference, but you need to put money in these kids' pockets. A lot of them are looking for the quick cash. A lot of them want money. A lot of them know how to make quick cash because they need to survive. And you know what, we need to start to look at how we can provide some funding in these communities to give these kids jobs to stay and help out their communities. (YJP-FG3)

There are other barriers to employment for gang-involved youth that should be acknowledged, particularly for those involved in the youth justice system. They often have a lack of education or technical skills, absent or poor work experience history, and/or lack of recent job experiences, which may block them from finding gainful employment, regardless of their motivation to change (Smith et al., 2015). Further, their criminal records may restrict access to employment opportunities (Graffam, Shinkfield, Lavelle, & McPherson, 2004; Stoll & Bushway, 2008; Uggen, Manza, & Thompson, 2006). In one of the focus groups with youth justice practitioners, having a criminal record was identified as a barrier in some of the current employment-focused programs:

[There are] a whole slew of programs out there that offer support to help kids get into the workforce and so on and so forth but as soon as they hear that the kid is on probation whether it's gang-involved youth, imagine if I try to put a gang-involved youth in those programs, so there needs to be a program out there that is geared toward kids that are high risk, on probation, because this is a risk. It's youth at risk. And, you know, I've had two agencies call me already to say, 'yeah, he's a youth on probation. Just don't refer at this time because we don't have the program and he won't be accepted'. (YJP-FG3)

Recognizing the dynamics of the current labour market, addressing barriers to employment, and acknowledging the reasons that individuals give for leaving their gangs are all important in the development of employment-based initiatives that can encourage and support gang exit (Roman et al., 2017).

As highlighted in Chapter 9, a new initiative of the YSB is the Tamarack Trades Training Centre, a pre-employment program that teaches justice-involved youth marketable trade skills needed to gain entry-level employment in residential and commercial construction. Participants are provided instruction on how to use tools and operate machinery while simultaneously learning general work skills. The program seeks to mirror the workplace environment as much as possible, has a process-oriented focus, and an emphasis on building routine. The staff members seek to establish a relationship with the youth participants and to act as mentors providing young people with both support and honesty about the realities of gaining employment.

While pre-employment programs can provide individuals with the knowledge and skills to succeed and prepare them for employment, there is often a lack of follow-through. This may be a result of the absence of engagement on the part of the individual, but another issue is the environment in which these young people are situated and the limited support they are provided with respect to their needs. In moving forward, a more direct and seamless process must be developed. It is important to ensure that the training offered through initiatives such as the Tamarack Trades Training Centre is matched to employment opportunities and needs in the Ottawa community. The justice-involved youth indicated being discouraged with efforts made in the youth justice facility to improve their job-related skills, which do not translate into employment once they are released. They identified the importance of having a job in place before they are released from the youth justice facility.

Encouraging gang-involved youth to participate in job-related training programs can be pivotal to a productive future but should be part of a broader package, including help securing meaningful employment. The YSB – Youth Justice Services, MCYS – Probation Services and community-based organizations in Ottawa must continue to work to address the multiple levels

of barriers to employment for gang-involved and formerly incarcerated youth. This means developing and implementing employment-focused programs that aim to lift structural barriers to employment (e.g., criminal record checks), launch career paths as opposed to temporary, low-wage work, and provide ongoing support through mentoring and other direct services (e.g., job retention support, employer incentives to hire young people with criminal records). These are the types of programs that are most apt to engage young people in a successful employment trajectory (Abrams et al., 2017; Lafontaine et al., 2005). This is in line with priorities of the *OSVGS* indicating that more attention needs to be paid to ensuring access to tangible employment and entrepreneurial supports and paid work opportunities for those involved in or at risk of becoming involved in gangs. This includes intensive supports for those involved in the criminal justice system and with criminal records, and requires the involvement of partners that represent the employment and business sectors (Bania, 2017).

#### Investigate the Role for Support from Individuals with Gang-Related Experiences

One of the main findings from Chapter 9 was that according to the justice-involved youth, the youth justice practitioners did not (or could not) understand their lived realities, limiting the ability of the latter to assist them in the desistance process. It was suggested by Allister that support may be better provided by a former gang member. When asked what interventions they might find helpful to support desistance from gang involvement, several other justice-involved youth identified the role that could be played by similarly situated others. Two justice-involved youth discussed the importance of mentorship from individuals who had similar life experiences and who were able to make positive changes in their own lives. As noted by Matt: “Like someone who has gone through a tough situation and has conquered it”, and by Michel: “Yes, and it is also the fact that they’ve done it and if they’re actually leading a good life

and they're doing better now that they're out of the gang, I think that could definitely influence me". Johnny also highlighted the importance of having someone with lived experience relay the consequences of continued membership in the gang based on their own situation:

If you [researcher] walked in right now to a bunch of us and told us 'hey yeah, I'm here to talk to you guys about gangs, I want to help you get out of gangs', no one would listen to you. I'm being honest. Like me, I had to have my cousin, like someone who has already been caught, someone who has already been through that path, you know but has changed his life in a certain way that he can explain to gang members what would happen if they continue, you know? Like in that situation, like someone who comes to speak to them to tell them it's not worth it, this is what happens.

Further, KP indicated that the consequences encountered by the individual needed to be severe for their advice to have any influence: "To be 100 per cent honest, the only way that would ever be beneficial is if you brought in a paraplegic dude that got shot at and it changed his life around".

Several youth justice practitioners also identified the importance of interventions which provide support from those who have lived the gang lifestyle but have since changed directions, embarking on a more prosocial pathway:

And it's more like somebody who might either have been through it or someone who's lived a similar life but led a different path, you know? Umm, because you want to, you want to be that person too, but you don't want to share your whole life with them. I don't want to tell them everything about my life so that they can believe me. But if a mentor or somebody that was younger too or somebody who maybe did leave a gang that they could actually look up to and see that there is, you know? (YJP-FG1)

I'm intrigued by having people who've moved through gangs help guys with gangs... past gang members helping present guys with exit strategies. I do utilize a lot of stories of people that have done well and how they've done it and how they've achieved it. I always find guys who are contemplating change; I think they would like to hear that. (YJP-3)

I'd like to see more guest speakers coming in [to the youth justice facility] and speaking with the youth as far as being former gang members that have transitioned into regular life. A lot of those guys understand their world and they've been through their steps, so these guys are going to listen to them a lot more than a counsellor or staffers. (YJP-FG2)



Several initiatives have relied on the ‘reformed gang member’ believing that a shared history is an important feature of gang interventions and seeing the significance of having someone who has ‘been there’ involved as an interventionist.<sup>156</sup> Lopez-Aguado (2013) studied how gang intervention programs utilized former gang-affiliated individuals to mentor active gang members. He found that gang interventionists possessed a ‘street liminality’ allowing them to navigate both the margins as well as conventional society. Interventionists fill a unique role as the bridge between gang-involved youth, the community, and the various agencies and organizations that are trying to reach this population including social services and law enforcement officials (Bradstreet, 2015). However, these ‘street worker interventionist’ models have also been critiqued by program evaluators, who have argued that acknowledging street culture only amplifies delinquent behaviour (Wilson & Chermak, 2011). Klein (1995) claims that these forms of outreach efforts are not effective because they legitimize street culture and reinforce gang cohesion. Street worker models are also considered gang enablers by critics (Klein & Maxson, 2006).

Although recommended by the justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners in this research project, the development and implementation of any youth justice system and community-based initiatives in the city of Ottawa that employ former gang-affiliated individuals should proceed with caution. ‘Insiders’, those with common social identities and similar experiences could have a broader impact on the client population than would other practitioners coming in from the ‘outside’ (Bradstreet, 2015). For example, in his ethnographic work with gang-involved young adults, Rios (2011) showed how advice given by probation and police officers had little practical application for criminalized youth on the streets. Harris (2011)

---

<sup>156</sup> For examples, see: Alberta Crime Reduction and Safe Communities Task Force (2007); Chalas & Grekul (2017); Hayden (2004); and Rodriguez (2001).

highlighted the need for support to come from someone who had been ‘in the game’ because this person would have important skills and tools over someone who had not lived their lifestyle. However, there are also risks to relying solely on insiders who must not only overcome their own personal experiences of gang involvement, but who must also be equipped to advise and support active gang members by providing them with new ways of thinking, coping, and behaving.

As noted in Chapter 9, perhaps a collaboration between formal supports (e.g., youth justice practitioners, community-based organizations) and informal supports (e.g., credible insiders) should be examined as a starting point in the development of initiatives for gang-involved youth in the city of Ottawa. Further, there should be emphasis placed on identifying the ideologies, social positions, and motivations of any credible insiders that may be placed in a position to assist young people in desistance from gang involvement.

Leveraging the expertise of individuals with lived experience of gang involvement was also identified in the context of preventative ‘knowledge dissemination’ initiatives. In one of the focus groups with justice-involved youth, a few participants referred to the deterrent effect of having gang-involved or formerly gang-involved individuals speak to at-risk youth about the negative consequences of gang involvement:

Even people that don’t do crime don’t like the police. What’s the police going to teach them [youth at risk for gang involvement]? You do a crime I’ll put you away, that’s it. Does that mean you’ll never get out, no. But you show him someone that is deep in it [gang involvement], that has done his whole life in it, that will show you what happened and now he is sitting behind bars. You would think for a long time like this guy is in the pen [adult correctional facility], he’s doing serious time, 25 years to life. (JIY-FG2)

[You should use] youth from your neighbourhood, people who have been where you’re heading, you know, and who can actually tell you what it’s about. You know someone goes to the pen [adult correctional facility] for three to four years... it’s not worth it. Sometimes it’s best to hear things first hand. (JIY-FG2)

We must also exercise caution in implementing this type of initiative. On the one hand, prior research has emphatically shown that programs like Scared Straight that attempt to deter youth from involvement in crime through visits to prisons and talking with inmates are not effective (Petrosino, Turpin-Petrosino, & Buehler, 2005). On the other hand, school-based programs such as Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.), which includes a lesson on harmful consequences of gangs on the individual and community, have been shown to be effective in reducing gang membership (Esbensen, Peterson, Taylor, & Osgood, 2012).

Having former gang members delineate the myths of the gang lifestyle was also identified as an important preventative measure. As noted in one of the focus groups with justice-involved youth:

One big thing is that people always over-exaggerate gangs. They say ‘oh if you’re in a gang then you’ll be this and this and this’. I guess it’s just like to prevent someone from joining a gang; you basically have to tell him [at-risk youth] how it is. I think it would make the most sense for someone who’s in a similar situation as them to show them.  
(JIY-FG2)

Disillusionment has been cited in the research literature as a motivation for leaving the gang (Carson et al., 2013; Carson & Vecchio, 2015). The justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners in this research project highlighted incongruences between the expectations and experiences of gang involvement related to a glamorous lifestyle, the perpetration of violence, and the gang’s ability to meet the needs for which they initially sought membership (e.g., sense of belonging, surrogate family, financial success) as contributing to a decision to leave the gang. We can make use of this knowledge on desistance by having those with experience debunk the glamorized view of the gang lifestyle and demystify the presumed advantages of gang membership, to counteract the perpetuation of gang mythology as presented by the media and entertainment industry.

If the YSB – Youth Justice Services, MCYS – Probation Services, and/or community-based organizations in Ottawa are to proceed with preventative ‘knowledge dissemination’ initiatives, care should be taken to determine what and how information will be presented and by whom. Raising awareness about the impacts of gang life may be accomplished via web-based or multimedia resources, a presentation by an ex-gang member, the screening of a gang documentary with a facilitated discussion, and/or an information session or educational workshop conducted by credible individuals who have varying levels of experience in the gang lifestyle. These activities may be conducted virtually or held in person in a school, youth justice facility, or community-based setting. They should be tailored to the audience and reflective of the local gang situation.

#### Identify Key Moments for Intervention

Findings from empirical research on the process of desistance, and specifically on the motivations for leaving the gang, can provide information on the best moments for intervention with gang-involved youth (Carson & Vecchio, 2015). A decision to leave the gang may be based on the growing costs associated with continued membership. For the participants in this research project, the latter were primarily discussed in the context of experiences of violence and confinement in the youth justice system as motivators for desistance. Berger and colleagues (2017) have defined these as ‘triggering situations’ which can lead to a process of contemplation regarding the gains and costs of continued gang involvement. For those who interpret these experiences as turning points, they may serve as hooks for change and can be considered key moments for intervention to support desistance from gang involvement.

As discussed previously, a key finding in this research project was the important role that violence played, through first-hand or vicarious victimization experiences, in the decision to

desist from gang involvement. Decker and Lauritsen (2002, p. 69) have suggested that these experiences may be an opportunity for intervention: “Seizing opportunities when gang members have been victimized by violence or have witnessed a close friend’s victimization may offer a promising avenue for reducing gang involvement”. They suggested that it is important to intervene very shortly after the experience, since it is then when members are more likely to reflect on the risks and consequences of their membership.

As shown in Chapter 2, emerging research shows that hospitals are an effective venue for intervening in the lives of gang members (Cooper et al., 2006; Johnson et al., 2007). HIVIPs often employ culturally competent support workers who understand the lived experiences of gang members and who can identify with them. The latter is necessary to establishing a trusting relationship as many clients have been marginalized and have significant trust issues with figures of authority. The support worker typically provides crisis intervention, linkages to community-based services, and offers long-term case management. Through the provision of these services, HIVIPs can supplement an individual’s desire to leave the gang with concrete resources to achieve this goal (Cooper et al., 2006; Roman et al., 2017; Snider et al., 2015). The perspectives of the justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners on the role of violence in the decision to desist from gang involvement, combined with growing concern around the harmful effects of street level violence in the city of Ottawa, as noted in the *OSVGS* (Bania, 2017) and observed in the increasing rates of gang-related shootings (Mussa, 2016), indicate that it may be time to engage in discussions about the development of a hospital-based violence intervention program for this city.

The transition from the youth justice facility to the community may also be a key moment for intervention to support desistance from gang involvement. In this research project, both the

justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners identified confinement in the youth justice facility as an opportunity to reflect on continued gang involvement and to engage in institutional programs that may help to support the transition to a more prosocial pathway upon release. However, they also highlighted a disconnect between the motivation and intention to desist while in the youth justice facility and the realities of returning to the community. The pressures and challenges that justice-involved youth face upon release from the youth justice facility can be overwhelming (e.g., mental health issues, dealing with dysfunctional family relationships, dissociating from gang-involved peers, difficulty accessing and affording stable housing, inadequate education and workforce readiness skills, lack of employment options, stigmatization) (Bullis & Yovanoff, 2006; Burke, Mulvey, & Schubert, 2015; Kang, Eno Louden, Ricks, & Jones, 2015; Lachman, Roman, & Cahill, 2013; Tam et al., 2016; Unruh, Povenmore-Kirk, & Yamamoto, 2009). It is important that individuals who are motivated to change are supported through the transition process to continue on a desistance pathway.

Several youth justice practitioners provided suggestions for supports that they believed would assist the process of desistance for gang-involved youth. They identified the importance of employing a wraparound care model and engaging a variety of supports in the community to address the young person's specific needs. They also identified the importance of long-term and persistent provisions in the community:

I mean they can do their time and once they get out [of the youth justice facility] they go to the same environment so it's offering wraparound services to youth on the outside. Having someone check in on them, not the probation officer, but somebody more neutral... somebody supporting their needs. So, it's the after-care from leaving the [youth] justice system and having a follow-up on the outside, like community support teams. So, look at all their social systems and providing support in all of them and have it in school, work, their home life. (YJP-1)

Having a better marriage of the institutional place with the community resources... and a real partnership and understanding what the challenges are with our [gang-involved]

youth and the kind of support that they need when they're reintegrating [to the community]. (YJP-FG1)

Trying to get them [justice-involved youth] community supports so that when their probation order or court order finishes, they have those supports in place because if a person calls me up and says 'hey I don't have a place to stay, where can I look?' Sure, I'll give him some information but ideally, it's like getting them supports in the community beyond their legal mandate. (YJP-5)

I think the persistence piece is important for me. With these particular, well any of the higher-risk clients, but these ones [gang-involved] as well, is that if they're going to have community supports, the service [has to be] one that is persistent in following through, in continuing to work with the client. (YJP-FG3)

Transitional planning and services for resettlement and reintegration encompass what occurs both during and after confinement in a youth justice facility. According to Altschuler and Brash (2004) resources offered should: (1) prepare young people for entry into the specific communities into which they will return; (2) establish the necessary arrangements and linkages with the full range of public and private sector organizations and individuals in the community that can address their needs; and (3) ensure the delivery of prescribed services and supervision in the community. Currently, where effective programming is available, it often utilizes comprehensive case management services and a wraparound care model (Bilchik, 2011). Like the HVIPs, community-based support workers who understand the lived experiences of gang members and who can identify with them should be employed. By developing a trusting relationship, they can act as positive role models in the lives of gang-involved youth and help to foster engagement in programming.

In moving forward, the YSB – Youth Justice Services should collaborate with community-based organizations in the city of Ottawa to more consistently employ the services of 'transition workers'. The latter should work closely with the youth justice practitioners while gang-involved youth justice clients are still in the youth justice facility. Transitional planning

should involve outreach to community-based resources to identify supports and opportunities prior to the justice-involved youth returning to the community. Community-based transition workers should collaborate with service providers from different disciplines to offer multifaceted services that support gang-involved youth during their transition into community life, offer sustained crisis intervention, and connect them to relevant community resources. Additionally, there is a need for continuous support from the community-based transition worker that extends well beyond the justice-involved youth's release into the community. According to Bullis and colleagues (2002), the first few months following release from a youth justice facility appear to be the most critical. Young people who receive appropriate supports within this window of engagement are more likely to be positively involved in society in the future.

#### Promote De-Labeling and Inclusionary Practices

The general research literature on desistance has consistently demonstrated that stigma and labelling influence the longevity and persistence of delinquent behaviour over time (Maruna & LeBel, 2010). In the context of youth gang involvement, the justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners in this research project identified the lingering gang label as a barrier in the process of desistance. As noted in Chapter 8, the justice-involved youth perceived the police as a hindrance rather than a help to any efforts they were making to change their lives. Some felt that the sheer presence of the police in their neighbourhoods represented a threat to desistance because it increased the likelihood that they would be stopped and harassed because of their past actions, their current associates, their appearance (e.g., tattoos, showing colours), and/or based on suspicion of their continued gang affiliation. It is difficult to sustain the momentum toward change when you are constantly marked by your past.



If police agencies, including the Ottawa Police Service, continue to use criteria-based gang member classification systems and employ computerized databases specifically designed to store information on individuals associated with gangs, then we must at least question the current model that does not allow a person to be removed from the system. It seems only fair that gang database entries should have a time limit or clear mechanisms for deletion once individuals have demonstrated their commitment to leave the gang lifestyle behind. In moving forward, the Ottawa Police Service should entertain the idea of the development of a removal protocol for their gang-related classification systems and databases. More generally, there is also a need to improve the relationship between the Ottawa Police Service and residents of the city of Ottawa. As noted in the *OSVGS*, in neighbourhoods affected by gangs and street violence, there is a need to improve the consistency of a policing approach that is built on dignity and respect for residents and for initiatives that build trust between the police and residents (Bania, 2017). While some youth-focused relationship development programs currently exist such as Real Talk: Building Positive Youth-Police Relationships in Four Neighbourhoods implemented by the Ontario Justice Education Network and the Ottawa Police Service's Youth Advisory Committee and Youth in Policing Initiative, more work needs to be done with at-risk and gang-involved populations.

Inclusionary community integration practices are also important to desistance from gang involvement. The focus here is on the importance of positive labelling, promoting human well-being, and encouraging a sense of belonging in the community. The general desistance literature has emphasized the use of 'status graduation ceremonies' and other 'reintegration rituals' (Fader, 2011; Maruna, 2011; Meisenhelder, 1982). These practices may become a meaningful component of the integration process if they are symbolic and emotive, are repeated as

necessary, involve community, focus on challenge and achievement, and involve a fresh start (Maruna, 2011). They involve more than just physical settlement into society (e.g., a place to stay, a source of income). Further to be successful, they must confer concrete privileges to individuals associated with a change in status. Significant others including family and friends, social institutions, community-based organizations, authority figures, and citizens should all play a role in recognizing gang-involved youths' work to reform and certify desistance efforts through ritual, prosocial labelling, and formal recognition (Fader, 2011).

In moving forward, community-based organizations in the city of Ottawa should identify possible community integration practices for gang-involved youth leaving the youth justice system who are motivated to change. This involves employing 'strengths-based' or 'restorative' approaches that focus on identifying opportunities for individuals to make positive contributions to the community. Initiatives may include education, leadership, mentorship, or community service activities. Ideally, the contributions made by these young people should be widely recognized and publicly acknowledged by the community. Beyond the introduction of these types of initiatives at the community level, there also must be change at a societal level.

As a society, we should be communicating an expectation that the desisting individual will be a positive force in the community, expressing the values of inclusion, citizenship, fundamental human rights, and forgiveness, and demonstrating our willingness to invest time and energy in these young people (Fox, 2015). The exclusionary 'criminology of the other' (Garland, 2001) will not serve our best interests. These practices associated with de-labelling and community inclusion promote normative identities among formerly gang-affiliated and justice-involved youth, as well as a sense of empowerment and autonomy, and contribute to a positive culture (Arrigo & Takahashi, 2006; Day & Ward, 2010).

## **Shifting Our Current Policy and Practice Orientation to Address Gang Desistance**

Current policy and practice on gang desistance has largely been disconnected from research on the topic (Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Pyrooz & Decker, 2014; Roman et al., 2017). Responding to the issue of youth gang membership should be built on a solid understanding of the process of desistance. The research literature as well as information gathered throughout this research project support the need for a shift in our current orientation. Below are some general considerations for moving forward as well as the presentation of a possible framework for a comprehensive, multi-systemic, multi-modal approach to address desistance from gang involvement.

### Acknowledge the Need to Address Structural Barriers

Leaving the gang requires commitment coupled with adequate resources and sustainable alternatives. It is not only about personal determination, but also about the environment within which individuals are situated and the opportunities that they are provided to help them change their lives. Like the work of others<sup>157</sup>, the findings from this research project identified several structural barriers that, unless systematically addressed, will continue to place limitations on young people's ability to desist from gang involvement. Failing to remove these barriers may also potentially leave these young people trapped in a cycle of setbacks as they enter adulthood.

If we are serious about addressing the issue of youth gang involvement, new initiatives must be devised that can capture the complex nature of the social world and the wider structural circumstances that constrain or facilitate individuals' ability to improve their lives (Healy, 2010). As Bottoms (2008) observed, unless interventions and practitioners are sensitive to the social contexts within which individuals attempt to engage in the process of desistance, their impact will be limited at best. Further, as emphasized by one of the youth justice practitioners:

---

<sup>157</sup> For examples, see: Abrams et al. (2017); and Deuchar et al. (2016).

I sometimes think of the work we do, we don't look at... context is also huge for me and you can work with an individual but if you never work to change their context or do grander work... That's my role to get out there and talk about structures that are in place, about systems that aren't working for people. You know all the determinants of health thing, right? Um, if we don't address those things and address them with these guys [gang-involved youth], I think things fall short for them.... You can give all sorts of lovely exit strategies but if you haven't gone back to address I think things that have been put on them... And I'm not discounting the idea of responsibility because some of the guys do not very nice things to other people, but I think in doing an intervention with them you have to address their history, their context, what's happened in their lives and how often systems have utterly and miserably failed them. (YJP-3)

If we continue to rely predominantly on strategies that focus on the gang-involved individuals, this justifies actions that seek to address the latter and their assumed 'deficits' rather than altering our society itself. This overlooks the ways in which institutions and policy processes themselves contribute to the social problems involving young people, and instead emphasizes the need to change and/or reform individuals (White, 2008). In this sense, our current response to youth gangs focuses, to an extent, on managing public perceptions and expectations rather than responding adequately to the complexities of the issue (Cohen, 1985; Garland 2001). We need to shift our focus to address relative inequality and relieve some of the frustration caused by our current social, economic, and political arrangements (Hastings, 2003). This requires targeting the underlying issues of poverty, inadequate housing, barriers to education, unemployment, racism, and discrimination (Bania, 2009; Miller, 1990) through a more systematic approach.

#### Clarify the Operationalization of 'Success'

Gang membership is largely treated as a dichotomy and individuals are lumped into 'gang member' and 'not a gang member' categories (Pyrooz, 2014b). While this may be a convenient measure, it is not the best way to understand gang membership in the context of gang intervention efforts. A complex reality surrounds the status of gang member. As discussed in

Chapter 5, there are various perspectives on how gang membership is defined and understood particularly as it relates to the criterion of criminal behaviour. The findings from this research project have supported the view shared by other researchers that there is nothing inherently criminal about gang membership. Rather, as explained by Pyrooz (2014a), the social mechanisms linked to group processes, not simply gang status, are responsible for heightened levels of criminal activity and violence within gangs.

Further, in employing this dichotomy, the understanding of desistance emphasizes the achievement of an outcome. Desisters are those individuals who identified as a gang member at one time but not at a later time. This operationalization tends to focus on the event of de-identification as a gang member (Krohn & Thornberry, 2008; Sweeten et al., 2013). The findings from this research project demonstrated that while de-identification is an important component of desistance it is not tantamount to disengagement from the gang. Rather, there is variability in conceptually defining desistance as a process. In general, it involves a lessened association with group members and/or reduced participation in group activities. Attention should be paid to the presence of enduring ties and continued involvement in criminal activities as they may indicate the varying stages of progression along the path to desistance (Carson & Vecchio, 2015). Pathways to change were described as gradual and complicated. Many gang members fluctuate in their level of commitment to the gang as they exit, and the process of being fully disengaged from the gang may see a series of steps forward and backward (Pyrooz & Decker, 2014). There is dynamic heterogeneity between and within individuals in their levels of involvement in and around gangs (Pyrooz, 2013).

Gang desistance initiatives should not begin with dichotomies, but with the recognition that individuals are embedded within gangs differentially. Our understanding of success should

worry less about gang status and suppression of criminal behaviour and more about mechanisms to support the process of desistance. The most common policy response to youth gangs continues to be enforcement by agents of the criminal justice system which focuses on the criminal behaviour component of gang membership (Bania, 2009; Chettleburgh, 2007; Fritsch et al., 1999; Jones et al., 2004; Klein, 1995; Westmacott et al., 2005). Other initiatives focus on cognitive behavioural treatment approaches centered upon the modification of offending behaviour of gang-involved individuals (Raynor & Robinson, 2009). By focusing exclusively on the criminal behaviour of gang members, we are not addressing the underlying purposes and motivations for gang membership. Instead, we are creating a damaging cycle of imprisonment and release of youth gang members, excluding them from mainstream society, and categorizing them based on their level of risk to reoffend. We need initiatives that are embedded with an understanding of the ‘zigzagging’ nature of the desistance process. Relapses are common, even within a desisting pathway, and automatic harsh enforcement may create more problems in the longer term (Farrall et al., 2010; Maruna, LeBel, Mitchell, & Naples, 2004). We need to place more emphasis on the incremental and difficult nature of making and sustaining behavioural change over time (Abrams et al., 2017).

Our policies and practices for addressing gang involvement should make more room for young people to embody the ‘in-between’ space where the journey to desistance may take different twists and turns before landing firmly on a certain path. Whether a young person can be considered a desister (not a gang member) or a persister (gang member) should not be the goal of gang intervention (Abrams et al., 2017). Instead of condemning gang members for maintaining certain aspects of gang membership, such as connections to group members or engagement in group-related behaviour, we should focus on strides that are made toward positive forms of

change and an individual's ongoing journey toward successful integration within the community (Bubolz, 2014; Uggen et al., 2006). This means relying on multiple measures of success that focus on improvements in agreed upon indicators such as the social determinants of health (Farrall & Calverley, 2006). These indicators are likely to provide a better assessment of the performance of gang initiatives in the long term than the level of reduction in criminal behaviour or a dichotomous measure of gang involvement.

### Toward a Comprehensive Approach to Address Desistance from Gang Involvement

Taken together, the recommendations and considerations in this chapter demonstrate the need for a comprehensive, multi-systemic, multi-modal approach to address desistance from gang involvement. We need initiatives that focus on all social-ecological domains (individual, relational, community), together with serious efforts to prevent and reduce the social structural conditions of multiple marginality (Vigil, 2002). To contribute to the continued discussion on the development of a comprehensive approach, I propose a possible framework with three main focal areas for intervention that may be taken up by various sectors in society.

At the 'individual level', initiatives should focus on identifying and addressing any experiences of trauma and resulting mental health issues (e.g., substance abuse, anger management issues, post-traumatic stress) and improving gang-involved youths' capacities through knowledge, skills, and resources (human capital). This may include helping individuals to develop problem-solving and cognitive skills to address personal problems. It also includes 'opportunity provisions', including providing gang-involved youth with access to stable housing options, as well as education, training, and employment programs.

At the 'social level', initiatives should focus on the creation and improvement of gang-involved youths' capabilities through the development of socially structured relations by which

we can achieve participation and inclusion in society (social capital). This may include family-based supports to develop positive parental relationships capable of supporting desistance, informal supports to encourage new prosocial networks and relationships (e.g., mentorship and recreational activities), and work to challenge social structures and attitudes that impede the inclusion of ex-gang members. This means providing gang-involved youth with alternatives for what they sought through gang membership and focusing on de-labelling and inclusion practices at the community level. These initiatives help to recognize that it is not enough to build capacities for change, there must also be opportunities to change. Emphasis should be placed on the willingness and ability of societal institutions to include formerly gang-involved youth in society.

At the ‘structural level’, initiatives should focus on addressing and reducing patterns of stress, inequality, and relative deprivation. This may include advocacy work to access resources to address systematic disadvantages in the local environment, and work to make systematic improvement to social determinants of health (e.g., poverty, inadequate housing, barriers to education, unemployment, racism, discrimination). These approaches recognize that at least some portion of the issue reflects macro-level structural barriers experienced by members of communities, and as a result, merely addressing gang desistance through interventions will not have much effect without improvements to current social, economic, and political arrangements.

Various sectors must work together to implement a comprehensive approach to desistance from gang involvement. This involves collaboration between a network of agencies and organizations including the youth justice system, the education system, youth services organizations, employers, social welfare agencies, as well as community-based organizations. When an intervention opportunity arises, there is a need for practitioners from these different



areas to communicate and coordinate their efforts, and to provide a variety of initiatives addressing different dimensions in the lives of gang-involved youth.

Finally, the insights from this chapter further emphasize the point that there is no one initiative that can create a pathway to desistance from gang involvement. Since desistance is an inherently individualized and subjective process, a comprehensive approach must also accommodate issues of variability and diversity (Weaver & McNeill, 2010). Different social contexts influence how individuals exercise agency by providing conditions to enable and constrain it and which, in turn, influence the possibilities of action for particular individuals at a given time. The various social contexts that would-be desisters encounter require alternative temporal orientations of agency which can enable, constrain, or suppress these possibilities of action. New approaches to working with gang-involved youth should, therefore, take greater consideration of individual needs, motivations, and circumstances that may trigger pathways toward desistance from gang involvement in the development and implementation of individualized interventions.

Overall, a broad range of factors influence the process of desistance from gang involvement and must be addressed in a comprehensive approach. The future development of responses to the issue of gang involvement must include providing gang-involved youth with viable alternatives to gang membership, offering them options or incentives to give them some of the same benefits as the gang, and helping them to fulfill their basic needs for supportive relationships, belonging, financial security, personal safety, and protection. Without a shift to a comprehensive, long-term solution that addresses all aspects of youth gang involvement in the development of desistance policies and practices, we are setting up youth gang members who wish to desist for failure, and we may be making matters worse in the process.

Finally, to put a comprehensive approach such as the one identified above into practice, there are several factors to consider.<sup>158</sup> The first consideration is ‘planning’. To ensure the long-term sustainability of the initiatives discussed previously and to foster multisectoral collaboration, an essential first step is to build commitment to address youth gang involvement and desistance. This requires raising awareness among all stakeholders of the youth gang problem and of the solutions that have been identified to address it that are based on research and empirical evidence. Next, the status of existing policies, laws, programs, practices, services, and infrastructure relevant to addressing the youth gang issue should be assessed. Readiness assessments should also be conducted with government and community-based organizations to determine their ability to implement initiatives.

The second consideration is ‘implementation’. Initiatives should be selected for implementation based on their suitability for the current social and cultural context. Once selected, initiatives may also need to be adapted to the local environment while preserving the essential features that made the initiative effective in the first place. Other implementation issues include: strengthening the infrastructure required to deliver the initiatives; developing and managing human resources; identifying sustainable sources of financial support; and activities for information sharing, education and communication, and social mobilization.

The third consideration is ‘evaluation’. There should be overall monitoring and evaluation of progress toward defined goals. The implementation of initiatives should include mechanisms to facilitate monitoring through ongoing data collection and analysis. This will help to demonstrate both the uptake and the outcomes of initiatives to assess the effect they are having on youth gang involvement and desistance.

---

<sup>158</sup> The factors identified here are based on those highlighted in other comprehensive approaches including comprehensive community safety strategies (Waller, 2014); strategies for ending violence against children (World Health Organization, 2016); and the United Nations agenda for sustainable development (United Nations, 2017).

The last consideration is ‘coordination’. A centre of responsibility should be established to coordinate the comprehensive approach. The role of the latter is to bring multiple sectors together to assess the needs, develop the plan to address the needs identified, and oversee the implementation of initiatives and the evaluation of results.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to provide recommendations on general areas of focus for prevention, intervention, and desistance initiatives as well as considerations in the development of a comprehensive approach to support the process of desistance from gang involvement. The information, expertise, and opinions that come from the life experiences of justice-involved youth and the professional experience of youth justice practitioners are critical to the production of knowledge. The value of these perspectives is that they can offer a more detailed and nuanced picture of youth gangs and they may also yield more innovative and practical solutions to address gang involvement. There continue to be calls in the academic literature to give greater voice to these ‘expert witnesses’, especially young people, in policy and practice development processes.<sup>159</sup> The recommendations included in this chapter represent a step toward achieving that goal.

While caution must be employed with respect to generalizing the recommendations from this small-scale exploratory research project, the insights and suggestions provided do have the potential to offer added value to future debates about how best to prevent gang involvement, intervene with gang-involved youth, and support the process of desistance from gang involvement. Further, the recommendations and considerations for the future development of policy and practice discussed in this chapter contribute to the overall body of empirical research

---

<sup>159</sup> For examples, see: Barry (2013); Case (2006); and Prior & Mason (2010).

on youth gangs and highlight potential areas of future investigation for innovation and change on how we understand and address this social issue. See Appendix I for the presentation of some general recommendations for moving forward.

## CHAPTER 11 CONCLUSION

This final chapter provides an overview of the findings from this research project as well as some directions for future inquiries into the study of youth gangs. As discussed in Chapter 1, youth gangs are not a new phenomenon in Canada. Theoretical and empirical research efforts began in this country over seventy years ago (e.g., Rogers, 1945) and continue with the goal of developing a better understanding and response to the issue. While efforts to date have produced a significant amount of knowledge regarding gangs and their members in a variety of contexts, desistance from gang involvement continues to be an important area of inquiry. Several gaps remain, including the need for additional research to examine the processes associated with leaving the gang, which encompasses how desistance is perceived and experienced by different populations of youth gang members in the Canadian context.

### **Review of Research Approach and Findings**

To contribute to the Canadian knowledge base, the focus of this research project was on developing a greater understanding of gang involvement and desistance among justice-involved youth in the city of Ottawa. The *MCYS Youth Gang Project* served as the basis for this research project. To answer my research questions, I used the data obtained from focus groups with justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners conducted as part of the Eastern region case study<sup>160</sup>. These preliminary data were then supplemented with information obtained from individual interviews I conducted with justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners in the city of Ottawa. In total, throughout this data collection process, I engaged with and heard from 30 justice-involved youth and 23 youth justice practitioners. The findings presented

---

<sup>160</sup> As noted in Chapter 4, the data obtained from the focus groups with justice-involved youth while informative, were not relied on heavily for analysis purposes.

throughout this doctoral dissertation were based on the detailed qualitative accounts provided by these individuals.

I applied the life-course perspective to understand gang involvement and desistance as it frames gang membership as a process that follows several key life-course patterns: onset, continuity, and change. This perspective emphasizes the importance of treating behaviour as constantly evolving as various demands, opportunities, interests, and events impact on individuals as they age. In Chapter 3, I demonstrated that desistance from gang involvement may be achieved as individuals mature; are exposed to external turning points, in the form of social encounters and opportunities; and devise and implement courses of action to leave the gang. However, the pathway taken depends on the social structures that impinge on them, and how they mediate their current social context, in this case confinement in a youth justice facility. In identifying these various internal and external factors in the life course, I presented a conceptual integrated model suggesting a complex interrelationship and that the latter operate through a dynamic, interactive process. I used this model as a point of departure for an examination of the process of desistance from gang involvement among justice-involved youth.

In my work, I employed a constructivist epistemology. This framework acknowledges that 'gangs', 'gang involvement', and 'gang desistance' are socially constructed by meanings attached to these concepts by those directly involved in youth gangs or those with a presumed vested interest. Given my focus on the youth justice system in this research project, I was interested in the perspectives of justice-involved youth with gang affiliations and youth justice practitioners. The way in which these two groups defined and attributed meaning to the above concepts and their views on the role of the youth justice system have implications for how we understand and respond to youth gangs in this context.

To provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic under investigation in this research project, I first sought to understand the personal context of an individual's gang involvement. My first research question asked: *How do justice-involved youth define and attribute meaning to the 'gang' and why do they seek out involvement?* In Chapter 5, my findings showed a juxtaposition of different perspectives on the gang issue. Given the lens of youth justice practitioners and how they approach their work with justice-involved youth, the utility of defining the gang and its members was related to identifying and classifying individuals based on different levels of deviation. They tended to use more restrictive definitions focusing on individual behavioural dynamics. Alternatively, the justice-involved youth highlighted more normative aspects of the gang and its members, where involvement was part of a typical life-course trajectory. They tended to use more inclusive definitions focusing on relational dynamics. While several overlapping concepts were identified, the focus or emphasis underlying these factors often differed between the two groups. The perspectives presented emphasize the importance of seeking out and utilizing more nuanced and contextual definitions of gang-related concepts in the future. Further, this underscores the importance of relying on various perspectives to understand the multifaceted meanings of the gang issue.

In Chapter 6, my findings supported previous work that has demonstrated that the decision to join the gang is based on a combination and accumulation of factors that are internal and external to the individual. While the youth justice practitioners and justice-involved youth identified similar broad motivations for gang involvement, the two groups differed in the aspects of the concepts that they discussed and in the relative importance that they placed on them. Overall, there was agreement that those who seek out membership in the gang have often endured negative or stressful life events with respect to family relations and experiences of

disadvantage. For these individuals, they may feel that the gang is their best and only option for survival, protection, and belonging, and the vehicle through which to meet status needs related to achieving manhood. In general, instances of gang-related crime and violence were justified as instrumental to meeting these needs, and a by-product of the motivations for gang involvement. The perspectives presented by these two groups show the need to understand the nuances that exist within broader motivations for gang involvement and the role that issues of strain play in the decision to join the gang. These findings have implications for the focus of future initiatives that seek to prevent gang involvement.

My second research question then focused on desistance in the context of the youth justice system: *How do justice-involved youth define and understand 'desistance' from gang involvement and what factors are involved in leaving the gang?* In Chapter 7, my findings demonstrated that desistance is a dynamic and evolving process. There was a general agreement among participants that while the gang may serve a variety of functions for individuals at certain points in their lives, for most the situation is temporary. Although there was a consensus that leaving the gang is a process that involves a lessened association with gang members and/or reduced participation in gang-related activities, there was variability in understandings of the thresholds employed and the methods of departure. For those without experience in the desistance process, leaving the gang was characterized as an active 'knifing off', while for those with experience it was characterized as a passive 'fading away' often with lingering ties. The discrepancy in these perspectives demonstrates the perpetuation of gang myths and sensationalized claims that are only dispelled once individuals begin to engage in the desistance process. This understanding should be incorporated into future initiatives that seek to address and promote desistance from gang involvement.



My findings also demonstrated that there are a variety of motivations to leave the gang. While there were differences in relative emphasis on the motivating factors, there was general agreement among the groups of participants that it is a process in which individuals become more aware of the consequences of gang involvement, disillusioned with gang life, and experience feelings of maturity. The latter often develop in relation to turning points related to education, employment, and prosocial ties to others. Participants identified the interaction and accumulation of multiple push and pull factors as motivation for leaving the gang. These findings demonstrate that while the process of desistance is unique to the individual, there are common motivations that may be important in the development of future initiatives to support desistance from gang involvement.

The findings from Chapter 8 demonstrated that there are significant challenges involved in leaving the gang and the process of leaving is often more difficult than joining. In this research project, the internal barriers to desistance related to issues of loyalty and the benefits of membership, while the external barriers related to perceptions of limited opportunities outside the gang and the consequences of the lingering gang label. There were some discrepancies observed between the sub-groups of justice-involved youth on the internal barriers to desistance identified. The perspectives on barriers to desistance are highly personal and based on subjective interpretations of the current situation. Overall, the barriers to desistance identified are all powerful inducements to remain in the gang. These obstacles should be considered when devising initiatives to support desistance among gang-involved youth.

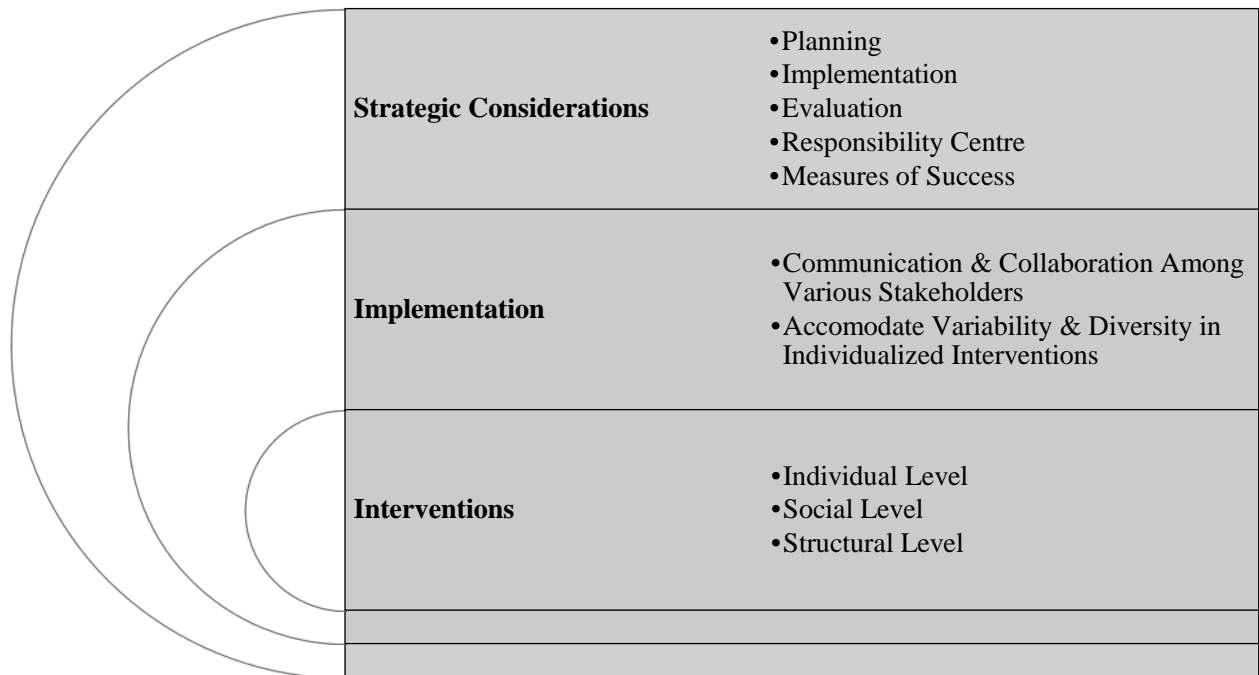
Support for the conceptual model presented in Chapter 3 was reflected in the findings from this research project which demonstrated that desistance for gang-involved youth is not a straight-forward process and instead involves multiple, overlapping factors related to internal

motivation (a crystallization of discontent, a conscious decision to leave the gang) and external turning points (prosocial bonds, access to opportunities) that operate within a given social context and larger social structural arrangements. The findings have also illustrated a nuanced interplay between the timing of factors in the desistance process. Individuals need first to commit themselves to leaving the gang (i.e., being willing) but this must be coupled with adequate resources and sustainable alternatives to the gang lifestyle (i.e., being able).

The findings from Chapter 9 demonstrated that while involvement in the youth justice system was touted as a motivation for leaving the gang, the perspectives of the justice-involved youth and youth justice practitioners varied on how experiences of confinement and the role of youth justice practitioners influenced decisions and the process of desistance. Whether confinement was perceived as ‘marking time’ or a ‘turning point’ was largely a result of the justice-involved youth’s own pre-determined intention to leave the gang. While the youth justice practitioners echoed these findings, they tended to believe that confinement was an opportunity to encourage, promote, and support the change process with a captive audience. Overall, relatively few justice-involved youth commented positively on the assistance that they received from youth justice practitioners. However, the latter believed they played a more prominent role in the lives of justice-involved youth employing cognitive-behavioural and strength-based approaches to encourage desistance, and cultivating trusting relationships needed to support them through the process of leaving the gang. The role of the youth justice system in the desistance process appears to depend on how the individual understands and interprets their youth justice system experience in the context of their motivation to leave the gang (or not). The information provided throughout this chapter can help to inform the future development of policy and practice to support gang-involved youth in the youth justice system.

In Chapter 10, I showed how the insights gained through my findings chapters can be used to inform policy and practice to prevent gang involvement among at-risk youth, to intervene with active gang members, and to support desistance by helping motivated individuals to pursue alternatives to gang life. Some recommended areas of focus for the future include: acknowledging and addressing trauma, providing family-focused supports, offering informal supports through mentoring and recreational activities, providing support for housing and meaningful employment, investigating the role for support from individuals with gang-related experiences, identifying key moments for intervention, and promoting de-labelling and inclusionary practices. Some general considerations were also highlighted for moving forward with initiatives to support the overall process of desistance from gang involvement including acknowledging the need to address structural barriers and clarifying the operationalization of success. Finally, as a contribution to continuing the dialogue on this issue, I presented a possible framework for a comprehensive, multi-systemic, multi-modal approach to address desistance from gang involvement. It includes intervention at individual, social, and structural levels and encourages communication and collaboration between various sectors working together. It represents a shift in our current policy and practice orientation to address the desistance process. I present a visual representation of this proposed framework in *Figure 2* on the following page.

Figure 2. Comprehensive Approach to Address Desistance from Gang Involvement



### Contributions of this Research Project

This research project represents one of a handful of empirical qualitative studies examining subjective experiences of the gang desistance process that have been conducted in Canada. Further, it is one of few studies that have used data derived from face-to-face interactions with a sample of justice-involved youth with gang affiliations (Descormiers, 2013). The information, expertise, and opinions that come from the life experiences of justice-involved youth are critical to the production of knowledge (Weaver, 2011). The value of these perspectives is that they can offer a more detailed and nuanced picture of youth gangs and they may also yield more innovative and practical solutions to address gang involvement. For example, this may help to shift from ‘deficit-based’ approaches focusing on risk factors and ‘needs’ as defined by the experts, to ‘strength-based’ approaches that seek to promote ‘good lives’ as defined by the individuals themselves (Burnett & Maruna, 2004; Ward & Maruna, 2007). More generally, analyzing these subjective experiences can strengthen criminology’s

understanding of the process of desistance. Overall, this research project falls under a ‘soft’ criminology perspective in which people are understood as agentic and willing to engage or reject depending on certain features of their lives (Ward & Maruna, 2007). This perspective, with its more nuanced understanding of individual level change and long-term perspectives acts in opposition to the more prominent ‘hard’ criminology of the ‘what works’ movement which is very deterministic and in which the complexities of individuals and their lives are absent (Farrall et al., 2014).

Further, while the preferences of justice-involved youth have not typically been viewed as relevant to policymakers, it needs to be emphasized that if members of this target population do not engage with or commit themselves to an intervention, the latter is unlikely to succeed (Maruna & LeBel, 2010). Moving forward, it is advisable to actively encourage individuals who have been involved in gangs to share their experiences to create innovative and effective services that are youth-centred and accessible (Raby & Jones, 2016). This knowledge may assist the MCYS in the development of additional supports for youth justice staff working with this population and in the development of initiatives to address the needs of gang-involved youth justice clients. At the local level, it may help the YSB – Youth Justice Services with future initiatives to promote and support pathways for justice-involved youth in Ottawa seeking to leave the gang, including improving existing interventions and developing desistance strategies.

This research project may serve as a valuable resource for other scholars who hope to expand existing knowledge on gang involvement and desistance in the Canadian context. While caution must be employed with respect to generalizing the findings from this small-scale exploratory research project, the insights provided do have the potential to offer added value to future debates about how best to prevent gang involvement, intervene with gang-involved youth,

and support the process of desistance from gang involvement. Further, the recommendations for the future development of policy and practice contribute to the overall body of empirical research on youth gangs and highlight potential areas of future investigation for innovation and change on how we understand and address this social issue.

More broadly, the findings from this research project may be applicable to other areas of inquiry in both criminology and in the social sciences more generally. For example, youth gang members and homeless and runaway youth share many characteristics (e.g., abusive and dysfunctional family backgrounds, use of and addiction to substances, increased risk of victimization, engagement in criminal activities) and at-risk individuals for both groups may seek out peers who can provide companionship, protection, social support, and tutelage for surviving on their own (Yoder, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2003). This demonstrates that approaches to prevention and intervention with gang-involved youth may also be applicable to homeless and runaway youth populations. Similarly, there may be several commonalities in why youth become part of gangs and involved in armed opposition groups (e.g., child soldiers). Indeed, both groups may offer young people a sense of identity, power, and control. Further, in both groups young people demonstrate both tactical and strategic agency to adapt to the circumstances and to survive in the environment in which they find themselves (Quenivet & Shah-Davis, 2013). This suggests that the arguments presented for the normalization of gang involvement and justification of criminal and violent behaviours as necessary to attain its benefits presented in this research project may also be applicable to understanding the behaviours of young people involved in armed opposition groups. There are also parallels that can be drawn between youth gangs and extremist groups. Individuals in these groups may share similar individual characteristics (e.g., demographics, behaviour), group structures and processes (e.g., collective

action, organization) as well as a macro-level context (e.g., socio-economic disadvantages) (Pyrooz, LaFree, Decker, & James, 2018). Both groups may also confront barriers to leaving and being (re)integrated into their communities and society. The insights provided in this research project with respect to the barriers to desistance from youth gangs and the recommendations for support to help motivated individuals to pursue alternatives to gang life may also be relevant to the development of policies and practices to promote de-radicalization among youth involved in extremist groups.

The nature, causes, and consequences of gang-related behaviours and processes have drawn interest from across the behavioural and social sciences, including: criminology, anthropology, psychology, sociology, economics, epistemology, among others. No matter the discipline, the study of gangs assists in the understanding of a more complex social reality. Short and Hughes (2015) argued that this issue needs to be brought back into the scientific mainstream because studying gangs can help solve ‘hard problems’ of general social significance. Indeed, a better understanding of youth gangs, as promoted through the completion of this research project, can uncover important findings about other criminal or delinquent groups specifically and the social nature of all groups more generally.

### **Future Directions for Research**

This research project was an exploratory study of gang involvement and desistance among justice-involved youth in the city of Ottawa. As noted in Chapter 4, my sample has limited generalizability to other youth gang members, and the specific setting should be kept in mind when considering transferability. While the *MCYS Youth Gang Project*, which served as a basis for this research project, represented a first step in examining desistance among gang-involved youth in the Ontario youth justice system, future research could build on the

methodological approach employed here in order to conduct similar research studies in all youth justice facilities across the province, and even across the country. Further, while it was not possible in the current study, the perspective of justice-involved youth under formal community supervision arrangements should also be incorporated. This supports Wortley and Tanner's (2006b) argument that pan-Canadian research on youth gangs is needed to examine the issue in different regions across the country to form a more complete understanding of the phenomenon.

However, it is also important to note that many research studies, including this one, have focused on adults and young people who were contacted due to their involvement in the criminal justice system or formal interventions programs.<sup>161</sup> While informative and beneficial, these samples have limitations. These individuals are likely to be more heavily involved with law-breaking activities and may not be representative of all gang members (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Moore, 1991). As discussed and encouraged by Carson and Vecchio (2015), future researchers should rely less on 'deep end samples', (i.e., individuals heavily involved in gangs with extensive involvement in the criminal justice system), and on formal institutions (e.g., police, courts, probation, social service agencies) in the sampling process when examining gang desistance. In order to further develop the Canadian knowledge base, future research studies may consider the methodological approach employed in this research project and apply it to community-based samples of gang-involved youth.

Also, this research project focused on the role of formal social support from youth justice practitioners in the process of desistance from gang involvement for justice-involved youth. Future research should investigate the social supports that family members, friends, and community-based social networks can offer (Martinez & Abrams, 2013). This information would

---

<sup>161</sup> For examples, see: Deane et al. (2007); Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule (2014); Pyrooz & Decker (2011); Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb (2014); and Sweeten et al. (2013).



be beneficial in the development of future prevention and intervention strategies that rely on informal mechanisms of support. Future research would do well to explore the possibilities of what transition programming might look like, how it might consider individuals at different stages of change, and how it might address the special needs of different populations (e.g., Aboriginal youth, young women, immigrant youth) (Chalas & Grekul, 2017).

Finally, another limitation of this research project is that it represents a snapshot in time and does not reflect the complete story of the desistance process. Future work must overcome cross-sectional research design limitations in favour of a longitudinal approach that examines gang membership over time. Multiple points of measurement for gang status, gang ties, and important life-course concepts (e.g., trajectories, transitions, turning points) should prove invaluable for assessing gang desistance (Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2014). Future research should focus on the mechanisms that maintain desistance from gang involvement over time, and what prevents individuals from returning to their former gang. Conditions that maintain the former status, as well as those that encourage 'relapse' back into gang life after the initial decision to leave, should be examined further (Bubolz, 2014).

Further, given that the study of gangs emerged alongside the use of ethnography, future research may consider the use of this methodological approach in longitudinal research. Ethnography fits well with the constructivist epistemology employed in this research project as one of its main objectives is to grasp and understand the meanings that actions and events have for those studied; to learn about the social world of a group of people as this world is subjectively experienced by them (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Ethnography requires participant observation *in situ* to consider the individual's or group's experience holistically and in their natural environment (Munn, 2014). This approach can minimize the artificiality of focus

group and individual interview sessions and promote more organic and long-term relationships between the researcher and the researched. Developing rapport and establishing a relationship of trust with the researcher may encourage gangs and their members to share their stories in more detail, which could improve the nature, quality, and depth of the data collected. In turn, this would lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the gang lifestyle.

As I stated at the outset of this doctoral dissertation, the goal of this research project was not to ‘prove anything’ but rather to ‘learn something’ (Flyvbjerg, 2006). I believe that while I have gained some insight into the youth gang phenomenon in Canada through this endeavour, as noted above, there remains much more to be explored and investigated. As William B. Sanders (1994, p. xi) suggested in his work on youth gang violence:

Anyone who has studied gangs over a period of time will admit that the more one studies them, the more complex they are. At best, we can come to understand a bit about certain features of gangs at given points of time. Gangs are dynamic, flexible and ever-changing.

I am hopeful that this research project will inspire others to ‘join the game’ and undertake further theoretical and empirical studies on the topic of youth gangs in Canada in the future. We must keep going, it is not yet time to ‘lay down the flag’.

## REFERENCES

- Abrams, L. S. (2006). Listening to juvenile offenders: Can residential treatment prevent recidivism? *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 23(1), 61-85.
- Abrams, L. S., Kim, K., & Anderson-Nathe, B. (2005). Paradoxes of treatment in juvenile corrections. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 34(1), 7-25.
- Abrams, L. S., Terry, D., & Inderbitzin, M. (2017). *Everyday desistance: The transition to adulthood among formerly incarcerated youth*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Agnew, R. (1992). Foundation for a general strain theory of crime and delinquency. *Criminology*, 30(1), 47-87.
- Akerlof, G. A., & Shiller, R. J. (2009). *Animal spirits: How human psychology drives the economy, and why it matters for global capitalism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Alberta Crime Reduction and Safe Communities Task Force (2007). *Keeping communities safe: Report and recommendations*. Edmonton, AB: Government of Alberta, Justice and Attorney General. Retrieved from <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/9780778569848>
- Aldridge, J., Shute, J., Ralphs, R., & Medina, J. (2009). Blame the parents? Challenges for parent-focused programmes for families of gang-involved young people. *Children & Society*, 25(5), 371-381.
- Alexander, J., & Parsons, B. V. (1982). *Functional Family Therapy*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.
- Allen, M. (2016). Young adult offenders in Canada, 2014. *Juristat*, 36(1). Ottawa, ON: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Statistics Canada. Retrieved from <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2016001/article/14561-eng.htm>
- Allen, M., & Superle, T. (2016). Youth crime in Canada, 2014. *Juristat*, 36(1). Ottawa, ON: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Statistics Canada. Retrieved from <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2016001/article/14309-eng.htm>
- Alleyne, E., & Wood, J. L. (2010). Gang involvement: Psychological and behavioral characteristics of gang members, peripheral youth, and nongang youth. *Aggressive Behavior*, 36(6), 423-436.
- Alleyne, E., & Wood, J. L. (2014). Gang involvement: Social and environmental factors. *Crime & Delinquency*, 60(4), 547-568.

- Altschuler, D. M., & Brash, R. (2004). Adolescent and teenage offenders confronting the challenges and opportunities of reentry. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 2(1), 72-87.
- Anderson, E. (1999). *Code of the street*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Anton, R. F. (1999). What is craving? Models and implications for treatment. *Alcohol Research & Health*, 23(3), 165-173.
- Arbreton, A. J. A., & McClanahan, W. (2002). *Targeted outreach: Boys and Girls Clubs of America's approach to gang prevention and intervention*. Philadelphia, PA: Public/Private Ventures.
- Arendell, T. (1997). Reflections on the researcher-researched relationship: A woman interviewing men. *Qualitative Sociology*, 20(3), 341-368.
- Aresti, A., Eatough, V., & Brooks-Gordon, B. (2010). Doing time after time: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of reformed ex-prisoners' experiences of self-change, identity and career opportunities. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 16(3), 169-190.
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469-480.
- Arnett, J. J. (2004). *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Arrigo, B. A., & Takahashi, Y. (2006). Re-communalization of the disenfranchised: A theoretical and critical criminological inquiry. *Theoretical Criminology*, 10(3), 307-336.
- Ashkar, P. J., & Kenny, D. T. (2008). Views from the inside: Young offenders' subjective experiences of incarceration. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 52(5), 584-597.
- Astwood Strategy Corporation. (2012). *Gang Risk Assessment Instrument*. Retrieved from <http://www.astwood.ca/grai.html>
- Augustyn, M. B., Thornberry, T. P., & Krohn, M. D. (2014). Gang membership and pathways to maladaptive parenting. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 24(2), 252-267.
- Ayling, J. (2011). Gang change and evolutionary theory. *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 56(1), 1-26.
- Badger, G., & Albright, C. (2003). *Alter-natives to non-violence report: Aboriginal youth gangs exploration: A community development process*. Saskatoon, SK: Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations. Retrieved from <http://www.fsin.com/fsindownloads/justice/downloads/violence3.pdf>

- Bailey, C. A. (2007). *A guide to qualitative field research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Bailey, C. E., Smith, C., Huey, S. R., McDaniel, D. D., & Babeva, K. (2014). Unrecognized posttraumatic stress disorder as a treatment barrier for a gang-involved juvenile offender. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma, 23*(2), 199-214.
- Bailey, M. (2015). *The trajectory of gang membership: The desistance from a "deviant identity"* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON.
- Baird, A. (2012). Negotiating pathways to manhood: Rejecting gangs and violence in Medellin's periphery. *Journal of Conflictology, 3*(1), 30-41.
- Baker, S. E., & Edwards, R. (2012). How many qualitative interviews is enough? Expert voices and early career reflections on sampling and cases in qualitative research. *National Centre for Research Methods Review Paper*. Retrieved from [http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/2273/4/how\\_many\\_interviews.pdf](http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/2273/4/how_many_interviews.pdf)
- Bala, N., Carrington, P. J., & Roberts, J. V. (2009). Evaluating the Youth Criminal Justice Act after five years: A qualified success. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice, 51*(2), 131-167.
- Ball, R., & Curry, D. (1995). The logic of definition in criminology: Purposes and methods for defining gangs. *Criminology, 33*(2), 225-245.
- Baltes, P. B. (1987). Theoretical propositions of life-span developmental psychology: On the dynamics between growth and decline. *Developmental Psychology, 23*(5), 611-626.
- Baltes, P. B., & Brim, O. G. (1982). *Life span development and behavior* (Vol. 4). New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Bamberg, M., De Fina, A., & Schiffrin, D. (2011). Discourse and identity construction. In S. Schwartz, K. Luyckx, & V. Vignoles (Eds.), *Handbook of identity theory and research* (pp. 177-199). New York, NY: Springer.
- Bania, M. (2009). Gang violence among youth and young adults: (Dis)Affiliation and the potential for prevention. *Institute for the Prevention of Crime Review, 3*, 89-116.
- Bania, M. (2017). *Ottawa street violence & gang strategy*. Report prepared for Crime Prevention Ottawa. Retrieved from [http://www.crimepreventionottawa.ca/Media/Content/files/Publications/Youth/Ottawa%20Street%20Violence%20&%20Gang%20Strategy%202017-2020-final\(2\).pdf](http://www.crimepreventionottawa.ca/Media/Content/files/Publications/Youth/Ottawa%20Street%20Violence%20&%20Gang%20Strategy%202017-2020-final(2).pdf)
- Barriball, K. L., & While, A. (1994). Collecting data using a semi-structured interview: A discussion paper. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 19*(2), 328-335.

- Barrows, J., & Huff, R. (2009). Gangs and public policy: Constructing and deconstructing gang databases. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 8(4), 675-704.
- Barry, M. (2000). The mentor/monitor debate in criminal justice: 'What works' for offenders. *British Journal of Social Work*, 30(5), 575-595.
- Barry, M. (2006). *Youth offending in transition: The search for social recognition*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Barry, M. (2007). Listening and learning: The reciprocal relationship between worker and client. *Probation*, 54(4), 407-422.
- Barry, M. (2013). Desistance by design: Offenders' reflections on criminal justice theory, policy and practice. *European Journal of Probation*, 5(2), 47-65.
- Battin, S. R., Hill, K. G., Abbott, R. D., Catalano, R. F., & Hawkins, J. D. (1998). The contribution of gang membership to delinquency beyond delinquent friends. *Criminology*, 36(1), 93-116.
- Baumeister, R. F. (1991). *Meanings of life*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Bazeley, P. (2013). *Qualitative data analysis: Practical strategies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Beaujot, R., & Kerr, D. (2007). Emerging youth transition patterns in Canada: Opportunities and risks. *PSC Discussion Papers Series*, 21(5). Retrieved from <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/pscpapers/vol21/iss5/1>
- Becker, G. (1993). *Human capital* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Becker, H. S. (1963). *Outsiders: Studies in the sociology of deviance*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Bellair, P. E., & McNulty, T. L. (2009). Gang membership, drug selling, and violence in neighborhood context. *Justice Quarterly*, 26(4), 644-669.
- Bellis, M. A., Hughes, K., Perkins, C., & Bennett, A. (2012). *Protecting people, promoting health: A public health approach to violence prevention for England*. North West Public Health Observatory at the Centre for Public Health. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apublic-health-approach-to-violence-prevention-in-england>
- Benda, B., & Tollett, C. (1999). A study of recidivism of serious and persistent offenders among adolescents. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 27(2), 111-126.
- Berg, B. L. (2009). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (7th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

- Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. (1991). *The social construction of reality*. London, UK: Penguin Books.
- Berger, R., Abu-Raiya, H., Heineberg, Y., & Zimbardo, P. (2017). The process of desistance among core ex-gang members. *Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice*, 87(4), 487-502.
- Bernburg, J. G., Krohn, M. D., & Rivera, C. J. (2006). Official labeling, criminal embeddedness, and subsequent delinquency: A longitudinal test of labeling theory. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 43(1), 67-88.
- Bilchik, S. (2011). *Five emerging practices in juvenile reentry*. New York, NY: Justice Center, the Council of State Governments Justice Center. Retrieved from <https://csgjusticecenter.org/youth/posts/five-emerging-practices-in-juvenile-reentry/>
- Bjerregaard, B. (2002). Self-definitions of gang membership and involvement in delinquent activities. *Youth & Society*, 34(1), 31-54.
- Bjørgero, T. (1999, November). How gangs fall apart: Process of transformation and disintegration of gangs. Paper presented at the 51st annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology, Toronto, ON.
- Bjørgero, T. (2002). *Exit Neo-Nazism: Reducing recruitment and promoting disengagement from racist groups*. Oslo, Norway: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. Retrieved from <https://brage.bibsys.no/xmlui/handle/11250/2394077>
- Bjørgero, T. (2009). Processes of disengagement from violent groups of the extreme right. In T. Bjørgero & J. Horgan (Eds.), *Leaving terrorism behind. Individual and collective disengagement* (pp. 30-48). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Blakemore, J. L., & Blakemore, G. M. (1998). African American street gangs: A quest for identity. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 1(2-3), 203-223.
- Blokland, A. A. J., Nagin, D. S., & Nieuwbeerta, P. (2005). Life span offending trajectories of a Dutch conviction cohort. *Criminology*, 43(4), 919-954.
- Blokland, A. A. J., & Nieuwbeerta, P. (Eds.). (2006). *Developmental and life course studies in delinquency and crime: A review of contemporary Dutch research*. The Hague, Netherlands: Boom Legal.
- Blokland, A. A. J., & Nieuwbeerta, P. (2010). Life course criminology. In G. S. Shlomo, P. Knepper, & M. Kett (Eds.), *International handbook of criminology* (pp. 51-93). Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.
- Blumstein, A., Cohen, J., & Hsieh, P. (1982). *The duration of adult criminal careers: Final report to National Institute of Justice*. Pittsburgh, PA: Carnegie-Mellon University.

- Blumstein, A., Cohen, J., Roth, J. A., & Visher, C. A. (1986). *Criminal careers and career criminals*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Bocanegra, E., & Stolbach, B. (2012, November). Trauma histories and recruitment of gang-involved youth in Chicago. In B. Stolbach (Chair), Trauma histories and recruitment of gang-involved youth in the U.S. and child soldiers in Colombia and Nepal: Parallels and implications. Panel presented at the 28th meeting of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, Los Angeles, CA.
- Boduszek, D., Dhingra, K., & Hirschfeld, A. (2015). Gang reengagement intentions among incarcerated serious juvenile offenders. *Journal of Criminology*, 1-10.
- Bolden, C. L. (2012). Liquid soldiers: Fluidity and gang membership. *Deviant Behavior*, 33(3), 207-222.
- Bolden, C. L. (2013). Tales from the hood: An emic perspective on gang joining and gang desistance. *Criminal Justice Review*, 38(4), 473-490.
- Bonnie, R. J., Stroud, C., & Breiner, H. (Eds.). (2015). *Investing in the health and well-being of young adults*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.
- Borduin, C. M., Schaeffer, C. M., & Heiblum, N. (2009). A randomized clinical trial of Multisystemic Therapy with juvenile sexual offenders: Effects on youth social ecology and criminal activity. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 77(1), 26-37.
- Borg, M. B., Jr., & Dalla, M. R. (2005). Treatment of gangs / gang behavior in adolescence. In T. Gullotta & G. Adams (Eds.), *Handbook of adolescent behavioral problems: Evidence-based approaches to prevention and treatment* (pp. 519-542). New York, NY: Springer.
- Bottoms, A. (2000). The relationship between theory and research in criminology. In R. D. King & E. Wincup (Eds.), *Doing research on crime and justice* (pp. 15-60). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Bottoms, A. (2008). The community dimension of community penalties. *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 47(2), 146-169.
- Bottoms, A., & Shapland, J. (2011). Steps towards desistance among male young adult recidivists. In S. Farrall, M. Hough, S. Maruna, & R. Sparks (Eds.), *Escape routes: Contemporary perspectives on life after punishment* (pp. 43-80). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bottoms, A., Shapland, J., Costello, A., Holmes, D., & Muir, G. (2004). Towards desistance: Theoretical underpinnings for an empirical study. *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 43(4), 368-389.



- Botvin, G. J., Griffin, K. W., & Nichols, T. R. (2006). Preventing youth violence and delinquency through a universal school-based prevention approach. *Prevention Science*, 7(4), 403-408.
- Bouchard, M., & Spindler, A. (2010). Groups, gangs, and delinquency: Does organization matter? *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 38(5), 921-933.
- Bouffard, J., & Bergseth, K. (2008). The impact of reentry services on juvenile offenders' recidivism. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 27(3), 312-329.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. D. (1992). *Invitation to a reflexive sociology*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Bourgois, P. (1995). *In search of respect: Selling crack in El Barrio*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourgois, P. (1996). In search of masculinity. *British Journal of Criminology*, 36(3), 412-427.
- Boyce, J., & Cotter, A. (2013). Homicide in Canada, 2012. *Juristat*, 33(1). Ottawa, ON: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Statistics Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2013001/article/11882-eng.htm>
- Bracken, D., Deane, L., & Morrissette, L. (2009). Desistance and social marginalization. *Theoretical Criminology*, 13(1), 61-78.
- Bradley, J. (2018). *Youth mentoring as a viable crime prevention strategy: Evidence and Ontario's policy, with reflections from some mentors* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON.
- Bradstreet, C. (2015). *Life on the line: An exploration of street outreach and gang prevention and intervention work in Los Angeles* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of California, Irvine, CA.
- Braga, A. A., & Weisburd, D. L. (2012). The effects of focused deterrence strategies on crime: A systematic review and meta-analysis of the empirical evidence. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 49(3), 323-358.
- Braithwaite, J. (1989). *Crime, shame and reintegration*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Bryman, A. (1984). The debate about quantitative and qualitative research: A question of method or epistemology? *The British Journal of Sociology*, 35(1), 75-92.

- Bubolz, B. (2014). *Once a gang member always a gang member? A life history study of gang desistance* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Nebraska, Omaha, NE.
- Bubolz, B., & Simi, P. (2015). Disillusionment and change: A cognitive-emotional theory of gang exit. *Deviant Behavior, 36*(4), 330-345.
- Budde, S., & Schene, P. (2004). Informal social support interventions and their role in violence prevention. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 19*(3), 341-355.
- Bullis, M., & Yovanoff, P. (2006). Idle hands: Community employment experiences of formerly incarcerated youth. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders, 14*(2), 71-85.
- Bullis, M., Yovanoff, P., Mueller, G., & Havel, E. (2002). Life on the “outs”: Examination of the facility-to-community transition of incarcerated youth. *Exceptional Children, 69*(1), 7-22.
- Bumpass, L. L., Sweet, J. A., & Cherlin, A. (1991). The role of cohabitation in declining rates of marriage. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 53*(4), 913-927.
- Burke, J. D., Mulvey, E. P., & Schubert, C. A. (2015). Prevalence of mental health problems and service use among first-time juvenile offenders. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 24*(12), 3774-3781.
- Burnett, R. (2004). To reoffend or not to reoffend? The ambivalence of convicted property offenders. In S. Maruna & R. Immarigeon (Eds.), *After crime and punishment: Pathways to offender reintegration* (pp. 152-180). Cullompton, UK: Willan.
- Burnett, R., & Maruna, S. (2004). So “prison work”, does it? The criminal careers of 130 men released from prison under home secretary Michael Howard. *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice, 43*(4), 390-404.
- Burnett, R., & Maruna, S. (2006). The kindness of prisoners: Strength-based resettlement in theory and in action. *Criminology & Criminal Justice, 6*(1), 83-106.
- Burnett, R., & McNeill, F. (2005). The place of the officer-offender relationship in assisting offenders to desist from crime. *Probation Journal, 52*(3), 221-242.
- Burrows, J. (2003). *Evaluation of the youth inclusion programme: End of phase one report*. London, UK: Youth Justice Board. Retrieved from <http://yjbpublications.justice.gov.uk/Resources/Downloads/YIP-Evaluation03.pdf>
- Burrows, J., Mackie, A., & Hubbard, R. (2008). *Evaluation of the youth inclusion programme, Phase 2*. London, UK: Youth Justice Board. Retrieved from <http://yjbpublications.justice.gov.uk/en-gb/scripts/prodView.asp?idproduct=473&eP>
- Bursik, R. J., & Grasmick, H. G. (1993). *Neighborhoods and crime: The dimensions of effective community control*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

- Bushway, S., Piquero, A. R., Broidy, L., Cauffman, E., & Mazerolle, P. (2001). An empirical framework for studying desistance as a process. *Criminology*, 39(2), 491-515.
- Bushway, S., Thornberry, T., & Krohn, M. (2003). Desistance as a developmental process: A comparison of static and dynamic approaches. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 19(2), 129-153.
- Butera, J.-A. (2013). *Home takeovers of vulnerable tenants: Perspectives from Ottawa*. Ottawa, ON: Crime Prevention Ottawa. Retrieved from <http://www.crimepreventionottawa.ca/Media/Content/files/Publications/Neighbourhoods/Home%20Takeovers%20of%20Vulnerable%20Tenants%20-%20final.pdf>
- Butler, S., Baruch, G., Hickey, N., & Fonagy, P. (2011). A randomized controlled trial of Multisystemic Therapy and a statutory therapeutic intervention for young offenders. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 50(12), 1220-1235.
- Butts, J. A., Bazemore, G., & Meroe, S. A. (2010). *Positive youth justice – Framing justice interventions using the concepts of positive youth development*. Washington, DC: Coalition for Juvenile Justice. Retrieved from <https://johnjayrec.nyc/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/pyj2010.pdf>
- Buzi, R. S., Saleh, M., Weinman, M. L., & Smith, P. B. (2004). Young fathers participating in a fatherhood program: Their expectations and perceived benefits. *The Prevention Researcher*, 11, 18-20.
- Bynner, J. (2002). Childhood risks and protective factors in social exclusion. *Children & Society*, 15(5), 285-301.
- Carlsson, C. (2012). Using ‘turning points’ to understand processes of change in offending: Notes from a Swedish study on life courses and crime. *British Journal of Criminology*, 52(1), 1-16.
- Carrington, P. J., Brennan, S., Matarazzo, A., & Radulescu, M. (2011). Co-offending in Canada, 2011. *Juristat*, 33(1). Ottawa, ON: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Statistics Canada. Retrieved from <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2013001/article/11856-eng.htm>
- Carson, D. C., Peterson, D., & Esbensen, F.-A. (2013). Youth gang desistance: An examination of the effect of different operational definitions of desistance on the motivations, methods, and consequences associated with leaving the gang. *Criminal Justice Review*, 38(4), 510-534.
- Carson, D. C., & Vecchio, J. M. (2015). Leaving the gang: A review and thoughts on future research. In S. H. Decker & D. C. Pyrooz (Eds.), *The handbook of gangs* (pp. 257-275). New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.

- Case, S. (2006). Young people ‘at risk’ of what? Challenging risk-focused early intervention as crime prevention. *Youth Justice*, 6(3), 171-179.
- Case, S. (2007). Questioning the “evidence” of risk that underpins evidence-led youth justice interventions. *Youth Justice*, 7(2), 91-106.
- Caspi, A., Bem, D. J., & Elder, G. H., Jr. (1989). Continuities and consequences of interactional styles across the life course. *Journal of Personality*, 57(2), 375-406.
- Caspi, A., & Moffitt, T. E. (1995). The continuity of maladaptive behaviour: From description to understanding in the study of antisocial behaviour. In D. Cicchetti & D. J. Cohen (Eds.), *Developmental psychopathology: Risk, disorder and adaptation* (Vol. 2, pp. 472-511). New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.
- Cassell, C., & Weinwrath, M. (2011). Barriers to leaving the gang: An exploratory analysis. In S. Kohm (Ed.), *The annual review of interdisciplinary justice research* (pp. 72-99). Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba.
- Castel, R. (1995). *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale*. Paris, FR : Librairie Arthème Fayard.
- Catalano, R. F., & Hawkins, J. D. (1996). The social development model: A theory of antisocial behavior. In J. D. Hawkins (Ed.), *Delinquency and crime: Current theories* (pp. 149-197). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Caudill, J. (2010). Back on the swagger: Institutional release and recidivism timing among gang affiliates. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 8(1), 58-70.
- Celinska, K., Furrer, S., & Cheng, C. C. (2013). An outcome-based evaluation of Functional Family Therapy for youth with behavior problems. *OJJDP Journal of Juvenile Justice*, 2(2), 23-36.
- Centre for Forensic Behavioural Science and Justice Studies (2015). *Identification of the major risk factors for youth delinquency, youth violence and youth gang involvement* (Unpublished report). Report prepared for Public Safety Canada.
- Centre for Social Justice (2009). *Dying to belong: An in-depth review of street gangs in Britain*. London, UK: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/core/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/DyingtoBelongFullReport.pdf>
- Cernkovich, S. A., & Giordano, P. C. (2001). Stability and change in antisocial behavior: The transition from adolescence to early adulthood. *Criminology*, 39(2), 371-410.
- Chalas, D. M., & Grekul, J. (2017). I’ve had enough: Exploring gang life from the perspective of (ex) members in Alberta. *The Prison Journal*, 97(3), 364-386.

- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London, UK: Sage.
- Charon, J. M. (2010). *Symbolic interactionism – An introduction, an interpretation, an integration* (10th ed.). Boston, MA: Prentice Hall.
- Chase, S. E. (2003). Taking narrative seriously: Consequences for method and theory in interview studies. In Y. S. Lincoln & N. K. Denzin (Eds.), *Turning points in qualitative research: Tying knots in a handkerchief* (pp. 273-296). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Chatterjee, J. (2006). *A research report on youth gangs: Problems, perspectives and priorities*. Ottawa, ON: Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Retrieved from <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/lbrr/archives/cnmcs-plcng/cn000033251178-eng.pdf>
- Chettleburgh, M. C. (2003). *Results of the 2002 Canadian police survey on youth gangs*. Toronto, ON: Astwood Strategy Corporation. Retrieved from [http://www.astwood.ca/assets/gangs\\_e.pdf](http://www.astwood.ca/assets/gangs_e.pdf)
- Chettleburgh, M. C. (2007). *Young thugs: Inside the dangerous world of Canadian street gangs*. Toronto, ON: Harper Collins.
- Chettleburgh, M. C. (2008). *Now is the time to act: Youth gang prevention in Ottawa*. Final report to Crime Prevention Ottawa. Retrieved from [http://www.crimepreventionottawa.ca/uploads/files/Now-is-the-time-to-Act%20\\_FINAL-REPORT.pdf](http://www.crimepreventionottawa.ca/uploads/files/Now-is-the-time-to-Act%20_FINAL-REPORT.pdf)
- Chu, C. M., Daffern, M., Thomas, S., & Lim, J. Y. (2012). Violence risk and gang affiliation in youth offenders: A recidivism study. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 18(3), 299-315.
- Chung, H. L., Little, M., & Steinberg, L. (2005). The transition to adulthood for adolescents in the juvenile justice system: A developmental perspective. In D. W. Osgood, E. M. Foster, C. Flanagan, & G. R. Ruth (Eds.), *On your own without a net: The transition to adulthood for vulnerable populations* (pp. 68-91). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Cianci, R., & Gambrel, P. (2003). Maslow's hierarchy of needs: Does it apply in a collectivist culture? *Journal of Applied Management and Entrepreneurship*, 8(2), 143-161.
- Clark, W. (2007). Delayed transitions of young adults. *Canadian Social Trends* (No. 84). Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/2007004/pdf/10311-eng.pdf>
- Clarke, R. V., & Cornish, D. B. (1985). Modeling offenders' decisions: A framework for research and policy. In M. Tonry & N. Morris (Eds.), *Crime and justice: An annual review of research* (Vol. 6, pp. 147-185). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

- Cloward, R. A., & Ohlin, L. E. (1960). *Delinquency and opportunity: A theory of delinquent gangs*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Coalter, F. (2007). *A wider social role for sport: Who's keeping the score?* Abingdon, VA: Routledge.
- Cohen, A. J. (1955). *Delinquent boys: The culture of the gang*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Cohen, J. A., & Mannarino, A. P. (2008). Trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy for children and parents. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health, 13*(4), 158-162.
- Cohen, S. (1985). *Visions of social control: Crime, punishment and classification*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Connell, R. W. (1987). *Gender and power*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society, 19*(6), 829-859.
- Cooley, C. (1902). *Human nature and the social order*. New York, NY: Schocken Books.
- Cooper, C., Eslinger, D. M., & Stolley, P. D. (2006). Hospital-based violence intervention programs work. *Journal of Trauma, 61*(3), 534-540.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cornish, D., & Clarke, R. (2008). The rational choice perspective. In R. Wortley & L. Mazerolle (Eds.), *Environmental criminology and crime analysis* (pp. 2-47). Devon, UK: Willan.
- Corrado, R., & Mathesius, J. (2014). Developmental psycho-neurological research trends and their importance for reassessing key decision-making assumptions for children, adolescents, and youth adults in juvenile/youth and adult criminal justice systems. *Bergen Journal of Criminal Law and Criminal Justice, 2*(2), 141-163.
- Courtney, M., & McCutcheon, H. (2010). *Using evidence to guide nursing practice*. Chatswood, Australia: Churchill Livingstone.
- Craine, S. (1997). The black magic roundabout: Cyclical transitions, social exclusion and alternative careers. In R. MacDonald (Ed.), *Youth, the 'underclass' and social exclusion* (pp. 130-152). London, UK: Routledge.
- Crawford, B. (2016, December 15). Special police task force created to investigate all unsolved gang-related homicides. *The Ottawa Citizen*. Retrieved from <http://ottawacitizen.com>

- Criminal Intelligence Service Canada [CISC]. (2006). *Project spectrum: 2006 situational overview of street gangs in Canada*. Ottawa, ON: Author.
- Crutchfield, R. D. (2014). *Get a job: Labor markets, economic opportunity, and crime*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Cullen, F. T. (2011). Beyond adolescence-limited criminology: Choosing our future. *Criminology*, 49(2), 287-330.
- Curry, D. G., Ball, R. A., & Decker, S. H. (1996). Estimating the national scope of gang crime from law enforcement data. *National Institute of Justice Research in Brief*. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice. Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/161477NCJRS.pdf>
- Curry, G. D., Ball, R. A., & Fox, R. J. (1994). Gang crime and law enforcement record keeping. *National Institute of Justice Research in Brief*. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice. Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/148345NCJRS.pdf>
- Curry, G. D., & Decker, S. H. (1998). *Confronting gangs: Crime and community*. Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury.
- Curry, G. D., Decker, S. H., & Egley, A., Jr. (2002). Gang involvement and delinquency in a middle school population. *Justice Quarterly*, 19(2), 301-318.
- Curry, G. D., Decker, S. H., & Pyrooz, D. (2013). *Confronting gangs: Crime and community* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Curry, G. D., & Spergel, I. A. (1992). Gang involvement and delinquency among Hispanic and African-American adolescent males. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 29(3), 273-291.
- Dahlberg, L., & Krug, E. G. (2002). Violence: A global public health problem. In E. G. Krug, L. Dahlberg, J. A. Mercy, A. B. Zwi, & R. Lozano (Eds.). *The world report on violence and health* (pp. 1-22). Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization.
- Daiute, C., & Fine, M. (2003). Youth perspectives on violence and injustice. *Journal of Social Issues*, 59(1), 1-14.
- Dalton, A., & McVilly, K. (2004). Ethics guidelines for international multicenter research involving people with intellectual disabilities. *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities* 1(2), 57-70.
- Dannefer, D. (1984). Adult development and social theory: A paradigmatic appraisal. *American Sociological Review*, 49(1), 100-116.

- Davies, S., & Tanner, J. (2003). The long arm of the law: Effects of labelling on employment. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 44(3), 385-404.
- Day, A., & Ward, T. (2010). Offender rehabilitation as a value-laden process. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 54(3), 289-306.
- Day, D. M., Koegl, C. J., Rossman, L., & Oziel, S. (2016). *The monetary costs of criminal trajectories for an Ontario sample of offenders* (Research Report 2015-R011). Prepared for Public Safety Canada. Retrieved from <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/mntry-cst-crmnl-trjctrs/index-en.aspx>
- Deane, L., Bracken, D. C., & Morrissette, L. (2007). Desistance within an urban Aboriginal gang. *Probation Journal*, 54(2), 125-141.
- Debicki, A. (2011). *Making Canadian communities safe: One child and youth at a time. Good Wraparound projects in Canada: A review of NCPC projects* (Unpublished Report). Report prepared for the National Crime Prevention Centre.
- Decker, S. H. (1996). Collective and normative features of gang violence. *Justice Quarterly*, 13(2), 243-264.
- Decker, S. H., & Curry, G. D. (2000). Addressing key features of gang membership: Measuring the involvement of young members. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 28(6), 473-482.
- Decker, S. H., Katz, C. M., & Webb, V. J. (2008). Understanding the black box of gang organization: Implications for involvement in violent crime, drug sales, and violent victimization. *Crime & Delinquency*, 54(1), 153-172.
- Decker, S. H., & Kempf-Leonard, K. (1991). Constructing gangs: The social definition of youth activities. *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, 5(4), 271-291.
- Decker, S. H., & Lauritsen, J. L. (2002). Leaving the gang. In C. R. Huff (Ed.), *Gangs in America* (3rd ed., pp. 51-70). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Decker, S. H., Melde, C., & Pyrooz, D. C. (2013). What do we know about gang and gang members and where do we go from here? *Justice Quarterly*, 303(3), 369-402.
- Decker, S. H., & Pyrooz, D. C. (2010). Gang violence worldwide: Context, culture and country. In Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (Ed.), *Small arms survey 2010: Gangs, groups, and guns* (pp.129-155). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Decker, S. H., & Pyrooz, D. C. (2011a). Gangs, terrorism, and radicalization. *Journal of Strategic Security*, 4(4), 151-166.



- Decker, S. H., & Pyrooz, D. C. (2011b). *Leaving the gang: Logging off and moving on*. Paper commissioned by Google Ideas. Retrieved from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258276618\\_Leaving\\_the\\_Gang\\_Logging\\_Off\\_and\\_Moving\\_On](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258276618_Leaving_the_Gang_Logging_Off_and_Moving_On)
- Decker, S. H., Pyrooz, D. C., & Moule, R. K., Jr. (2014). Disengagement from gangs as role transitions. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 24*(2), 268-283.
- Decker, S. H., Pyrooz, D. C., Sweeten, G., & Moule, R. K., Jr. (2014). Validating self-nomination in gang research: Assessing differences in gang embeddedness across non-, current, and former gang members. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology, 30*(4), 577-598.
- Decker, S., & Van Winkle, B. (1996). *Life in the gang*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Del Carmen, A., Rodriguez, J., Dobbs, R., Smith, R., Butler, R., & Sarver, R. (2009). In their own words: A study of gang members through their own perspective. *Journal of Gang Research, 16*, 57-76.
- DeLisi, M., Barnes, J. C., Beaver, K. M., & Gibson, C. L. (2009). Delinquent gangs and adolescent victimization revisited: A propensity score matching approach. *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 36*(8), 808-823.
- DeLisi, M., & Piquero, A. R. (2011). New frontiers in criminal careers research, 2000-2011: A state-of-the-art review. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 39*(4), 289-301.
- Demo, D. H. (1992). The self-concept over time: Research issues and directions. *Annual Review of Sociology, 18*(1), 303-326.
- Densley, J. (2013). *How gangs work: An ethnography of youth violence*. Oxford, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Denzin, N. K. (2009). The elephant in the living room: Or extending the conversation about the politics of evidence. *Qualitative Research, 9*(2), 139-160.
- Descormiers, K. (2013). *From getting in to getting out: The role of pre-gang context and group processes in analyzing turning points in gang trajectories* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC.
- Descormiers, K., & Morselli, C. (2011). Alliance, conflicts, and contradictions in Montreal's street gang landscape. *International Criminal Justice Review, 21*(3), 297-314.
- Deuchar, R. (2009). *Gangs, marginalised youth and social capital*. Stoke on Trent, UK: Trentham.

- Deuchar, R., Sjøgaard, T. F., Kolind, T., Thylstrup, B., & Wells, L. (2016). 'When you're boxing you don't think so much': Pugilism, transitional masculinities and criminal desistance among young Danish gang members. *Journal of Youth Studies, 19*(6), 725-742.
- Dickson-Gomez, J., Quinn, K., Broaddus, M., & Pacella, M. (2017). Gang masculinity and high-risk sexual behaviours. *Culture, Health & Sexuality, 19*(2), 165-178.
- Di Placido, C., Simon, T. L., Witte, T. D., Gu, D., & Wong, S. C. P. (2006). Treatment of gang members can reduce recidivism and institutional misconduct. *Law and Human Behavior, 30*(1), 93-114.
- Dmitrieva, J., Monahan, K. C., Cauffman, E., & Steinberg, L. (2012). Arrested development: The effects of incarceration on the development of psychosocial maturity. *Development and Psychopathology, 24*(3), 1073-1090.
- Dong, B., Gibson, C. L., & Krohn, M. D. (2015). Gang membership in a developmental and life course perspective. In S. H. Decker & D. C. Pyrooz (Eds.), *The handbook of gangs* (pp. 78-97). New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.
- Dong, B., & Krohn, M. (2016). Escape from violence: What reduces the enduring consequences of adolescent gang affiliation? *Journal of Criminal Justice, 47*(Complete), 41-50.
- Dorais, M., & Corriveau, P. (2009). *Gangs and girls. Understanding juvenile prostitution*. Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Drake, D. H., Fergusson, R., & Briggs, D. B. (2014). Hearing new voices: Reviewing youth justice policy through practitioners' relationships with young people. *Youth Justice, 14*(1), 22-39.
- DuBois, D., Holloway, B., Valentine, J., & Cooper, H. (2002). Effectiveness of mentoring programs for youth: A meta-analytic review. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 30*(2), 157-197.
- Dunbar, L. (2017). *Youth gangs in Canada: A review of current topics and issues* (Research Report 2017-R001). Ottawa, ON: Public Safety Canada. Retrieved from <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/2017-r001/index-en.aspx>
- Duncan, G. D., Ludwig, J., & Magnuson, K. A. (2007). Reducing poverty through preschool interventions. *Future Child, 17*(2), 143-160.
- Ebaugh, H. R. F. (1988). *Becoming an ex: The process of role exit*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Edin, K., & Kefalas, M. (2005). *Promises I can keep: Why poor women put motherhood before marriage*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

- Egley, A., Jr., Howell, J. C., & Harris, M. (2014). Highlights of the 2012 National Youth Gang Survey. *OJJDP Juvenile Justice Fact Sheet*. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice. Retrieved from <https://www.ojjdp.gov/pubs/248025.pdf>
- Elder, G. H., Jr. (1985). Perspectives on the life course. In G. H. Elder, Jr. (Ed.), *Life course dynamics* (pp. 23-49). New York, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Elder, G. H., Jr. (1994). Time, human agency, and social change: Perspectives on the life course. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *57*(1), 4-15.
- Elder, G. H., Jr. (1997). The life course and human development. In R. M. Lerner (Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Theoretical models of human development* (Vol. 1, pp. 939-991). New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.
- Elder, G. H., Jr. (1998). The life course as developmental theory. *Child Development*, *69*(1), 1-12.
- Elder, G. H., Jr., & Johnson, K. M. (2003). The life course and aging: Challenges, lessons, and new directions. In R. A. Settersten, Jr. (Ed.), *Invitation to the life course: Towards new understandings of later life* (pp. 49-81). Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing Company.
- Elder-Vass, D. (2007). For emergence: Refining Archer's account of social structure. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, *37*(1), 24-44.
- Emirbayer, M., & Mische, A. (1998). What is agency? *American Journal of Sociology*, *103*(4), 962-1023.
- Esbensen, F.-A., & Huizinga, D. (1993). Gangs, drugs, and delinquency in a survey of urban youth. *Criminology*, *31*(4), 565-589.
- Esbensen, F.-A., Peterson, D., Taylor, T. J., & Freng, A. (2009). Similarities and differences in risk factors for violent offending and gang membership. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, *42*(3), 310-335.
- Esbensen, F.-A., Peterson, D., Taylor, T. J., & Freng, A. (2010). *Youth violence: Sex and race differences in offending, victimization, and gang membership*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Esbensen, F.-A., Peterson, D., Taylor, T. J., & Osgood, D. W. (2012). Results from a multi-site evaluation of the G.R.E.A.T. Program. *Justice Quarterly*, *29*(1), 125-151.
- Esbensen, F.-A., Winfree, L. T., Jr., He, N., & Taylor, T. J. (2001). Youth gangs and definitional issues: When is a gang a gang and why does it matter? *Crime & Delinquency*, *47*(1), 105-130.

- Ezeonu, I. (2014). Doing gang research in Canada: Navigating a different kaleidoscope. *Contemporary Justice Review*, 17(1), 4-22.
- Fader, J. (2008). You can take me outta the 'hood, but you can't take the 'hood outta me: Youth incarceration and reentry. In E. Anderson (Ed.), *Against the wall: Poor, young, Black, and male* (pp. 198-217). Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Fader, J. (2011). Conditions of a successful status graduation ceremony: Formerly incarcerated urban youth and their tenuous grip on success. *Punishment & Society*, 13(1), 29-46.
- Fader, J., & Traylor, L. (2015). Dealing with difference in desistance theory: The promise of intersectionality for new avenues of inquiry. *Sociology Compass*, 9(4), 247-260.
- Fagan, J. (1989). The social organization of drug use and drug dealing among urban gangs. *Criminology*, 27(4), 633-670.
- Fagan, J., & Freeman, R. B. (1999). Crime and work. *Crime and Justice*, 25, 225-290.
- Farmer, A. Y., & Hairston, T. (2013). Predictors of gang membership: Variations across grade levels. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 39(4), 530-544.
- Farrall, S. (2002). *Rethinking what works with offenders: Probation, social context and desistance from crime*. Cullompton, UK: Willan.
- Farrall, S., Bottoms, A., & Shapland, J. (2010). Social structures and desistance from crime. *European Journal of Criminology*, 7(6), 546-570.
- Farrall, S., & Bowling, B. (1999). Structuration, human development and desistance from crime. *British Journal of Criminology*, 39(2), 252-267.
- Farrall, S., & Calverley, A. (2006). *Understanding desistance from crime*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.
- Farrall, S., Hunter, B., Sharpe, G., & Calverley, A. (2014). *Criminal careers in transition: The social context of desistance from crime*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Farrington, D. P., & Welsh, B. C. (2007). *Saving children from a life of crime: Early risk factors and effective interventions*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Feavel, K., & Pyrooz, D. C. (2014). Desistance from gangs. In G. Bruinsma & D. Weisburd (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of criminology and criminal justice* (pp. 978-988). New York, NY: Springer.
- Felson, M. (2006). *Crime and nature*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Ferguson, R. F., Snipes, J., Hossain, F., & Manno, M. S. (2015). *Developing positive young adults: Lessons from two decades of YouthBuild programs*. MDRC. Retrieved from [http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/YouthBuild%20Development%20Paper\\_2015.pdf](http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/YouthBuild%20Development%20Paper_2015.pdf)
- FitzGerald, M., Stockdale, J., & Hale, C. (2003). *Young people and street crime. Research into young people's involvement in street crime*. London, UK: Youth Justice Board. Retrieved from <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/4158137.pdf>
- Fitzpatrick, M., & Irannejad, S. (2008). Adolescent readiness for change and the working alliance in counseling. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 86*(4), 438-445.
- Flanagan, S. M., & Hancock, B. (2010). 'Reaching the hard to reach': Lessons learned from the VCS (voluntary and community sector). A qualitative study. *BMC Health Services Research, 10*(1), 92-100.
- Fleisher, M. S. (1998). *Dead end kids: Gang girls and the boys they know*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Fleisher, M. S., & Decker, S. H. (2001). Going home, staying home: Integrating prison gang members into the community. *Corrections Management Quarterly, 5*(1), 65-77.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case study research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 12*(2), 219-245.
- Fontana, A., & Frey, J. H. (2000). The interview: From structured questions to negotiated text. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 645-672). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Fox, K. A., Lane, J., & Akers, R. L. (2010). Do perceptions of neighborhood disorganization predict crime or victimization? An examination of gang member versus non-gang member jail inmates. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 38*(4), 720-729.
- Fox, K. J. (2015). Theorizing community integration as desistance promotion. *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 42*(1), 82-94.
- France, A., & Homel, R. (2006). Societal access routes and developmental pathways: Putting social structure and young people's voice into the analysis of pathways into and out of crime. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology, 39*(3), 295-309.
- Franzese, R. J., Covey, H. C., & Menard, S. W. (2016). *Youth gangs*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- Fraser, A., & Hagedorn, J. M. (2018). Gangs and a global sociological imagination. *Theoretical Criminology, 22*(1), 42-62.

- Fritsch, E. J., Caeti, T. J., & Taylor, R. W. (1999). Gang suppression through saturation patrol, aggressive curfew, and truancy enforcement: A quasi-experimental test of the Dallas anti-gang initiative. *Crime & Delinquency*, 45(1), 122-139.
- Furstenberg, F. (2010). On a new schedule: Transitions to adulthood and family change. *Future of Children*, 20(1), 67-87.
- Gabor, T. (2016). *Costs of crime and criminal justice responses* (Research Report 2015-R022). Report prepared for Public Safety Canada. Retrieved from <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/2015-r022/index-en.aspx>
- Gadd, D., & Farrall, S. (2004). Criminal careers, desistance and subjectivity: Interpreting men's narratives of change. *Theoretical Criminology*, 8(2), 123-156.
- Gardner, W. (1993). A life-span rational choice theory of risk taking. In N. Bell & R. Bell (Eds.), *Adolescent risk taking* (pp. 66-83). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Garland, D. (2001). *The culture of control: Crime and social order in contemporary society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Gatti, U., Tremblay, R. E., & Vitaro, F. (2009). Latrogenic effect of juvenile justice. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 50(8), 991-998.
- Gaudet, S. (2007). *Emerging adulthood: A new stage in the life course. Implications for policy development*. Ottawa, ON: Policy Research Initiative, Government of Canada. Retrieved from <http://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/320569/publication.html>
- Gebo, E., & Campos, K. (2016). Perceptions of gangs and crews by justice-involved youth and implications for best practice work. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 42(4), 478-488.
- Geller, A., Garfinkel, I., & Western, B. (2006). *The effects of incarceration on employment and wages: An analysis of the fragile families survey* (Working Paper No. 2006-01-FF). Centre for Research on Child Wellbeing. Retrieved from <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/a748/257cf094a1868ba70514c09098462f2c5dde.pdf>
- Gervais, C. (2015). *Standing up for offending youths' right to play: Re-constructing individual identity and reassuring public safety*. 6<sup>th</sup> Children's Rights Academic Network Meeting – Response to Shaking the Movers VII Report (pp.20-25). Ottawa, ON: Landon Pearson Resource Centre for the Study of Childhood and Children's Rights. Retrieved from [http://www.landonpearson.ca/uploads/6/0/1/4/6014680/cran\\_2015\\_report.pdf](http://www.landonpearson.ca/uploads/6/0/1/4/6014680/cran_2015_report.pdf)
- Ghoussoub, M. (2017, November 17). Public safety minister announces \$327.6M to fight gangs and gun violence. *CBC News*. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca>
- Gibbert, M., & Ruigrok, W. (2010). The “what” and “how” of case study rigor: Three strategies based on published work. *Organizational Research*, 13(4), 710-737.

- Gilman, A. B., Hill, K. G., Hawkins, J. D., Howell, J. C., & Kosterman, R. (2014). The developmental dynamics of joining a gang in adolescence: Patterns and predictors of gang membership. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 24*(2), 204-219.
- Giordano, P. C. (2010). *Legacies of crime: A follow-up of the children of highly delinquent girls and boys*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Giordano, P. C., Cernovich, S. A., & Holland, D. D. (2003). Changes in friendship relations over the life course: Implications for desistance from crime. *Criminology, 41*(2), 293-327.
- Giordano, P. C., Cernovich, S. A., & Rudolph, J. L. (2002). Gender, crime and desistance: Toward a theory of cognitive transformation. *American Journal of Sociology, 107*(4), 990-1064.
- Giordano, P. C., Schroeder, R. D., & Cernovich, S. A. (2007). Emotions and crime over the life course: A neo-meadian perspective on criminal continuity and change. *American Journal of Sociology, 112*(6), 1603-1661.
- Glassner, B., & Loughlin, J. (1987). *Drugs in adolescent worlds: Burnouts to straights*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Goldman, L., Giles, H., & Hogg, M. A. (2014). Going to extremes: Social identity and communication processes associated with gang membership. *Group Process & Intergroup Relations, 17*(6), 813-832.
- Goldson, B., & Muncie, J. (Eds.). (2006). *Youth crime and justice*. London, UK: Sage.
- Goldstein, A. P., Glick, B., & Gibbs, J. C. (1998). *Aggression Replacement Training: A comprehensive intervention for aggressive youth*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.
- Goodwill, A. (2009). *In and out of Aboriginal gang life: Perspectives of Aboriginal ex-gang members* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC.
- Goodwill, A. (2016). A critical incident technique study of the facilitation of gang entry: Perspectives of Indigenous men ex-gang members. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma, 25*(5), 518-536.
- Gordon, J. A. (1999). Correctional officers' attitudes toward delinquents and delinquency: Does the type of institution make a difference? In M. L. Dantzker (Ed.), *Readings for research methods in criminology and criminal justice* (pp. 85-98). Boston, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Gordon, R. M. (2000). Criminal business organizations, street gangs and 'wanna-be' groups: A Vancouver perspective. *Canadian Journal of Criminology, 42*(1), 39-60.

- Gormally, S. (2015). 'I've been there, done that...': A study of youth gang desistance. *Youth Justice, 15*(2), 148-165.
- Gorman-Smith, D., Kampfner, A., & Bromann, K. (2013). What should be done in the family to prevent gang membership? In T. R. Simon, N. M. Ritter, & R. R. Mahendra (Eds.), *Changing course: Preventing gang membership* (pp. 75-88). Washington, DC: US Department of Justice and US Department of Health and Human Resources.
- Gottfredson, M. R. (2011). Sanctions, situations, and agency in control theories of crime. *European Journal of Criminology, 8*(2), 128-143.
- Gottfredson, M. R., & Hirschi, T. (1990). *A general theory of crime*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Gover, A. R., Jennings, W. G., & Tewksbury, R. (2009). Adolescent male and female gang members' experiences with violent victimization, dating violence, and sexual assault. *American Journal of Criminal Justice, 34*(1), 103-115.
- Graffam, J., Shinkfield, A., Lavelle, B., & McPherson, W. (2004). Variables affecting successful reintegration as perceived by offenders and professionals. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation, 40*(1-2), 147-171.
- Greene, J., & Pranis, K. (2007). *Gang wars: The failure of enforcement tactics and the need for effective public safety strategies*. Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.justicepolicy.org/research/1961>
- Grekul, J., & LaBoucane-Benson, P. (2007). *An investigation into the formation and recruitment processes of Aboriginal gangs in Canada*. Report prepared for Public Safety Canada. Retrieved from <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/brgnl-gngs-nvstgtn-2006/index-en.aspx>
- Grekul, J., & LaBoucane-Benson, P. (2008). Aboriginal gangs and their (dis)placement: Contextualizing recruitment, membership, and status. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice, 50*(1), 59-82.
- Griffin, M. L. (2007). Prison gang policy and recidivism: Short-term management benefits, long-term consequences. *Criminology & Public Policy, 6*(2), 223-230.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105-117). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 191-216). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.



- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59-82.
- Hagedorn, J. M. (1988). *People and folks: Gangs, crime, and the underclass in a rustbelt city*. Chicago, IL: Lake View Press.
- Hagedorn, J. M. (1994). Homeboys, dope fiends, legit, and new jacks. *Criminology*, 32(2), 197-219.
- Hagedorn, J. M. (1996). The emperor's new clothes. *Free Inquiry in Creative Sociology*, 24(2), 111-122.
- Hagedorn, J. M. (1998). Gang violence in the postindustrial era. *Crime and Justice*, 24, 365-419.
- Hagedorn, J. M. (Ed.). (2007). *Gangs in the global city: Alternatives to traditional criminology*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Haggerty, K. D. (2003). Review essay: Ruminations on reflexivity. *Current Sociology*, 51(2), 153-162.
- Halpern, R., Barker, G., & Mollard, W. (2000). Youth programs as alternative spaces to be: A study of neighborhood youth programs in Chicago's West Town. *Youth and Society*, 31(4), 469-506.
- Hamel, S., Fredette, C., Blais, M., & Bertot, J. (1998). *Youth and street gangs, phase II: Field research results*. Montreal, QC: l'Institute de recherche pour le développement social des jeunes (IRDS).
- Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice* (3rd ed.). London, UK: Routledge.
- Hamnett, C. (2003). Gentrification and the middle-class remaking of inner London, 1961-2001. *Urban Studies*, 40(12), 2401-2426.
- Harper, G. W., Davidson, J., & Hosek, S. G. (2008). Influence of gang membership on negative affects, substance use, and antisocial behavior among homeless African American male youth. *American Journal of Men's Health*, 2(3), 229-243.
- Harris, A. (2011). Constructing clean dreams: Accounts, future selves, and social and structural support as desistance work. *Symbolic Interaction*, 34(1), 63-85.
- Hart, J., O'Toole, S., Price-Sharps, J., & Shaffer, T. (2007). The risk and protective factors of violent juvenile offending: A examination of gender differences. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 5(4), 367-384.

- Hartley, C. A., & Somerville, L. H. (2015). The neuroscience of adolescent decision-making. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 5(Complete), 108-115.
- Hartmann, D. (2001). Notes on midnight basketball and the cultural politics of recreation, race and at-risk urban youth. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 25(4), 339-371.
- Hastings, R. (2003). We are acting locally but are we thinking globally? *Preventing Crime through Social Development*, 6(4). Ottawa, ON: Canadian Council on Social Development.
- Hastings, R. (2010). *Workshop report: Developing a strategic approach to criminal youth gangs*. Ottawa, ON: Institute for the Prevention of Crime, University of Ottawa.
- Hastings, R., Dunbar, L., & Bania, M. (2011). *Leaving criminal youth gangs: Exit strategies and programs*. Ottawa, ON: Institute for the Prevention of Crime, University of Ottawa.
- Hayden, T. (2004). *Street wars: Gangs and the future of violence*. New York, NY: New Press.
- Hays, S. (1994). Structure and agency and the sticky problem of culture. *Sociological Theory*, 12(1), 57-72.
- Healy, D. (2010). *The dynamics of desistance: Charting pathways through change*. Cullompton, UK: Willan.
- Healy, D., & O'Donnell, I. (2008). Calling time on crime: Motivation, generativity and agency in Irish probationers. *Probation Journal*, 55(1), 25-38.
- Hearn, J. (2000). Is masculinity dead? A critique of the concept of masculinity/masculinities. In M. Mac an Ghail (Ed.), *Understanding masculinities: Social relations and cultural arenas* (pp. 202-217). Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Hébert, J., Hamel, S., & Savoie, G. (1997). *Youth and street gangs, phase I: Literature review*. Montreal, QC: l'Institut de recherche pour le développement social des jeunes (IRDS).
- Heckman, J. (2006). Skill formation and the economics of investing in disadvantaged children. *Science*, 312(5782), 1900-1902.
- Heisz, A. (2005). *Ten things to know about Canadian metropolitan areas: A synthesis of Statistics Canada's trends and conditions in census metropolitan areas series* (Analytical Paper No. 009). Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada. Retrieved from <http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/olc-cel/olc.action?objId=89-613-M2005009&objType=46&lang=en&limit=0>
- Hemmati, T. (2006). *The nature of Canadian urban gangs and their use of firearms: A review of the literature and police survey* (Research Report rr07-1e). Ottawa, ON: Department of Justice Canada. Retrieved from [http://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/csj-sjc/crime/rr07\\_1/pl.html](http://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/csj-sjc/crime/rr07_1/pl.html)

- Henggeler, S. W., Schoenwald, S. K., Borduin, C. M., Rowland, M. D., & Cunningham, P. B. (2009). *Multisystemic therapy for antisocial behavior in children and adolescents* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Guilford.
- Hill, K. G., Howell, J. C., Hawkins, J. D., & Battin-Pearson, S. R. (1999). Childhood risk factors for adolescent gang membership: Results from the Seattle Social Development Project. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 36(3), 300-322.
- Hirschi, T. (1969). *Causes of delinquency*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Hirschi, T., & Gottfredson, M. (1983). Age and the explanation of crime. *American Journal of Sociology*, 89(3), 552-584.
- Hixt, N. (2017, December 29). Calgary homicides in 2017: Drug, gang & organized crime-related deaths lead stats. *Global News*. Retrieved from <https://www.globalnews.ca>
- Hodgkinson, J., Marshall, S., Berry, G., Newman, M., Reynolds, P., Burton, E., Dickson, K., & Anderson, J. (2009). *Reducing gang related crime: A systematic review of 'comprehensive' interventions*. EPPI-Centre. Retrieved from <http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Default.aspx?tabid=2444>
- Hofstede, G. (1984). The cultural relativity of the quality of life concept. *Academy of Management Review*, 9(3), 389-398.
- Hollander, J. (2001). Vulnerability and dangerousness: The construction of gender through conversation about violence. *Gender & Society*, 15(1), 84-110.
- Hollander, J. (2004). The social contexts of focus groups. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 33(5), 602-637.
- Holleran, D., & Spohn, C. (2004). On the use of the total incarceration variable in sentencing research. *Criminology*, 42(1), 211-240.
- Hollway, W., & Jefferson, T. (2001). Free association, narrative analysis and the defended subject: The case of Ivy. *Narrative Inquiry*, 11(1), 103-122.
- Homans, G. C. (1950). *The human group*. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace.
- Hopper, T., & Powell, A. (1985). Making sense of research into the organisational and social aspects of management accounting: A review of the underlying assumptions. *Journal of Management Studies*, 22(5), 429-465.
- Horowitz, R. (1990). Sociological perspectives on gangs: Conflicting definitions and concepts. In R. Huff (Ed.), *Gangs in America* (pp. 37-54). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

- Horsfall, D., Byrne-Armstrong, H., & Higgs, J. (2001). Researching critical moments. In H. Byrne-Armstrong, J. Higgs, & D. Horsfall (Eds.), *Critical moments in qualitative research* (pp. 3-16). Oxford, UK: Butterworth Heinemann.
- Houston, J. (1996). What works: The search for excellence in gang intervention programs. *Journal of Gang Research*, 3, 1-16.
- Howell, J. C. (1998). Youth gangs: An overview. *National Youth Gang Center Bulletin*. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice. Retrieved from <https://secure.ce-credit.com/articles/101181/167249.pdf>
- Howell, J. C. (2006). The impact of gangs on communities. *National Youth Gang Center Bulletin*. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice. Retrieved from <https://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Content/Documents/Impact-of-Gangs-on-Communities.pdf>
- Howell, J. C. (2007). Menacing or mimicking? Realities of youth gangs. *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*, 58(2), 39-50.
- Howell, J. C. (2010). Gang prevention: An overview of research and programs. *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice. Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/231116.pdf>
- Howell, J. C. (2012). *Gangs in America's communities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Howell, J. C., Braun, J. F., & Bellatty, P. (2017). The practical utility of a life-course gang theory for intervention. *Journal of Crime & Justice*, 40(3), 358-375.
- Howell, J. C., & Egley, A., Jr. (2005). Moving risk factors into developmental theories of gang membership. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 3(4), 334-354.
- Huebner, B. M., Varano, S. P., & Bynum, T. S. (2007). Gangs, guns, and drugs: Recidivism among serious, young offenders. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 6(2), 187-222.
- Huff, C. R. (2002). *Gangs in America* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hugman, R. (2005). *New approaches in ethics for the caring professions*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hugman, R. (2010). Social work research and ethics. In I. Shaw, K. Briar-Lawson, J. Orme, & R. Ruckdeschel (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of social work research* (pp. 149-163). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Huizinga, D., & Henry, K. (2008). The effect of arrest and justice system sanctions on subsequent behavior: Findings from longitudinal and other studies. In A. Liberman (Ed.), *The long view of crime: A synthesis of longitudinal research* (pp. 220-254). New York, NY: Springer.

- Huizinga, D., Schumann, K., Ehret, B., & Elliot, A. (2004). *The effects of juvenile justice processing on subsequent delinquent and criminal behaviour: A cross-national study*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice. Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/205001.pdf>
- Ilan, J. (2010). 'If you don't let us in, we'll get arrested': Class-cultural dynamics in the provision of, and resistance to, youth justice work. *Youth Justice, 10*(1), 25-39.
- Inderbitzin, M. (2006). Guardians of the state's problem children: An ethnographic study of staff members in a juvenile correctional facility. *The Prison Journal, 86*(4), 431-451.
- Jacobs, B. A. (1999). *Dealing crack*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.
- Jacobs, B. A. (2000). *Robbing drug dealers: Violence beyond the law*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Jacobs, B. A., & Wright, R. (2006). *Street justice: Retaliation in the criminal underworld*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Jacques, S., & Wright, R. (2008). The victimization-termination link. *Criminology, 46*(4), 1009-1038.
- Jacquez, F., Vaughn, L., & Wagner, E. (2013). Youth as partners, participants or passive recipients: A review of children and adolescents in community-based participatory research (CBPR). *American Journal of Community Psychology, 51*(1-2), 176-189.
- Jimenez, L. (2014). Intergenerational traumatic transmission of aspects of masculinities through shame and embarrassment among unemployed young men and their fathers. *International Forum of Psychoanalysis, 23*(3), 151-160.
- Joe, K., & Chesney-Lind, M. (1995). Just every mother's angel: An analysis of gender and ethnic variations in youth gang membership. *Gender & Society, 9*(4), 408-431.
- Johnson, S. B., Bradshaw, C., Wright, J. L., Haynie, D. L., Simons-Morton, B., & Cheng, T L. (2007). Characterizing the teachable moment: Is an emergency department visit a teachable moment for intervention among assault-injured youth and their parents? *Pediatric Emergency Care, 23*(8), 553-559.
- Johnson, S. D. (1995). Will our research hold up under scrutiny? *Journal of Industrial Teacher Education, 32*(3), 3-6.
- Johnstone, J. W. C. (1981). Youth gangs and Black suburbs. *Pacific Sociological Review, 24*(3), 355-375.
- Johnstone, J. W. C. (1983). Recruitment to a youth gang. *Youth and Society, 14*(3), 281-300.

- Jones, D., Roper, V., Stys, Y., & Wilson, C. (2004). *Street gangs: A review of theory, interventions, and implications for corrections* (Research Report R-161). Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/research/r161-eng.shtml>
- Jordan, S. C., & Wesselmann, E. D. (2015). The contextually grounded nature of prosocial behavior: A multiscale, embodied approach to morality. In D. A. Schroeder & W G. Graziano (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of prosocial behavior* (pp. 153-165). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Kaler, A., & Beres, M. (2010). *Essentials of field relationships*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Kamradt, B. (2014, October). Innovative approaches to measuring and monitoring outcomes for youth in systems of care – Wraparound Milwaukee’s model. Paper presented at the Conference on Expanding Access to Children’s Behavioral Health Care Services, Albany, NY.
- Kang, T., Eno Louden, J., Ricks, E. P., & Jones, R. L. (2015). Aggression, substance use disorder, and presence of a prior suicide attempt among juvenile offenders with subclinical depression. *Law and Human Behavior*, 39(5), 1-9.
- Kassel, P. (2003). The crackdown in the prisons of Massachusetts: Arbitrary and harsh treatment can only make matters worse. In L. Kontos, D. Brotherton, & L. Barrios (Eds.), *Gangs and society: Alternative perspectives* (pp. 229-252). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Katz, C. M., Webb, V. J., & Decker, S. H. (2005). Using the Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (ADAM) program to further understand the relationship between drug use and gang membership. *Justice Quarterly*, 22(1), 58-88.
- Kazemian, L. (2007). Desistance from crime: Theoretical, empirical, methodological and policy considerations. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 23(1), 5-27.
- Keating, D. (1990). Adolescent thinking. In S. Feldman & G. Elliot (Eds.), *At the threshold: The developing adolescent* (pp. 54-89). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kelly, A. (2015). *Girls in gangs: Listening to and making sense of females' perspectives of gang life* (Unpublished master’s thesis). University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON.
- Kelly, K. (2009). *Ottawa youth gang prevention initiative: Community cohesion and youth gang prevention in six priority areas*. Report prepared for Crime Prevention Ottawa. Retrieved from <https://www.peelregion.ca/health/youth/pdfs/Ottawa-YouthGangPrevention.pdf>
- Kelly, K., & Caputo, T. (2005). The linkages between street gangs and organized crime: The Canadian experience. *Journal of Gang Research*, 13, 17-31.

- Kelly, L. (2012). Sports-based interventions and the local governance of youth crime and antisocial behavior. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 37(3), 261-283.
- Kelly, S., Anderson, D., Hall, L., Peden, A., & Cerel, J. (2012). The effects of exposure to gang violence on adolescent boys' mental health. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 33(2), 80-88.
- Kelman, H. C. (1958). Compliance, identification and internalization: Three processes of attitude change. *Conflict Resolution*, 2(1), 51-60.
- Kennedy, D. M. (2009). Gangs and public policy: Constructing and deconstructing gang databases. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 8(4), 711-716.
- Kerig, P. K., Wainryb, C., Twali, M. S., & Chaplo, S. D. (2013). America's child soldiers: Toward a research agenda for studying gang-involved youth in the United States. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 22(7), 773-795.
- King, J. E., Walpole, C. E., & Lamon, K. (2007). Surf and turf wars online – Growing implications of Internet gang violence. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 41, S66–S68.
- King, S. (2013). Assisted desistance and experiences of probation supervision. *Probation Journal*, 60(2), 136-151.
- King-Hill, S. (2015). Critical analysis of Maslow's hierarchy of need. *The STeP Journal Student Teacher Perspectives*, 2(4), 54-57.
- Kitchen, P., & Williams, A. (2010). Quality of life and perceptions of crime in Saskatoon, Canada. *Social Indicators Research*, 95(1), 33-61.
- Kitzinger, J. (1994). The methodology of focus groups: The importance of interaction between research participants. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 16(1), 103-121.
- Klein, M. W. (1971). *Street gangs and street workers*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Klein, M. W. (1995). *The American street gang: Its nature, prevalence, and control*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Klein, M. W. (1996). Gangs in the United States and Europe. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, 4(2), 63-80.
- Klein, M. W. (2002). Street gangs: A cross national perspective. In C. R. Huff (Ed.), *Gangs in America* (3rd ed., pp. 237-256). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Klein, M. W. (2012). The next decade of Eurogang program research. In F.-A. Esbensen & C. L. Maxson (Eds.), *Youth gangs in international perspective: Results from the Eurogang program of research* (pp. 291-301). New York, NY: Springer.

- Klein, M. W., & Crawford, L. Y. (1967). Groups, gangs, and cohesiveness. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 4(1), 63-75.
- Klein, M. W., & Maxson, C. L. (1989). Street gang violence. In N. Weiner & M. Wolfgang (Eds.), *Violent crime, violent criminals* (pp. 198-234). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Klein, M. W., & Maxson, C. L. (2006). *Street gang patterns and policies*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Knox, G. W. (1994). *An introduction to gangs* (2nd ed.). Berrien Springs, MI: Vande Vere.
- Koss, M. P., Bachar, K., & Hopkins, C. Q. (2006). Disposition and treatment of juvenile sex offenders from the perspective of restorative justice. In H. E. Barbaree & W. L. Marshall (Eds.), *The juvenile sex offender* (2nd ed., pp. 336-357). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Kraska, P. B., & Neuman, W. L. (2011). *Criminal justice and criminology research methods* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Pearson.
- Krohn, M. D., Gibson, C. L., & Thornberry, T. P. (2013). Under the protective bud the bloom awaits: A review of theory and research on adult-onset and late-blooming offenders. In C. L. Gibson & M. D. Krohn (Eds.), *Handbook of life-course criminology: Emerging trends and directions for the future research* (pp. 183-200). New York, NY: Springer.
- Krohn, M. D. & Thornberry, T. P. (2008). Longitudinal perspectives on adolescent street gangs. In A. M. Liberman (Ed.), *The long view of crime: A synthesis of longitudinal research* (pp. 128-160). New York, NY: Springer.
- Krohn, M. D., Ward, J. T., Thornberry, T. P., Lizotte, A. J., & Chu, R. (2011). The cascading effects of adolescent gang involvement across the life course. *Criminology*, 49(4), 991-1028.
- Lachman, P., Roman, C. G., & Cahill, M. (2013). Assessing youth motivations for joining a peer group as risk factors for delinquent and gang behavior. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 11(3), 212-229.
- Lafontaine, T., Ferguson, M., & Wormith, J. S. (2005). *Street gangs: A review of the empirical literature on community and corrections-based prevention, intervention and suppression strategies*. Retrieved from [http://www.qp.gov.sk.ca/documents/misc-publications/GangReportforCPSJune30\\_05.pdf](http://www.qp.gov.sk.ca/documents/misc-publications/GangReportforCPSJune30_05.pdf)
- Laidler, K. A. J., & Hunt, G. (1997). Violence and social organization in female gangs. *Social Justice*, 24(4), 148-169.
- Laliberté, D. (2015). *Evaluation summary of the Atlantic Youth Inclusion Program* (Research Report 2015-R047). Ottawa, ON: Public Safety Canada. Retrieved from <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/2015-r047/index-en.aspx>



- Landsdowne Technologies Inc. (2013). *Ottawa gang strategy: A roadmap for action 2013-2016*. Report prepared for Crime Prevention Ottawa. Retrieved from <http://ottawa.ca/calendar/ottawa/citycouncil/opsb/2013/06-24/2a-Ottawa%20Gang%20Strategy%20-%20Annex-FINAL.pdf>
- Landsdowne Technologies Inc. (2016). *Ottawa gang strategy: Seeking solutions to street-level violence. Our first three years*. Report prepared for Crime Prevention Ottawa Retrieved from <http://www.crimepreventionottawa.ca/Media/Content/files/Publications/Youth/OGS%20Report-%20first%203%20years%20-Oct%202016-final-EN-reduced.pdf>
- Lapadat, J. C. (2000). Problematizing transcription: Purpose, paradigm and quality. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 3(3), 203-219.
- Lattimore, P. K., MacDonald, J. M., Piquero, A. R., Linster, R. L., & Visher, C. A. (2004). Studying the characteristics of arrest frequency among paroled youthful offenders. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 41(1), 37-57.
- Lattimore, P. K., Visher, C. A., & Linster, R. L. (1995). Predicting rearrest for violence among serious youthful offenders. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 32(1), 54-83.
- Laub, J. H., & Sampson, R. J. (2001). Understanding desistance from crime. *Crime and Justice*, 28, 1-69.
- Laub, J. H., & Sampson, R. J. (2003). *Shared beginnings, different lives: Delinquent boys to age 70*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Laub, J. H., Sampson, R. J., & Sweteen, G. A. (2006). Assessing Sampson and Laub's life course theory of crime. In F. T. Cullen, J. P. Wright, & K. R. Blevins (Eds.), *Taking stock: The status of criminological theory* (pp. 313-334). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Laucius, J. (2015, January 17). Gang exit strategies: 'The problem can't be arrested away. *The Ottawa Citizen*. Retrieved from <http://ottawacitizen.com>
- La Vigne, N. G., Visher, C., & Castro, J. (2004). *Chicago prisoners' experiences returning home*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/42831/311115-Chicago-Prisoners-Experiences-Returning-Home.PDF>
- Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence (2016). *Healing communities in crisis: Lifesaving solutions to the urban gun violence epidemic*. Retrieved from <http://www.lawcenter.giffords.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Healing-Communities-in-Crisis-URL.pdf>
- Layder, D. (1994). *Understanding social theory*. London, UK: Sage.

- Layder, D. (1998). *Sociological practice: Linking theory and social research*. London, UK: Sage.
- Leap, J., Franke, T. M., Christie, C. A., & Bonis, S. (2011). Nothing stops a bullet like a job: Homeboy Industries Gang Prevention and Intervention in Los Angeles. In J. S. Hoffman, L. M. Knox, & R. Cohen (Eds.), *Beyond suppression: Global perspectives on youth violence* (pp. 127-137). Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.
- LeBel, T. P., Burnett, R., Maruna, S., & Bushway, S. (2008). The “chicken and egg” of subjective and social factors in desistance from crime. *European Journal of Criminology*, 5(2), 131-159.
- Le Blanc, M. (2004). Self-control and social control in the explanation of deviant behaviour: Their development and interactions along the life course. Paper presented at the seminar on Social Contexts of Pathways in Crime: Development, Context, and Mechanisms, Cambridge, UK.
- Le Blanc, M., & Loeber, R. (1990). Toward a developmental criminology. *Crime and Justice*, 12, 375-473.
- Le Blanc, M., & Loeber, R. (1998). Developmental criminology updated. *Crime and Justice*, 23, 115-198.
- Leininger, M. (1994). Evaluation criteria and critique of qualitative research studies. In J. Morse (Ed.), *Critical issues in qualitative research methods* (pp. 95-115). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lemert, E. (1951). *Social pathology*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Levitt, S. D., & Venkatesh, S. A. (2000). An economic analysis of a drug-selling gang's finances. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 115(3), 755-789.
- Levitt, S. D., & Venkatesh, S. A. (2001a). *An analysis of the long-run consequences of gang involvement*. Paper presented at the 2001 Harvard Inequality Summer Institute, Harvard University, Boston, MA.
- Levitt, S. D., & Venkatesh, S. A. (2001b). Growing up in the projects: The economic lives of a cohort of men who came of age in Chicago public housing. *American Economic Review*, 91(2), 79-84.
- Li, X., Stanton, B., Pack, R., Harris, C., Cottrell, L., & Burns, J. (2002). Risk and protective factors associated with gang involvement among urban African American adolescents. *Youth and Society*, 34(2), 172-194.
- Lin, N. (2001). *Social capital: A theory of social structure and action*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Lindegaard, M., & Jacques, S. (2014). Agency as a cause of crime. *Deviant Behaviour*, 35(2), 85-100.
- Linden, R. (2010). *Comprehensive approaches to address street gangs in Canada* (Report No. 014). Report prepared for Public Safety Canada. Retrieved from [http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2012/sp-ps/PS4-113-2011-eng.pdf](http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2012/sp-ps/PS4-113-2011-eng.pdf)
- Lindgren, S.-A. (2005). Social constructionism and criminology: Traditions, problems and possibilities. *Criminology and Crime Prevention*, 6(1), 4-22.
- Little, W., Vyain, S., Scaramuzzo, G., Cody-Rydzewski, S., Griffiths, H., Strayer, E., Keirns, N., & McGivern, R. (2014). *Introduction to sociology* (1st Canadian ed.). Vancouver, BC: BC Campus Open Source Textbook.
- Loeber, R., & Farrington, D. P. (Eds.). (1998). *Serious and violent juvenile offenders: Risk factors and successful interventions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lofland, J., Snow, D. A., Anderson, L., & Lofland, L. H. (2006). *Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis* (4th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.
- Lopez-Aguado, P. (2013). Working between two worlds: Gang intervention and street liminality. *Ethnography*, 14(2), 186-206.
- Lopoo, L. M., & Western, B. (2005). Incarceration and the formation and stability of marital unions. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67(3), 721-734.
- Lösel, F., Bottoms, A., & Farrington, D. P. (Eds.). (2012). *Young adult offenders: Lost in transition?* London, UK: Routledge.
- Lurigio, A. L., Flexon, J. L., & Greenleaf, R. G. (2008). Antecedents to gang membership: Attachments, beliefs, and street encounters with the police. *Journal of Gang Research*, 15, 15-33.
- Madan, A., Mrug, S., & Windle, M. (2011). Do delinquency and community violence exposure explain internalizing problems in early adolescence gang members? *Journal of Adolescence*, 34(5), 1093-1096.
- Maggs, J. L., & Hurrelmann, K. (1998). Do substance use and delinquency have differential associations with adolescents' peer relations? *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 22(2), 367-388.
- Maguire, M., & Raynor, P. (2006). How the resettlement of prisoners promotes desistance from crime: Or does it? *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 6(1), 19-38.

- Majors, R., & Billson, J. M. (1992). *Cool pose: The dilemmas of Black manhood in America*. New York, NY: Lexington Books.
- Mander, H. (2010). 'Words from the heart': Researching people's stories. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 2(2), 252-270.
- Marsh, S. C., & Evans, W. P. (2009). Youth perspectives on their relationships with staff in juvenile correction settings and perceived likelihood of success on release. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 7(1), 46-67.
- Marsh, S. C., Evans, W. P., & Williams, M. J. (2010). Social support and sense of program belonging discriminate between youth-staff relationship types in juvenile correction settings. *Child Youth Care Forum*, 39(6), 481-494.
- Marshall, V. W. (2005). Agency, events and structure at the end of the life course. *Advances in Life Course Research*, 10(Complete), 57-91.
- Marsiglio, W., & Pleck, J. H. (2004). Fatherhood and masculinities. In M. S. Kimmel, J. Hearn, & R. W. Connell (Eds.), *Handbook of studies on men and masculinities* (pp. 249-269). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Martinez, D. J., & Abrams, L. S. (2013). Informal social support among returning young offenders: A metasynthesis of the literature. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 57(2), 169-190.
- Martinez, D. J., & Christian, J. (2009). The familial relationships of former prisoners: Examining the link between residence and informal support mechanisms. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 38(2), 201-224.
- Maruna, S. (1999). Desistance and development: The psychosocial process of "going straight". In M. Brogden (Ed.), *The British Criminology Conferences: Selected proceedings* (Vol. 2). British Criminology Conference, Queen's University, Belfast, Ireland. 15-19 July 1997. Retrieved from <http://www.britsocrim.org/v2.htm>
- Maruna, S. (2001). *Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Maruna, S. (2011). Reentry as a rite of passage. *Punishment & Society*, 13(1), 3-28.
- Maruna, S., & LeBel, T. P. (2003). Welcome home? Examining the "reentry court" concept from a strengths-based perspective. *Western Criminology Review*, 4(2), 1-7.
- Maruna, S., & LeBel, T. P. (2010). The desistance paradigm in correctional practice: From programmes to lives. In F. McNeill, P. Raynor, & C. Trotter (Eds.), *Offender supervision: New directions in theory, research and practice* (pp. 65-87). Oxon, UK: Willan.

- Maruna, S., LeBel, T. P., Mitchell, N., & Naples, M. (2004). Pygmalion in the reintegration process: Desistance from crime through the looking glass. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 10(3), 271-281.
- Maruna, S., & Roy, K. (2007). Amputation or reconstruction: Notes on ‘knifing off’ and desistance from crime. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 23(1), 104-124.
- Maslow, A. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370-396.
- Maslow, A. (1954). *Motivation and personality*. New York, NY: Harper.
- Mason, P., & Prior, D. (2008). *Engaging young people who offend*. London, UK: Youth Justice Board.
- Matsuda, K. N., Esbensen, F.-A., & Carson, D. C. (2012). Putting the “gang” in “Eurogang”: Characteristics of delinquent youth groups by different definitional approaches. In F.-A. Esbensen & C. L. Maxson (Eds.), *Youth gangs in international perspective: Results from the Eurogang program of research* (pp. 17-33). New York, NY: Springer.
- Matsuda, K. N., Melde, C., Taylor, T. J., Freng, A., & Esbensen, F.-A. (2013). Gang membership and adherence to the “code of the street”. *Justice Quarterly*, 30(3), 440-468.
- Matza, D. (1964). *Delinquency and drift*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Maxson, C. L. (1998). Gang members on the move. *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice. Retrieved from <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/94cd/5309f8545239947c0e4e704d1cb8008b1b12.pdf>
- Maxson, C. L. (2015). Bringing gangs and girls back in. In F. T. Cullen, P. Wilcox, R. J. Sampson, & B. D. Dooley (Eds.), *Challenging criminological theory: The legacy of Ruth Rosner Kornhauser* (pp. 399-416). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Maxson, C. L., & Klein, M. (1995). Investigating gang structures. *Journal of Gang Research*, 3, 33-40.
- Maxson, C. L., & Whitlock, M. L. (2002). Joining the gang: Gender differences in risk factors for gang membership. In C. R. Huff (Ed.), *Gangs in America* (3rd ed., pp. 19-36). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Maykut, P. S., & Morehouse, R. (1994). *Beginning qualitative research: A philosophic and practical guide*. London, UK: Falmer Press.
- McAra, L., & McVie, S. (2007). Youth justice? The impact of system contact on desistance from offending. *European Journal of Criminology*, 4(3), 315-345.

- McCamish-Svensson, C., Samuelsson, G., Hagberg, B., Svensson, T., & Dehlin, O. (1999). Informal and formal support from a multidisciplinary perspective: A Swedish follow-up between 80 and 82 years of age. *Health and Social Care in the Community*, 7(3), 163-176.
- McClanahan, W. (2004). *Alive at 25: Reducing youth violence through monitoring and support*. Philadelphia, PA: Public/Private Ventures.
- McClanahan, W. (2008). *Treatment and program effects in a violence reduction program* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Pennsylvania, State College, PA.
- McCulloch, T. (2005). Probation, social context and desistance: Retracing the relationship. *Probation Journal*, 52(1), 8-22.
- McDaniel, D. D. (2012). Risk and protective factors associated with gang affiliation among high-risk youth: A public health approach. *Injury Prevention*, 18(4), 253-258.
- McGloin, J. M. (2005). Policy and intervention considerations of a network analysis of street gangs. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 4(3), 607-635.
- McGrath, N. (2007). Engaging the hardest to reach parents in parenting-skills programmes. In K. A. Pomerantz, M. Hughes, & D. Thompson (Eds.), *How to reach 'hard to reach' children. Improving access, participation and outcomes* (pp. 184-205). Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons.
- McLellan, E., MacQueen, K. M., & Neidig, J. L. (2003). Beyond the qualitative interview: Data preparation and transcription. *Field Methods*, 15(1), 63-84.
- McNeill, F. (2006a). A desistance paradigm for offender management. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 6(1), 39-62.
- McNeill, F. (2006b). Community supervision: Context and relationships matter. In B. Goldson & J. Muncie (Eds.), *Youth crime and justice: Critical issues* (pp. 125-138). London, UK: Sage.
- McNeill, F. (2009). What works and what's just? *European Journal of Probation*, 1(1), 21-40.
- McNeill, F. (2012). Four forms of 'offender' rehabilitation: Towards an interdisciplinary perspective. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 17(1), 18-36.
- McNeill, F., Batchelor, S., Burnett, R., & Knox, J. (2005). *21st century social work: Reducing re-offending: Key practice principles*. Edinburgh, UK: Social Work Inspection Agency. Retrieved from <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2005/04/21132007/20089>
- McNeill, F., & Maruna, S. (2008). Giving up and giving back: Desistance, generativity and social work with offenders. *Research Highlights in Social Work*, 48, 224-239.

- McNeill, F., & Whyte, B. (2007). *Reducing reoffending: Social work and community justice in Scotland*. Cullompton, UK: Willan.
- Mears, S. L., Yaffe, J., & Harris, N. J. (2009). Evaluation of Wraparound services for severely emotionally disturbed youths. *Research on Social Work Practice, 19*(6), 678-685.
- Meisenhelder, T. (1982). Becoming normal: Certification as a stage in exiting from crime. *Deviant Behavior, 3*(2), 137-153.
- Melde, C., & Esbensen, F.-A. (2011). Gang membership as a turning point in the life course. *Criminology, 49*(2), 513-552.
- Melde, C., & Esbensen, F.-A. (2014). The relative impact of gang status transitions: Identifying the mechanisms of change in delinquency. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 51*(3), 349-376.
- Melde, C., Taylor, T. J., & Esbensen, F.-A. (2009). 'I got your back': An examination of the protective function of gang membership in adolescence. *Criminology, 47*(2), 565-594.
- Mellor, B., MacRae, L., Pauls, M., & Hornick, J. P. (2005). *Youth gangs in Canada: A preliminary review of programs and services*. Calgary, AB: Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family. Retrieved from <http://www.crilf.ca/Documents/Youth%20Gangs%20-%20Review%20of%20Services%20-%20Sep%202005.pdf>
- Meltzer, B. N., Petras, J. W., & Reynolds, L. T. (1975). *Symbolic interactionism: Genesis, varieties, and criticism*. Boston, MA: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Merton, B., et al. (2004). *An evaluation of the impact of youth work in England*. Nottingham, UK: Department for Education and Science. Retrieved from <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130323013919/https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/RR606.pdf>
- Merton, R. K. (1938). Social structure and anomie. *American Sociological Review, 3*(5), 672-682.
- Messerschmidt, J. W. (1993). *Masculinities and crime*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Messerschmidt, J. W. (1997). *Crime as structured action: Gender, race, class and crime in the making*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Miladinovic, Z., & Mulligan, L. (2015). Homicide in Canada, 2014. *Juristat, 35*(1). Ottawa, ON: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Statistics Canada. Retrieved from <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2015001/article/14244-eng.htm>

- Miller, C., Millenky, M., Schwartz, L., Goble, L., & Stein, J. (2016). *Building a future: Interim impact evaluation findings from the YouthBuild evaluation*. MDRC. Retrieved from <https://www.mdrc.org/publication/building-future>
- Miller, J. (2001). *One of the guys: Girls, gangs, and gender*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Miller, J., & Decker, S. (2001). Young women and gang violence: Gender, street offending and violent victimization in gangs. *Justice Quarterly*, 18(1), 115-140.
- Miller, W. B. (1975). *Violence by youth gangs and youth groups as a crime problem in major American cities*. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice. Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/34497NCJRS.pdf>
- Miller, W. B. (1976). Youth gangs in the urban crisis era. In J. F. Short, Jr. (Ed.), *Delinquency, crime and society* (pp. 91-128). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Miller, W. B. (1981). Gangs, groups and serious youth crime. In D. Shichor & D. Kelly (Eds.), *Critical issues in juvenile delinquency* (pp. 115-138). Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- Miller, W. B. (1990). Why the United States has failed to solve its youth gang problem. In C. R. Huff (Ed.), *Gangs in America* (2nd ed., pp. 263-287). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Miller, W. B. (1992). *Crime by youth gangs and groups in the United States*. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice. Retrieved from <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cyggus.pdf>
- Ministry of Children and Youth Services, Youth Justice Services Division, Effective Programming and Evaluation Unit [MCYS] (2012). *Program framework: A continuum of evidence-based, evidence-informed programs and services*. Retrieved from <http://www.communitylearninghub.com/MCYS%20HUB%20Evidence-%20Informed%20Designation%20-%2009-Mar-12.pdf>
- Mittelman, W. (1991). Maslow's study of self-actualization: A reinterpretation. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 31(1), 114-135.
- Moffit, T. E. (1993). 'Life-course persistent' and 'adolescent-limited' antisocial behavior: A developmental taxonomy. *Psychological Review*, 100(4), 674-701.
- Mohammed, M. (2007). Des « bandes d'ici » aux « gangs d'ailleurs » : comment définir et comparer? In M. Mohammed & L. Mucchielli (Eds.), *Les bandes de jeunes : Des « blousons noirs » à nos jours* (pp. 265-285). Paris, FR: La découverte.
- Moloney, M., Hunt, G. P., Joe-Laidler, K., & MacKenzie, K. (2010). Young mother (in the) hood: Gang girls negotiation of new identities. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 14(1), 1-19.



- Moloney, M., MacKenzie, K., Hunt, G., & Joe-Laidler, K. (2009). The path and promise of fatherhood for gang members. *British Journal of Criminology*, 49(3), 305-325.
- Moore, J. W. (1991). *Going down to the barrio: Homeboys and homegirls in change*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Moran, K. (2015). Social structure and bonhomie: Emotions in the youth street gang. *British Journal of Criminology*, 55(3), 556-577.
- Moule, R. K., Jr., Decker, S. H., & Pyrooz, D. C. (2013). Social capital, the life-course, and gangs. In C. L. Gibson & M. D. Krohn (Eds.), *Handbook of life-course criminology: Emerging trends and directions for future research* (pp. 143-158). New York, NY: Springer.
- Mulvey, E. P., Steinberg, L., Fagan, J., Cauffman, E., Piquero, A. R., & Chassin, L. (2004). Theory and research on desistance from antisocial activity among serious adolescent offenders. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 2(3), 213-236.
- Munn, M. (2014). Epistemological violence, psychological whips, and other moments of angst: Reflections on PhD research. In J. M. Kilty, M. Felices-Luna, & S. C. Fabian (Eds.), *Demarginalizing voices: Commitment, emotion, and action in qualitative research* (pp. 286-305). Vancouver, BC: BC Press.
- Musolf, G. R. (2003). Social structure, human agency, and social policy. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 23(6-7), 1-12.
- Mussa, I. (2016, October 4). As shootings continue to trend high, police say Ottawa's gun culture is changing. *CBC News*. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca>
- Na, C., & Paternoster, R. (2012). Can self-control change substantially over time? Rethinking the relationship between self-and social control. *Criminology*, 50(2), 427-462.
- Naber, P., May, D., Decker, S., Minor, K., & Wells, J. B. (2006). Are there gangs in schools? It depends upon whom you ask. *Journal of School Violence*, 5(2), 53-72.
- National Crime Prevention Centre [NCPC] (2007a). *Addressing youth gang problems: An overview of programs and practices*. Ottawa, ON: Public Safety Canada. Retrieved from <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/ddrsng-prblms/index-en.aspx>
- National Crime Prevention Centre [NCPC] (2007b). *Youth gangs in Canada: What do we know?* Ottawa, ON: Public Safety Canada. Retrieved from <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/gngs-cnd/index-en.aspx>
- Neuman, W. L., & Robson, K. (2007). *Basics of social research: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Toronto, ON: Pearson.

- Newburn, T., & Stanko, E. (Eds.). (1994). *Just boys doing business*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Ngo, H. V. (2010). *Unravelling identities and belonging: Criminal gang involvement of youth from immigrant families*. Calgary, AB: Centre for Newcomers.
- Nichols, G. (2007). *Sport and crime reduction*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Norman, S. (1990). Detention care. *Journal for Juvenile Justice and Detention Services*, 5, 12-16.
- Nugent, B., & Schinkel, M. (2016). The pains of desistance. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 16(5), 568-584.
- O'Brien, K., Daffern, M., Chu, C. M., & Thomas, S. D. M. (2013). Youth gang affiliation, violence, and criminal activities: A review of motivational, risk, and protective factors. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 18(4), 417-425.
- O'Connor, R. M., & Waddell, S. (2015). *What works to prevent gang involvement, youth violence and crime: A rapid review of interventions delivered in the UK and abroad*. London, UK: Early Intervention Foundation. Retrieved from [www.eif.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Final-R2-WW-Prevent-Gang-Youth-Violence-final.pdf](http://www.eif.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Final-R2-WW-Prevent-Gang-Youth-Violence-final.pdf)
- O'Neal, E. N., Decker, S. H., Moule, R. K., Jr., & Pyrooz, D. C. (2016). Girls, gangs and getting out: Gender differences and similarities in leaving the gang. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 14(1), 43-60.
- Oppenheimer, V. K., Kalmijn, M., & Lim, N. (1997). Men's career development and marriage timing during a period of rising inequality. *Demography*, 34(3), 311-330.
- Orton, L., Patrick, G., Cordwell, T., Truswell, K., & Wormith, J. S. (2012). *Process evaluation of the STR8UP program: Evaluation report*. Report prepared for the John Howard Society of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Branch. Retrieved from [https://www.usask.ca/cfbsjs/research/pdf/research\\_reports/STR8UP%20Process%20Evaluation%20Final%20Report.pdf](https://www.usask.ca/cfbsjs/research/pdf/research_reports/STR8UP%20Process%20Evaluation%20Final%20Report.pdf)
- Osgood, D. W., Foster, E. M., & Courtney, M. (2010). Vulnerable populations and the transition to adulthood. *The Future of Children*, 20(1), 209-225.
- Padilla, F. M. (1992). *The gang as an American enterprise*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Pager, D. (2003). The mark of a criminal record. *American Journal of Sociology*, 108(5), 937-975.
- Palys, T. (1997). *Research decisions: Quantitative and qualitative perspectives* (2nd ed.). Toronto, ON: Harcourt Canada.

- Panuccio, E. A., Christian, J., Martinez, D. J., & Sullivan, M. L. (2012). Social support, motivation, and the process of juvenile reentry: An exploratory analysis of desistance. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation, 51*(3), 135-160.
- Papachristos, A. V. (2011). Too big to fail: The science and politics of violence prevention. *Criminology & Public Policy, 10*(4), 1053-1061.
- Parsons, T. (1963). *Essays in sociological theory* (Rev. ed.). New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Paternoster, R., & Bushway, S. (2009). Desistance and the “feared self”: Toward an identity theory of criminal desistance. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology, 99*(4), 1103-1156.
- Patterson, G. R., DeBaryshe, B. D., & Ramsey, E. (1989). A developmental perspective on antisocial behavior. *American Psychologist, 44*(2), 329-335.
- Patterson, G. R., Reid, J. B., & Dishion, T. J. (1992). *A social learning approach. IV. Antisocial boys*. Eugene, OR: Castalia.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Peek, L., & Fothergill, A. (2009). Using focus groups: Lessons from studying daycare centers, 9/11, and Hurricane Katrina. *Qualitative Research, 9*(1), 31-59.
- Pennell, S., Evans, E., Melton, R., & Hinson, S. (1994). *Down for the set: Describing and defining gangs in San Diego*. San Diego, CA: Criminal Justice Research Division, Association of Governments.
- Personal Narratives Group (1989). Truths. In Personal Narratives Group (Ed.), *Interpreting women's lives*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Petersen, R., & Howell, J. C. (2013). Program approaches for girls in gangs: Female specific or gender neutral? *Criminal Justice Review, 38*(4), 491-509.
- Petersen, R., & Valdez, A. (2005). Using snowball-based methods in hidden populations to generate a randomized community sample of gang-affiliated adolescents. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice, 3*(2), 151-167.
- Peterson, D. (2000). Definitions of a gang and impacts on public policy. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 28*(2), 139-149.
- Peterson, D. (2012). Girlfriends, gun-holders, and ghetto-rats? Moving beyond narrow views of girls in gangs. In S. Miller, L. D. Leve, & P. K. Kering (Eds.), *Delinquent girls: Contexts, relationships, and adaptations* (pp. 71-84). New York, NY: Springer.

- Peterson, D., & Morgan, K. A. (2014). Sex differences and the overlap in youths' risk factors for onset of violence and gang involvement. *Journal of Crime & Justice*, 37(1), 129-154.
- Peterson, D., Taylor, T. J., & Esbensen, F.-A. (2004). Gang membership and violent victimization. *Justice Quarterly*, 21(4), 793-815.
- Petrosino, A., Turpin-Petrosino, C., & Buehler, J. (2005). 'Scared Straight' and other juvenile awareness programs for preventing juvenile delinquency. *The Scientific Review of Mental Health Practice*, 4(1), 48-54.
- Pettus-Davis, C., Doherty, E. E., Veeh, C., & Drymon, C. (2017). Deterioration of postincarceration social support for emerging adults. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 44(10), 1317-1339.
- Pickles, A., & Rutter, M. (1991). Statistical and conceptual models of turning points in developmental processes. In D. Magnusson, L. R. Bergman, G. Rudinger, & B. Torestad (Eds.), *Problems and methods in longitudinal research* (pp. 133-165). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Piquero, A. R., Brame, R., Mazerolle, P., & Haapanen, R. (2002). Crime in emerging adulthood. *Criminology*, 40(1), 137-170.
- Piquero, A. R., Farrington, D. P., & Blumstein, A. (2003). The criminal career paradigm. In M. Tonry (Ed.), *Crime and justice* (Vol. 30, pp. 359-506). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Piquero, A. R., Farrington, D. P., & Blumstein, A. (2007). *Key issues in criminal career research: New analyses of the Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Piquero, A. R., & Mazerolle, P. (Eds.). (2001). *Life-course criminology: Contemporary and classic readings*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Pittaway, E., Bartolomei, L., & Hugman, R. (2010). 'Stop stealing our stories': The ethics of research with vulnerable groups. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 2(2), 229-251.
- Pitts, J. (2008). *Reluctant gangsters: The changing face of youth crime*. Devon, UK: Willan.
- Presser, L. (2009). The narratives of offenders. *Theoretical Criminology*, 13(2), 177-200.
- Presser, L. (2010). Collecting and analyzing the stories of offenders. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 21(4), 431-446.
- Preston, J. P., Carr-Stewart, S., & Bruno, C. (2012). The growth of Aboriginal youth gangs in Canada. *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, 32(2), 193-207.

- Friday, E. (2006). New directions in juvenile justice: Risk and cognitive behaviourism. *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*, 17(3), 343-359.
- Prince, R. (2009). *Say hello to my little friend: De Palma's Scarface, cinema spectatorship, and the hip hop gangsta as urban superhero* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH.
- Prior, D., & Mason, P. (2010). A different kind of evidence? Looking for 'what works' in engaging young offenders. *Youth Justice*, 10(3), 211-226.
- Prochaska, J. O., & Levesque, D. A. (2002). Enhancing motivation of offenders at each stage of change and phase of therapy. In M. McMurrin (Ed.), *Motivating offenders to change: A guide to enhancing engagement in therapy* (pp. 57-73). Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons.
- Public Safety Canada (2017, November 17). Major new federal funding and summit to tackle gun violence and gang activity. News Release. Retrieved from <https://www.canada.ca>
- Pyrooz, D. C. (2013). Gangs, criminal offending, and an inconvenient truth: Considerations for gang prevention and intervention in the lives of youth. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 12(3), 427-436.
- Pyrooz, D. C. (2014a). From colors and guns to caps and gowns? The effects of gang membership on educational attainment. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 51(1), 56-87.
- Pyrooz, D. C. (2014b). "From your first cigarette to your last dyin' day": The patterning of gang membership in the life-course. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 30(2), 349-372.
- Pyrooz, D. C., & Decker, S. H. (2011). Motives and methods for leaving the gang: Understanding the process of gang desistance. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 39(5), 417-425.
- Pyrooz, D. C., & Decker, S. H. (2014). Recent research on disengaging from gangs: Implications for practice. In J. Humphrey & P. Cordella (Eds.), *Effective interventions in the lives of criminal offenders* (pp. 81-98). New York, NY: Springer.
- Pyrooz, D. C., Decker, S. H., & Fleisher, M. S. (2011). From the street to the prison, from the prison to the street: Understanding and responding to prison gangs. *Journal of Aggression, Conflict and Peace Research*, 3(1), 12-24.
- Pyrooz, D. C., Decker, S. H., & Webb, V. (2014). The ties that bind: Desistance from gangs. *Crime & Delinquency*, 60(4), 491-516.

- Pyrooz, D. C., Fox, A. M., & Decker, S. H. (2010). Racial and ethnic heterogeneity, economic disadvantage, and gangs: A macro-level study of gang membership in urban America. *Justice Quarterly*, 27(6), 867-892.
- Pyrooz, D. C., Fox, A. M., Katz, C. M., & Decker, S. H. (2012). Gang organization, offending and victimization. In F.-A. Esbensen & C. L. Maxson (Eds.), *Youth gangs in international perspective: Results from the Eurogang program of research* (pp. 85-106). New York, NY: Springer.
- Pyrooz, D. C., LaFree, G., Decker, S. H., & James, P. A. (2018). Cut from the same cloth? A comparative study of domestic extremists and gang members in the United States. *Justice Quarterly*, 35(1), 1-32.
- Pyrooz, D. C., Moule, R. K., Jr., & Decker, S. H. (2014). The contribution of gang membership to the victim-offender overlap. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 51(3), 315-348.
- Pyrooz, D. C., Sweeten, G., & Piquero, A. R. (2013). Continuity and change in gang membership and gang embeddedness. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 50(2), 239-271.
- Queensway Carleton Hospital (2015). *Hospital chages*. Retrieved from <https://www.qch.on.ca/hospitalcharges>
- Quenivet, N., & Shah-Davis, S. (2013). *Youth and violence: Drawing parallels between child soldiers and youth in gangs* (Working Paper No. 4). Bristol, UK: University of the West of England. Retrieved from [www2.uwe.ac.uk/faculties/BBS/BUS/law/Law%20docs/YouthViolencereport.pdf](http://www2.uwe.ac.uk/faculties/BBS/BUS/law/Law%20docs/YouthViolencereport.pdf)
- Quicker, J. C. (1999). The Chicana gang: A preliminary description. In M. Chesney-Lind & J. M. Hagedorn (Eds.), *Female gangs in America: Essays on girls, gangs, and gender* (pp. 48-46). Chicago, IL: Lakeview Press.
- Raby, C., & Jones, F. (2016). Identifying risks for male street gang affiliation: A systematic review and narrative synthesis. *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, 27(5), 601-644.
- Radak, G. (2016). *Ex-gang members who have become help-professionals: What influences their desistance from gang involvement and their career choice?* (Unpublished master's thesis). Massey University, Auckland Campus, Albany, New Zealand.
- Raynor, P., & Robinson, G. (2009). *Rehabilitation, crime and justice* (Rev. ed.). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rex, S. (1999). Desistance from offending: Experiences of probation. *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 36(4), 366-383.

- Reyna, V. F., & Farley, F. (2006). Risk and rationality in adolescent decision-making: Implications for theory, practice, and public policy. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 7(1), 1-44.
- Reynolds, L. T., & Herman-Kinney, N. J. (2003). *Handbook of symbolic interactionism*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Rice, P., & Ezzy, D. (1999). *Qualitative research methods: A health focus*. Melbourne, Australia: Oxford University Press.
- Rios, V. M. (2011). *Punished: Policing the lives of Black and Latino boys*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Ritter, J., & Anker, R. (2002). Good jobs, bad jobs: Workers' evaluations in five countries. *International Labour Review*, 141(4), 331-358.
- Robert, P. (1966). *Les bandes d'adolescents*. Paris, FR : Les éditions ouvrières.
- Rodriguez, L. (2001). *Hearts and hands: Creating community in violent times*. New York, NY: Seven Stories Press.
- Rogers, K. H. (1945). *Street gangs in Toronto: A study of a forgotten boy*. Toronto, ON: Ryerson Press.
- Roman, C. G., Decker, S. H., & Pyrooz, D. C. (2017). Leveraging the pushes and pulls of gang disengagement to improve gang intervention: Findings from three multi-site studies and a review of relevant gang programs. *Journal of Crime & Justice*, 40(3), 316-336.
- Ross, A., Duckworth, K., Smith, D. J., Wyness, G., & Schoon, I. (2011). *Prevention and reduction: A review of strategies for intervening early to prevent or reduce youth crime and anti-social behaviour*. London, UK: Centre for Analysis of Youth Transitions. Retrieved from <http://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/5594>
- Ross, L., & Arsenault, S. (2018). Problem analysis in community violence assessment: Revealing early childhood trauma as a driver for youth and gang violence. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 62(9), 2726-2741.
- Rossetto, K. R. (2014). Qualitative research interviews: Assessing the therapeutic value and challenges. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 31(4), 482-489.
- Roush, D. W. (1993). Juvenile detention programming. *Federal Probation*, 57(3), 20-33.
- Roush, D. W. (1996). *Desktop guide to good juvenile detention practice: Research report*. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice. Retrieved from <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/101805486>

- Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (1995). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Rumgay, J. (2004). Scripts for safer survival: Pathways out of female crime. *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 43(4), 405-419.
- Rutter, M., & Giller, H. (1983). *Juvenile delinquency: Trends and perspectives*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Rutter, M., & Rutter, M. (1993). *Developing minds: Challenge and continuity across the life span*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Ryan, G. W., & Bernard, H. R. (2000). Data management and analysis methods. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 769-802). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ryan, G. W., Leversee, T., & Lane, S. (2010). *Juvenile sexual offending: Causes, consequences and correction* (3rd ed.). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Saldana, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. London, UK: Sage.
- Sampson, R. J., & Laub, J. H. (1990). Crime and deviance over the life-course: The salience of adult social bonds. *American Sociological Review*, 55(5), 609-627.
- Sampson, R. J., & Laub, J. H. (1993). *Crime in the making: Pathways and turning points through life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sampson, R. J., & Laub, J. H. (1995). Understanding variability in lives through time: Contributions of life course criminology. *Studies on Crime and Crime Prevention*, 4, 143-158.
- Sampson, R. J., & Laub, J. H. (1996). Socioeconomic achievement in the life course of disadvantaged men: Military service as a turning point, circa 1940-1965. *American Sociological Review*, 61(3), 347-367.
- Sampson, R. J., & Laub, J. H. (1997). A life-course theory of cumulative disadvantage and the stability of delinquency. In T. P. Thornberry (Ed.), *Developmental theories of crime and delinquency: Advances in criminological theory* (Vol. 6, pp. 133-161). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Sampson, R. J., & Laub, J. H. (2005). A life course view of the development of crime. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 602(1), 12-45.
- Sampson, R. J., Raudenbush, S. W., & Earls, F. (1997). Neighborhoods and violent crime: A multilevel study of collective efficacy. *Science*, 277(5328), 918-924.



- Sánchez-Jankowski, M. (1991). *Islands in the street. Gangs and American urban society*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Sánchez-Jankowski, M. (2003). Gangs and social change. *Theoretical Criminology*, 7(2), 191-216.
- Sandberg, S. (2008a). Black drug dealers in a White welfare state: Cannabis dealing and street capital in Norway. *British Journal of Criminology*, 48(5), 604-619.
- Sandberg, S. (2008b). Street capital: Ethnicity and violence on the streets of Oslo. *Theoretical Criminology*, 12(2), 153-171.
- Sanders, B., Lankenau, S. E., & Jackson-Bloom, J. (2010). Putting in work: Qualitative research on substance use and other risk behaviors among gang youth in Los Angeles. *Substance Use Misuse*, 45(5), 736-753.
- Sanders, W. B. (1994). *Gangbans and drive-bys: Grounded culture and juvenile gang violence*. New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Santisteban, D. A., Coatsworth, J. D., Perez-Vidal, A., Kurtines, W. M., Schwartz, S., LaPerriere, A., & Szapocznik, J. (2003). Efficacy of Brief Strategic Family Therapy in modifying Hispanic adolescent behavior problems and substance use. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 17(1), 121-133.
- Santisteban, D. A., Coatsworth, J. D., Perez-Vidal, A., Mitrani, V., Jean-Gilles, M., & Szapocznik, J. (1997). Brief Structural/Strategic Family Therapy with African American and Hispanic high-risk youth. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 25(5), 453-471.
- Schinkel, M. (2015). Hook for change or shaky peg? Imprisonment, narratives and desistance. *European Journal of Probation*, 7(1), 5-20.
- Schochet, P. Z., Burghardt, J., & McConnell, S. (2006). *National Job Corps study and longer-term follow-up study: Impact and benefit-cost findings using survey and summary earnings records data*. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research. Retrieved from <https://www.mathematica-mpr.com/our-publications-and-findings/publications/national-job-corps-study-and-longerterm-followup-study-impact-and-benefitcost-findings-using-survey-and-summary-earnings-records-data>
- Schwalbe, C. S., & Maschi, T. (2011). Confronting delinquency: Probation officers' use of coercion and client-centered tactics to foster youth compliance. *Crime & Delinquency*, 57(5), 801-822.
- Scott, D. W. (2014). Attitude is everything: Youth attitudes, gang involvement, and length of institutional gang membership. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 17(6), 780-798.

- Scott, S. (2008). Parenting programmes for attachment and antisocial behaviour. *Psychiatry* 7(9), 367-370.
- Seale, C. (1999). Quality in qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 5(4), 465-478.
- Sersli, S., Salazar, J., & Lozano, N. (2010). *Gang prevention for new immigrant and refugee youth in BC*. Retrieved from <http://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/public-safety-and-emergency-services/crime-prevention/community-crime-prevention/publications/gang-prevention-immigrant-refugee.pdf>
- Settersten, R. A., Jr. (2003). Propositions and controversies in life-course scholarship. In R. A. Settersten, Jr. (Ed.), *Invitation to the life course: Towards new understandings of later life* (pp. 15-45). Amityville, NY: Baywood.
- Sexton, T. L., & Turner, C. W. (2010). The effectiveness of Functional Family Therapy for youth with behavioral problems in a community practice setting. *Journal of Family Psychology* 24(3), 339-348.
- Shaffer, C. (2014). *Risk and protective factors for youth gang involvement in Canada: An ecological systems analysis* (Unpublished master's thesis). Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, BC.
- Shakur, S. (1993). *Monster: The autobiography of an L.A. gang member*. New York, NY: Grove Press.
- Shammas, V. L., & Sandberg, S. (2016). Habitus, capital, and conflict: Bringing Bourdieusian field theory to criminology. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 16(2), 195-213.
- Shanahan, M. J. (2000). Pathways to adulthood in changing societies: Variability and mechanisms in life course perspective. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26(1), 667-692.
- Shapiro, C. J., Malone, P. S., & Gavazzi, S. M. (2018). Modifying a risk assessment instrument for youthful offenders. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 62(2), 482-503.
- Sharkey, J. D., Shekhtmeyster, Z., Chavez-Lopez, L., Norris, E., & Sass, L. (2011). The protective influence of gangs: Can schools compensate? *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 16(1), 45-54.
- Sharkey, J. D., Stifel, S. W., & Mayworm, A. M. (2015). How to help me get out of a gang: Youth recommendations to family, school, community, and law enforcement systems. *OJJDP Journal of Juvenile Justice*, 4, 64-83.
- Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, 22(2), 63-75.

- Short, J. F., Jr. (2009). Gangs, law enforcement and the academy. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 8(4), 723-732.
- Short, J. F., Jr., & Hughes, L. A. (2015). Bringing the study of street gangs back into the mainstream. In R. A. Scott & S. M. Kosslyn (Eds.), *Emerging trends in the social and behavioral sciences: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (pp.1-13). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Short, J. F., Jr., & Strodbeck, F. L. (1965). *Group process and gang delinquency*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Shover, N. (1983). The later stages of ordinary property offender careers. *Social Problems* 31(2), 208-217.
- Shute, J. (2008). *Parenting and youth gangs: Risk, resilience and effective support*. Report for Manchester City Council. Manchester, UK: CCCJ.
- Shute, J. (2013). Family support as a gang reduction measure. *Children & Society*, 27(1), 48-59.
- Silverman, D. (2001). *Interpreting qualitative data: Methods for analysing talk, text and interaction*. London, UK: Sage.
- Simmonds, A. P. (1989). Ideological domination and the political information market. *Theory and Society*, 18(2), 181-211.
- Simon, T. R., Ritter, N. M., & Mahendra, R. R. (Eds.). (2013). *Changing course: Preventing gang membership*. Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/239234.pdf>
- Sinclair, R., & Grekul, J. (2012). Aboriginal youth gangs in Canada: (De)Constructing an epidemic. *Frist Peoples Child & Family Review*, 7(1), 2-28.
- Skogan, W. G., Hartnett, S. M., Bump, N., & Dubois, J. (2008). *Evaluation of CeaseFire Chicago*. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice. Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/227181.pdf>
- Smith, C., Huey, S. J., Jr., & McDaniel, D. D. (2015). Commitment language and homework completion in a behavioral employment program for gang-affiliated youth. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 59(5), 502-518.
- Smith-Moncrieffe, D. (2013). *Youth Gang Prevention Fund projects: What did we learn about what works in preventing gang involvement?* Ottawa, ON: Public Safety Canada. Retrieved from <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/yth-gng-prvntn-fnd/index-en.aspx>
- Smithson, J. (2000). Using and analysing focus groups: Limitations and possibilities. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 3(2), 103-119.

- Snider, C., Jiang, D., Logsetty, S., Strome, T., & Klassen, T. (2015). Wraparound care for youth injured by violence: Study protocol for a pilot randomised control trial. *BMJ Open*, *5*, 1-6.
- Souhami, A. (2009). Doing youth justice: Beyond boundaries? In M. Barry & F. McNeill (Eds.), *Youth offending and youth justice* (pp. 176-193). London, UK: Jessica Kingsley.
- Soyer, M. (2014). The imagination of desistance: A juxtaposition of the construction of incarceration as a turning point and the reality of recidivism. *British Journal of Criminology*, *54*(1), 91-108.
- Spergel, I. A. (1990). Youth gangs: Continuity and change. In M. Tonry & N. Morris (Eds.), *Crime and justice: A review of research* (Vol. 12, pp. 171-276). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Spergel, I. A. (1995). *The youth gang problem*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Spergel, I. A. (2007). *Reducing youth gang violence: The Little Village Gang Project in Chicago*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.
- Spergel, I. A., Wa, K. M., & Sosa, R. V. (2006). The Comprehensive Community-Wide Gang Program model: Success and failure. In J. F. Short, Jr. & L. A. Hughes (Eds.), *Studying youth gangs* (pp. 203-224). Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.
- Starbuck, D., Howell, J. C., & Lindquist, D. J. (2001). *Hybrid and other modern gangs*. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice. Retrieved from <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/c1b7/459768bc69fdf1415f4c74de6736f3b3ccb5.pdf>
- Steinberg, L., & Cauffman, E. (1996). Maturity of judgment in adolescence: Psychosocial factors in adolescent decision making. *Law and Human Behavior*, *20*(3), 249-272.
- Steinberg, L., Chung, H. L., & Little, M. (2004). Reentry of young offenders from the justice system: A developmental perspective. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, *2*(1), 21-38.
- Stephenson, M., Giller, H., & Brown, S. (2011). *Effective practice in youth justice*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Stewart, E. A., Simons, R. L., Conger, R. D., & Scaramella, L. V. (2002). Beyond the interactional relationship between delinquency and parenting practices: The contribution of legal sanctions. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, *39*(1), 36-59.
- Stinchcomb, J. B. (2002). Promising (and not so promising) gang prevention and intervention strategies: A comprehensive literature review. *Journal of Gang Research*, *10*, 27-45.
- Stoll, M. A., & Bushway, S. D. (2008). The effect of criminal background checks on hiring ex-offenders. *Criminology & Public Policy*, *7*(3), 371-404.

- Stretesky, P. B., & Pogrebin, M. R. (2007). Gang related gun violence: Socialization, identity, and self. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 36(1), 85-114.
- Sullivan, M. L. (1989). *“Getting paid”: Youth crime and work in the inner city*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Sullivan, M. L. (2004). Youth perspectives on the experience of reentry. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 2(1), 56-71.
- Sullivan, M. L. (2005). Maybe we shouldn't study gangs: Does reification obscure youth violence? *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 21(2), 170-190.
- Sumner, C. (2004). The social nature of crime and deviance. In C. Sumner (Ed.), *The Blackwell companion to criminology* (pp. 3-31). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Sutherland, E. H. (1937). *The professional thief*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Sutherland, E. H. (1939). *Principles of criminology* (3rd ed.). Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott.
- Sutherland, E. H., Cressey, D. R., & Luckenbill, D. F. (1992). *Principles of criminology*. New York, NY: General Hall.
- Suttles, G. D. (1968). *The social order of the slum: Ethnicity and territory in the inner city*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Sweeten, G., Pyrooz, D. C., & Piquero, A. R. (2013). Disengaging from gangs and desistance from crime. *Justice Quarterly*, 30(3), 469-500.
- Szapocznik, J., Schwartz, S. J., Muir, J. A., & Brown, H. (2012). Brief Strategic Family Therapy: An intervention to reduce adolescent risk behavior. *Couple Family Psychology*, 1(2) 134-145.
- Tam, C., Freisthler, B., Curry, S., & Abrams, L. S. (2016). Where are the beds? Housing locations for transition age youth exiting public systems. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, 97(2), 111-119.
- Tasca, M., Griffin, M. L., & Rodriguez, N. (2010). The effect of importation and deprivation factors on violent misconduct: An examination of Black and Latino youth in prison. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 8(3), 1-16.
- Tay, L., & Diener, E. (2011). Needs and subjective well-being around the world. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101(2), 354-365.
- Taylor, C. S. (1990). *Dangerous society*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press.

- Taylor, S. S. (2009). How street gangs recruit and socialize members. *Journal of Gang Research*, 17, 1-27.
- Taylor, T. J. (2013). Preventing gang joining and facilitating desistance: Recent contributions to a growing field. *Criminal Justice Review*, 38(4), 429-431.
- Taylor, T. J., Freng, A., Esbensen, F.-A., & Peterson, D. (2008). Youth gang membership and serious violent victimization: The importance of lifestyles and routine activities. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 23(10), 1441-1464.
- Taylor, T. J., Peterson, D., Esbensen, F.-A., & Freng, A. (2007). Gang membership as a risk factor for adolescent violent victimization. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 44(4), 351-380.
- Terry, D., & Abrams, L. (2017). Dangers, diversions, and decisions: The process of criminal desistance among formerly incarcerated young men. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 61(7), 727-750.
- The Canadian Press (2015, November 11). B.C. anti-gang squad report shows rise in gang shootings. *CBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca>
- The Canadian Press (2018, July 3). 75 per cent of shootings in Toronto are gang-related, Tory says. *Toronto Star*. Retrieved from <https://www.thestar.com>
- Thomas, W. I., & Thomas, D. S. (1928). *The child in America: Behavior problems and programs*. New York, NY: Knopf.
- Thornberry, T. P. (1987). Toward an interactional theory of delinquency. *Criminology*, 25(4), 863-891.
- Thornberry, T. P. (Ed.). (1997). *Developmental theories of crime and delinquency: Advances in criminological theory* (Vol. 7). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Thornberry, T. P. (1998). Membership in youth gangs and involvement in serious and violent offending. In R. Loeber & D. P. Farrington (Eds.), *Serious and violent juvenile offenders: Risk factors and successful interventions* (pp. 147-166). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Thornberry, T. P. (2002). *Gangs and delinquency in developmental perspective*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Thornberry, T. P., & Krohn, M. D. (2005). Applying interactional theory to the explanation of continuity and change in antisocial behavior. In D. P. Farrington (Ed.), *Integrated developmental and life course theories of offending: Advances in criminological theory* (Vol. 14, pp. 183-210). Piscataway, NJ: Transaction.

- Thornberry, T. P., Krohn, M. D., Lizotte, A. J., & Chard-Wierschem, D. (1993). The role of juvenile gangs in facilitating delinquent behavior. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 30(1), 75-85.
- Thornberry, T. P., Krohn, M. D., Lizotte, A. J., Smith, C. A., & Tobin, K. (2003). *Gangs and delinquency in developmental perspective*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Thornberry, T. P., Lizotte, A. J., Krohn, M. D., Farnworth, M., & Jang, S. J. (1991). Testing interactional theory: An examination of reciprocal causal relationships among family, school and delinquency. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 82(1), 3-35.
- Thornberry, T. P., Lizotte, A. J., Krohn, M. D., Farnworth, M., & Jang, S. J. (1994). Delinquent peers, beliefs, and delinquent behavior: A longitudinal test of interactional theory. *Criminology*, 32(1), 47-83.
- Thrasher, F. M. (1927). *The gang: A study of 1313 gangs in Chicago*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Timmons-Mitchell, J., Bender, M. B., Kishna, M. A., & Mitchell, C. C. (2006). An independent effectiveness trial of Multisystemic Therapy with juvenile justice youth. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 35(2), 227-236.
- Tolan, P., Henry, D., Schoeny, M., Lovegrove, P., Nichols, E. (2014). Mentoring programs to affect delinquency and associated outcomes of youth at risk: A comprehensive meta-analytic review. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 10(2), 179-206.
- Totten, M. (2012). *Nasty, brutish, and short: The lives of gang members in Canada*. Toronto, ON: James Lorimer & Company.
- Totten, M. (2013). Preventing Aboriginal youth gang involvement in Canada: A gendered approach. In P. White & J. Bruhn (Eds.), *Aboriginal policy research: Exploring the urban landscape* (Vol. 8, pp. 255-279). Toronto, ON: Thompson Educational Publishing.
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837-851.
- Trulson, C. R. (2007). Determinants of disruption institutional misconduct among state-committed delinquents. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 5(1), 7-34.
- Uggen, C. (1996, May). Age, employment and the duration structure of recidivism: Estimating the “true effect” of work on crime. Paper presented at the American Sociology Association conference, New York, NY.
- Uggen, C., Manza, J., & Thompson, M. (2006). Citizenship, democracy, and the civic reintegration of criminal offenders. *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 605(1), 281-310.

- Uggen, C., & Piliavin, I. (1998). Asymmetrical causation and criminal desistance. *The Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology*, 88(4), 1399-1422.
- Ulmer, J. T., & Spencer, J. W. (1999). The contributions of an interactionist approach to research and theory on criminal careers. *Theoretical Criminology*, 3(1), 95-124.
- Umamaheswar, J. (2012). Bringing hope and change: A study of youth probation officers in Toronto. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 57(9), 1158-1182.
- United Nations (2017). *The sustainable development goals report 2017*. New York, NY: Author. Retrieved from <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/report/2017/TheSustainableDevelopmentGoalsReport2017.pdf>
- Unruh, D., Povenmire-Kirk, T., & Yamamoto, S. (2009). Perceived barriers and protective factors of juvenile offenders on their developmental pathway to adulthood. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 60(3), 201-224.
- Valdez, A., & Kaplan, C. D. (1998). Reducing selection bias in the use of focus groups to investigate hidden populations: The case of Mexican-American gang members from South Texas. *Drugs and Society*, 14(1-2), 209-224.
- Van Acker, R., & Wehby, J. H. (2000). Exploring social contexts influencing student success or failure: Introduction. *Preventing School Failure*, 44(3), 93-96.
- VanDenBerg, J. E., & Grealish, M. E. (1996). Individualized services and supports through the wraparound process: Philosophy and procedures. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 5(1), 7-21.
- van Gemert, F., & Fleisher, M. S. (2005). In the grip of the group. In S. H. Decker & F. M. Weerman (Eds.), *European street gangs and troublesome youth groups* (pp. 11-30). Lanham, MD: AltaMira.
- Varallo, S. M., Berlin Ray, E., & Hartman Ellis, B. (1998). Speaking of incest: The research interview as social justice. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 26(2), 254-271.
- Vaughan, B. (2007). The internal narrative of desistance. *British Journal of Criminology*, 47(3), 390-404.
- Vecchio, J. (2013). Once bitten, thrice wise: The varying effects of victimization on routine activities and risk management. *Deviant Behavior*, 34(3), 169-190.
- Venkatesh, S. A. (1997). The social organization of street gang activity in an urban ghetto. *American Journal of Sociology*, 103(1), 82-111.



- Venkatesh, S. A. (2000). *American project: The rise and fall of a modern ghetto*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Venkatesh, S. A. (2003). A note on social theory and the American street gang. In L. Kontos, D. Brotherton, & L. Barrios (Eds.), *Gangs and society: Alternative perspectives* (pp. 3-11). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Veysey, B. M., Martinez, D. J., & Christian, J. (2013). Getting out: A summary of qualitative research on desistance across the life course. In C. L. Gibson & M. D. Krohn (Eds.), *Handbook of life-course criminology: Emerging trends and directions for future research* (pp. 233-260). New York, NY: Springer.
- Vigil, J. D. (1988). *Barrio gangs: Street life and identity in southern California*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Vigil, J. D. (2002). *A Rainbow of gangs: Street cultures in the mega-city*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Voisin, D. R., King, K. M., Diclemente, R. J., & Carry, M. (2014). Correlates of gang involvement and health-related factors among African American females with a detention history. *Children and Youth Services Review, 44*(Complete), 120-125.
- Wahba, M., & Bridwell, L. (1976). Maslow reconsidered: A review of research on the need hierarchy theory. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 15*(2), 212-240.
- Waller, I. (2006). *Less law, more order: The truth about reducing crime*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Waller, I. (2014). *Smarter crime control: A guide to a safer future for citizens, communities, and politicians*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Walters, G. D. (2006). Risk-appraisal versus self-report in the prediction of criminal justice outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 33*(3), 279-304.
- Ward, T., & Fortune, C. (2013). The good lives model: Aligning risk reduction with promoting offenders' personal goals. *European Journal of Criminology, 5*(2), 29-46.
- Ward, T., & Gannon, T. A. (2006). Rehabilitation, etiology, and self-regulation: The comprehensive good lives model of treatment for sexual offenders. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 11*(1), 77-94.
- Ward, T., & Maruna, S. (2007). *Rehabilitation*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Ward, T., & Stewart, C. (2003). Criminogenic needs and human needs: A theoretical model. *Psychology, Crime & Law, 9*(6), 125-144.

- Warr, M. (2002). *Companions in crime: The social aspects of criminal conduct*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Watkins, A. M. (2017). The labor market and gang membership in adulthood: Is the availability, quality, and nature of legal work associated with adult gang involvement? *Journal of Crime & Justice*, 40(3), 376-394.
- Weaver, A., & Weaver, B. (2013). Autobiography, empirical research and critical theory in desistance: A view from the inside out. *Probation Journal*, 60(3), 259-277.
- Weaver, B. (2011). Co-producing community justice: The transformative potential of personalisation for penal sanctions. *British Journal of Social Work*, 41(6), 1038-1057.
- Weaver, B. (2012). The relational context of desistance: Some implications and opportunities for social policy. *Social Policy and Administration*, 46(4), 395-412.
- Weaver, B., & McNeill, F. (2010). Travelling hopefully: Desistance research and probation practice. In J. Brayford, F. Cowe, & J. Deering (Eds.), *What else works? Creative work with offenders* (pp. 36-60). Cullompton, UK: Willan.
- Weaver, B., & McNeill, F. (2015). Lifelines: Desistance, social relations, and reciprocity. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 42(1), 95-107.
- Webb, V. J., Katz, C. M., & Decker, S. H. (2006). Assessing the validity of self-reports by gang members: Results from the Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring program. *Crime & Delinquency*, 52(2), 232-252.
- Weerman, F. M., Lovegrove, P. J., & Thornberry, T. P. (2015). Gang membership transitions and its consequences: Exploring changes related to joining and leaving gangs in two countries. *European Journal of Criminology*, 12(1), 70-91.
- Weinrath, M., Donatelli, M., & Murchison, M. J. (2016). Mentorship: A missing piece to manage juvenile intensive supervision programs and youth gangs? *Canadian Journal of Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 58(3), 291-321.
- Weisel, D. L. (2002). The evolution of street gangs: An examination of form and variation. In W. L. Reed & S. H. Decker (Eds.), *Responding to gangs: Evaluation and research* (pp. 25-65). Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice.
- Welman, J. C., & Kruger, S. J. (1999). *Research methodology for the business and administrative sciences*. Johannesburg, South Africa: International Thompson.
- West, D. (1982). *Delinquency: Its roots, careers, and prospects*. London, UK: Heinemann.
- Western, B. (2006). *Punishment and inequality in America*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

- Westmacott, R., Stys, Y., & Brown, S. L. (2005). *Selected annotated bibliography: Evaluation of gang intervention programs* (Research Brief B-36). Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/research/092/b36-eng.pdf>
- White, R. (2008). Disputed definitions and fluid identities: The limitations of social profiling in relation to ethnic youth gangs. *Youth Justice*, 8(2), 149-161.
- White, R. (2013). *Youth gangs, violence and social respect: Exploring the nature of provocations and punch-ups*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- White, R., & Mason, R. (2006). Youth gangs and youth violence: Charting the key dimensions. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 39(1), 54-70.
- Whyte, W. F. (1993). *Street corner society: The social structure of an Italian slum*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Wilkinson, D., Beaty, C., & Lurry, R. (2009). Youth violence-crime or self-help? Marginalized Urban males' perspectives on the limited efficacy of the criminal justice system to stop youth violence. *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 623(1), 25-38.
- Williams, C. L., & Heikes, E. J. (1993). The importance of researcher's gender in the in-depth interview: Evidence from two case studies of male nurses. *Gender & Society*, 7(2), 280-291.
- Williams, D. J., Currie, D., Linden, W., & Donnelly, P. D. (2014). Addressing gang-related violence in Glasgow: A preliminary pragmatic quasi-experimental evaluation of the Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV). *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 19(6), 686-691.
- Wilson, J. M., & Chermak, S. (2011). Community-driven violence reduction programs: Examining Pittsburgh's one vision one life. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 10(4), 993-1027.
- Winfree, L. T., Fuller, K., Vigil, T. & Mays, G. L. (1992). The definition and measurement of 'gang status': Policy implications for juvenile justice. *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*, 43(1), 29-38.
- Winterdyk, J., Fillipuzi, N., Mescier, J., Hencks, C., & Ruddell, R. (2009). *Prison gangs: A review and survey of strategies*. Report prepared for Correctional Service of Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/rsrch/briefs/b43/b43-eng.pdf>
- Wong, J. S., Gravel, J., Bouchard, M., Descormiers, K., & Morselli, C. (2016). Promises kept? A meta-analysis of gang membership prevention programs. *Journal of Criminological Research, Policy and Practice*, 2(2), 134-147.

- Wong, J. S., Gravel, J., Bouchard, M., Morselli, C., & Descormiers, K. (2012). *Effectiveness of street gang control strategies: A systematic review and meta-analysis of evaluation studies* (Report No. 23). Report prepared for Public Safety Canada. Retrieved from [http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2012/sp-ps/PS4-121-2012-eng.pdf](http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2012/sp-ps/PS4-121-2012-eng.pdf)
- Wood, J. L., & Alleyne, E. (2010). Street gang theory and research: Where are we now and where do we go from here? *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 15*(2), 100-111.
- Wood, J. L., Alleyne, E., Mozova, K., & James, M. (2014). Predicting involvement in prison gang activity: Street gang membership, social and psychological factors. *Law and Human Behavior, 38*(3), 203-211.
- World Health Organization (2016). *INSPIRE seven strategies for ending violence against children*. Geneva, Switzerland: Author. Retrieved from [http://www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/violence/inspire/en/](http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/inspire/en/)
- Wortley, S. (2010). *Identifying street gangs: Definitional dilemmas and their policy implications* (Report No. 016). Report prepared for Public Safety Canada. Retrieved from [http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2012/sp-ps/PS4-115-2011-eng.pdf](http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2012/sp-ps/PS4-115-2011-eng.pdf)
- Wortley, S. & Tanner, J. (2004). Social groups or criminal organizations? The extent and nature of youth gang activity in Toronto. In B. Kidd & J. Philips (Eds.), *From enforcement and prevention to civic engagement: Research on community safety* (pp. 59-80). Toronto, ON: Centre of Criminology, University of Toronto.
- Wortley, S., & Tanner, J. (2006a). *Criminal organizations or social groups? An exploration of the myths and realities of youth gangs in Toronto*. Retrieved from <http://canada.metropolis.net/pdfs/WortleyTanner2007.pdf>
- Wortley, S., & Tanner, J. (2006b). Immigration, social disadvantage and urban youth gangs. Results of a Toronto-area study. *Canadian Journal of Urban Research, 15*(2), 18-37.
- Wortley, S., & Tanner, J. (2008). Respect, friendship, and racial injustice: Justifying gang membership in a Canadian city. In F. van Gemert, D. Peterson, & I.-L. Lien (Eds.), *Street gangs, migration and ethnicity* (pp. 192-208). Portland, OR: Wilan.
- Wright, J. P., Carter, D. E., & Cullen, F. T. (2005). A life-course analysis of military service in Vietnam. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 42*(1), 55-83.
- Wright, R. T., & Decker, S. H. (1994). *Burglars on the job*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.
- Wright, R. T., & Decker, S. H. (1997). *Armed robbers in action*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.
- Yablonsky, L. (1966). *The violent gang*. New York, NY: MacMillan.

- Yilmaz, K. (2013). Comparison of quantitative and qualitative research traditions: Epsitemological, theoretical, and methodological differences. *European Journal of Education, 48*(2), 311-325.
- Yoder, K. A., Whitbeck, L. B., & Hoyt, D. R. (2003). Gang involvement and membership among homeless and runaway youth. *Youth & Society, 34*(4), 441-467.
- Young, M. A., & Gonzalez, V. (2013). Getting out of gangs, staying out of gangs: Gang intervention and desistance strategies. *National Gang Center Bulletin*. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice. Retrieved from <https://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Content/Documents/Getting-Out-Staying-Out.pdf>
- Young, T., Fitzgibbon, W., & Silverstone, D. (2013). *The role of the family in facilitating gang membership, criminality and exit*. Report prepared for Catch-22. Retrieved from <https://cdn.catch-22.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Catch22-Dawes-Unit-The-role-of-the-family-June-2013.pdf>
- Young, T., Fitzgibbon, W., & Silverstone, D. (2014). A question of family? Youth and gangs. *Youth Justice, 14*(2), 171-185.
- Young, T., & Hallsworth, S. (2011). Young people, gangs and street-based violence. In C. Barter & D. Berridge (Eds.), *Children behaving badly? Exploring peer violence between children and young people* (pp. 59-70). West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons.

## **APPENDIX A – EXAMPLES OF CURRENT INITIATIVES**

Evidence-Informed Efforts to Address Gang Involvement and Desistance

## **Initiatives for Prevention, Intervention, and Desistance from Gang Involvement**

The following are examples of evidenced-informed efforts designed to target individuals at risk of gang involvement, those designed to divert gang members away from gangs and gang activity, and those designed to target gang members and their criminal activities. Some initiatives are gang-specific, some have adaptations that target at-risk or gang-involved individuals, and some are more generally applicable to at-risk populations including individuals at risk for gang involvement.

It has been acknowledged that a one-size-fits-all approach to address the gang issue will not work. A continuum of initiatives is needed, and the following examples are categorized by their intervention focus. It should be noted that these initiatives may have multiple intervention foci and therefore could be categorized under multiple headings.

This list of examples is by no means exhaustive and the purpose here is not to provide a comprehensive inventory of gang-appropriate initiatives. Rather it is to present examples of initiatives related to the topics discussed in this doctoral dissertation that may be of interest to policymakers and practitioners seeking to implement solutions to address the youth gang issue.

### Individual Supports

**LifeSkills Training (LST)** – This is a three-year universal prevention program for middle and high school students targeting the use of substances (tobacco, alcohol, marijuana) and violence. The program provides students with training in personal self-management, social skills, and social resistance skills. The program consists of 15 core sessions in the first year, 10 booster sessions in the second year, and five booster sessions in the third year. Each year also contains optional violence prevention sessions. Sessions are taught sequentially and delivered primarily by classroom teachers. Each unit in the curriculum has a specific major goal, measurable student objectives, lesson content, and classroom activities. Evaluations of LST have demonstrated improvements in life skills knowledge, substance use knowledge, and perceived adult substance abuse, both in the short-term and at longer-term follow-ups. Further, the intervention has shown reductions in delinquency at one-year follow-up to program completion (Botvin, Griffin, & Nichols, 2006).

**Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (TF-CBT)** – This is a therapeutic intervention for children and families who have been exposed to a traumatic event. TF-CBT employs a flexible components-based treatment model that consists of individual child-and-parent treatment sessions, as well as joint child-parent sessions. Each component is provided to both the child and parent in parallel sessions; parents additionally receive interventions to optimize effective parenting. Children and their parents attend between 12 and 18 sessions where they learn cognitive strategies for managing negative emotions and beliefs stemming from highly distressing and/or abusive experiences. TF-CBT has established evidence of improving the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder as well as reducing negative child behaviours (Cohen & Mannarino, 2008).

**Wraparound Approach** – This is an intensive, individualized care management approach designed for individuals with serious or complex emotional and/or behavioural problems. Wraparound is a definable planning process focused on providing a continuum of services and support networks with case management coordination to achieve a positive set of outcomes. It uses a variety of established interventions, including: skills training, cognitive problem-solving skills, self-control strategies, family management skills training, and parent training to name a few. Services are ‘wrapped around’ the individual in their natural environment. The planning process is individual-centered, builds on strengths, is community-based using a balance of formal and informal supports, is culturally relevant, flexible, and coordinated across agencies. Evaluations of the Wraparound approach have demonstrated overall improvements in youth functioning and decreases in recidivism (Debicki, 2011; Kamradt, 2014; Mears, Yaffe, & Harris, 2009; VanDenBerg & Grealish, 1996).

### Family-Focused Supports

**Brief Strategic Family Therapy (BSFT)** – This program adopts a structural family systems framework to improve a youth’s behaviour problems by improving family interactions that are presumed to be directly related to the youth’s symptoms. The target population is youth aged eight to 17 displaying or at risk for developing behaviour problems, including substance abuse. The program assumes that each family has unique characteristics that emerge when family members interact and that this family ‘system’ influences all members of the family. The program targets unsuccessful interaction patterns that are directly related to the youth’s behaviour problems and establishes a practical plan to help the family develop more effective patterns of interaction. Evaluations of BSFT have demonstrated reductions in youth conduct problems, socialized aggression, substance use, and improvements in family functioning (Santisteban et al., 2003, 1997; Szapocznik, Schwartz, Muir, & Brown, 2012). The BSFT – Gang Adaptation considers contextual factors, including frequent gang affiliation in high crime neighbourhoods characterized by low levels of education, multi-generational use of drugs, extensive criminality, and high incarceration rates. Three behavioural problems are addressed (delinquency, impulsivity, hyperactivity) along with drug/alcohol use. In addition to the adapted family therapy, gang diversion training for adolescents and gang awareness for parents are provided by outreach workers.

**Functional Family Therapy (FFT)** – This is a family systems program suitable for the families of young people with existing problems with antisocial and offending behaviour. The program aims to improve both structural and relational aspects of family functioning, with strong emphasis on reducing ‘defensive’ communication patterns (e.g., hostile, critical) and promoting ‘supportive communications’ (e.g., favouring active listening, turn-taking, empathy). The program is of variable intensity and delivered over a three-month period in home or clinic settings by trained practitioners engaging individual family units. Evaluations of FFT have demonstrated reductions in recidivism and out-of-home placements (Alexander & Parsons, 1982; Celinska, Furrer, & Cheng, 2013; Sexton & Turner, 2010). There is an adaptation to FFT that is currently being tested. It is called Functional Therapy for Gang Populations (FFT-G), a gang-enhanced version of the original FFT program and it is currently being implemented in Philadelphia.



**Multisystemic Therapy (MST)** – This is an example of a multilevel strategy that includes targeted components designed to strengthen parenting skills in families that have demonstrated problems in parenting. The program is designed to prevent child maltreatment and emotional, behavioural, and developmental problems. Prevention of these early risk behaviours can decrease risk for later involvement in delinquent and violent behaviour and set children on a healthy and productive developmental trajectory. Evaluations of MST have demonstrated reductions in recidivism and positive impacts on family cohesion and social skills (Butler, Baruch, Hickey, & Fonagy, 2011; Henggeler, Schoenwald, Borduin, Rowland, & Cunningham, 2009; Timmons-Mitchell, Bender, Kishna, & Mitchell, 2006).

### Community-Based Supports

Awareness raising initiatives are commonly employed to highlight the consequences and myths of gang membership. The following are some examples of such initiatives:

**British Columbia Gang Prevention Website** – This website offers facts about gangs and crime prevention in British Columbia. It provides links to resources and information regarding gangs in BC, ways to prevent youth gang involvement, how to get help, and a calendar of events. It also provides information about the many gang prevention initiatives that are taking place across the province, including programs and services provided by the eight Community Assessment Action Networks (CAANS) that participated in the BC provincial youth gang prevention strategy. (<http://www.gangprevention.ca/>)

**End Gang Life** – This is a comprehensive gang education, prevention, and awareness initiative that uses bold, emotional, and visually impactful images and messages to: (1) engage the public about gangs; (2) provide material that educates the public about gangs; (3) prevent youth and young adults from joining gangs; and (4) encourage those involved in gang life to exit. It is an initiative of the Combined Forces Special Enforcement Unit British Columbia. (<http://www.cfseu.bc.ca/end-gang-life/>)

The following are examples of community-based initiatives that rely on informal supports including mentoring and the provision of recreational activities including sports-based programs:

**Life Skills for Youth Crime and Drug Prevention through Sports** – In 2015, based on the Doha Declaration adopted by the United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) launched a global youth crime prevention initiative that builds on the power of sports. The LineUp LiveUp program was developed with the aim of building resilience in youth aged 13 to 17 by enhancing their life skills, as well as increasing their knowledge of the consequences of substance abuse and crime. This program can be used in sports centers and be applied in schools and other community settings to address youth crime, violence, and drug abuse. This program has been piloted in Brazil, and piloting phases will continue in other countries (such as South Africa and Kyrgyzstan).<sup>162</sup>

---

<sup>162</sup> Information on this program was obtained from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2017), *LineUp LiveUp – Life Skills Training in Sport Settings to Prevent Crime Violence and Drug Abuse* manual. Because this program is currently under testing, the manual is not yet available for further dissemination.

**Gang Prevention/Intervention Through Targeted Outreach Program (GPTTO/GITTO)** – The GPTTO fulfills at-risk youths’ desire for gang membership (i.e., a need for supportive adults, challenging activities, and a place to belong). Youth are identified and recruited into the program through direct outreach efforts and school referrals. Training is offered in character and leadership development, health and life skills, the arts, sports, fitness, and recreation. GITTO recruits gang-involved youth into Boys & Girls Club membership to decrease gang-related behaviours and contact with the youth justice system. Youth are offered a network of services involving drug treatment, tattoo removal, remedial education, life skills, and job training services. Adults act as mentors while offering advice on various issues. Staff help to take youth to court docket dates and job interviews and help to arrange family meetings. Evaluations of GITTO have demonstrated significant improvements in a range of school behaviours and use of leisure time, reductions in gang-associated behaviours and delinquent behaviours, and reduced contact with the youth justice system (Arbreton & McClanahan, 2002; Lafontaine et al., 2005).

**Youth Inclusion Programme (YIP)** – This program seeks to reintegrate young people at risk of offending, truancy, and school or social exclusion back into the conventional social order and to reduce crime within the community. The program has a variety of components including mentoring which seeks to offer support and positive role modeling for young people. Other components include sports and recreation, family projects, education and training, health and drug education, arts and cultural activities, and environmental activities. Evaluations of YIP have demonstrated reductions in offending, arrests, and school suspensions and improvements in life skills, school attendance, and family and personal relationships (Burrows, 2003; Burrows, Mackie, & Hubbard, 2008; Laliberté, 2015).

The following are examples of community-based vocational training and employment initiatives:

**Job Corps** – This program is focuses on career technical training and education for youth aged 16 to 24. The program’s goal is to help youth become more responsible, employable, and productive citizens. Job Corps services are delivered in three stages: outreach and admissions, centre operations, and placement. The heart of the program is the services provided at its centres. Further, the program usually involves moving a youth out of his home neighbourhood, and some have cited the benefits of the residential requirement as providing new opportunities, not simply for skills and job placements services, but via new experiences and positive role models. A national evaluation of the Job Corps program found improvements in outcomes for disadvantaged youth including increases in educational attainment, reductions in criminal activity, and increases in earnings (Schochet, Burghardt, & McConnell, 2006).

**Homeboy Industries (HBI)** – This is a job-related program targeted specifically to gang members which provides a range of social services, including counseling, mental health education and treatment, curriculum and training (e.g., life skills, education, 12-step, and art programs), and tattoo removal, but is mostly known for operating several social enterprises that serve as job-training sites. The program is based on a case management model. The case manager conducts a needs assessment and connects the client to appropriate services at HBI, which are documented in an action plan with goals (Leap, Franke, Christie, & Bonis, 2011).<sup>163</sup>

---

<sup>163</sup> It should be noted that at this time neither the Homeboy Industries program nor a subset of its strategies (e.g., entrepreneurship services) have been rigorously evaluated (Roman et al., 2017).

**STR8 UP** – This is a program that was developed in Saskatoon and designed to intervene with and assist gang members who are considering or are in the process of leaving their gang. There are many challenges that gang members face when they leave their gang. Some of these challenges include finding adequate housing and employment, upgrading their education, and coping with addictions. STR8UP outreach workers work with STR8UP members to reduce the barriers that they struggle to overcome, such as finding employment opportunities, accessing treatment or educational programs, and helping them register for welfare. STR8UP is also involved in the prevention of gang membership through youth mentorship programs, school presentations, and workshops in the community (Orton, Patrick, Cordwell, Truswell, & Wormith, 2012).<sup>164</sup>

**YouthBuild** – This is a community-based alternative education program that targets youth aged 16 to 24 and teaches them construction skills while they build affordable housing in their own neighbourhoods. The program was developed to work with young people to overcome challenges associated with low education skills and a lack of employment. It offers a combination of services including academic support, job skills training, counseling and case management, and community service and leadership development opportunities. Interim findings from an evaluation of YouthBuild have demonstrated positive impacts including increased educational attainment, a small increase in earnings, and increased civic engagement (Ferguson, Snipes, Hossain, & Manno, 2015; Miller, Millenky, Schwartz, Goble, & Stein, 2016).

### Comprehensive Strategies

The following are examples of comprehensive strategies that involve a combination of prevention, intervention, and suppression initiatives:

**The Comprehensive Community-Wide Gang Program Model** – This continues to be the best-known example of a comprehensive strategy. Developed by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in the United States, the initial version of the model was launched in Chicago in 1993. Several tests and demonstrations of this model have continued in the United States and Canada over the past twenty-five years.<sup>165</sup> The model incorporates five strategies: organizational change, community mobilization, opportunities provision, social intervention, and suppression. In American evaluations, the model has demonstrated effectiveness in reducing gang-related crime (Spergel, 2007; Spergel, Wa, & Sosa, 2006).

---

<sup>164</sup> It should be noted that STR8 UP has only undergone a process evaluation, no outcome evaluation has been completed to date.

<sup>165</sup> In its various iterations, this program model has been called the Little Village Gang Violence Reduction Program, the Spergel Model, the Comprehensive Gang Model, the Comprehensive Gang Prevention, Intervention and Suppression Model, and the Gang Reduction Program (Howell, 2012).

**The Glasgow Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV)** – This is a holistic, focused deterrence approach to address gang violence through the provision of social support. An initiative of Glasgow’s Violence Reduction Unit (VRU), the CIRV employed intelligence gathering, sheriff court self-referral session, multi-agency individualized client support, and police enforcement to reduce the long-standing involvement of young males in gang-related violence in Glasgow (Waller, 2014). The initiative was led by Strathclyde Police, with committed support from health, education, social services, housing, and community safety, and employed a public health model which regarded violence as preventable (see Dahlberg & Krug, 2002). An evaluation of the effectiveness of CIRV in reducing violent acts found a positive statistically significant effect on rates of weapon possession among those engaged with the initiative (Williams, Currie, Linden, & Donnelly, 2014).

**The Group Violence Intervention (GVI) Strategy** – This form of problem-oriented policing was first used in Operation Ceasefire in Boston, Massachusetts in the mid-1990s. Operation Ceasefire combined a focused deterrence strategy with activism from community groups and youth service providers. The objective was to make youth believe that there would be heavy and predictable consequences for carrying hand guns and violence (Waller, 2006). It employed a ‘pulling levers’ strategy where the police used whatever laws they could to intervene, including aggressive enforcement of liquor, traffic, and probation violations to prevent youth gang violence and manage the behaviour of chronic offenders; removing individuals from the gang who had a higher probability of impacting crime and violence levels. It also nominated certain people for social service intervention; gang members on the periphery were persuaded to abandon gang life in return for needed employment, education, and skills training (McGloin, 2005). The GVI approach has evolved over the years, although the core model has remained the same, and has now been adopted across the United States. In 2012, researchers from the Campbell Collaboration in the United States, conducted an extensive review and found strong empirical evidence for the crime prevention effectiveness of the GVI strategy (Braga & Weisburd, 2012).

**Youth Violence Reduction Partnership** – Also known as the Philadelphia Youth Violence Reduction Partnership, this program is a result of the close partnership between various public agencies (police, probation) and community organizations (street workers, religious organizations) who work with the client group. Street workers and police help probation officers supervise participants, resulting in almost daily contacts with seriously violent youth. The frontline staff aim to see participants and their families more than 25 times a month. Street workers mentor youth and broker in other services. This two-pronged approach intensifies interventions with young people and further discourages them from engaging in crime. Youth-serving organizations and criminal justice agencies collaborate to balance intensive supervision with comprehensive therapeutic support. YVRP provides youth with increased supervision and helps them access important resources (e.g., employment, mentoring, school bonding, counselling, health care, drug treatment). YVRP also seeks to stabilize the families of participants through such efforts as jobs for parents and assistance finding housing. An evaluation of the YVRP in Philadelphia demonstrated a reduction in youth homicides, and previous research has demonstrated that the combination of intensive probation and support in YVRP is associated with reductions in violence at the community level (McClanahan, 2004, 2014).

The following are examples of initiatives that identify key moments as opportunities to intervene in the lives of gang-involved individuals and utilize comprehensive case management services with appropriate supports:

**Cure Violence** – This is a violence prevention and intervention program which started in 1999 in several of Chicago’s highest crime neighbourhoods. It has reframed violence prevention in a public health framework; specifically, the program believes that changing attitudes toward violence requires changing norms and behaviours in the same way other public health efforts have tried to alter behaviours like cigarette smoking. It is based on an approach commonly referred to as ‘street work’ meaning the use of outreach workers to work directly with gangs, gang members, and troubled youth to provide services and mediate disputes so that they do not become violent. Intervening in crises (e.g., after instances of gang violence and victimization), it uses ‘violence interrupters’ to mediate gang/neighbourhood disputes to stop the cycle of retaliatory violence, and engages more traditional case workers in direct service provision for members seeking to exit the gang (e.g., providing access to individual development and substance abuse rehabilitation programs, employment-related services and opportunities, education, housing) (Papachristos, 2011; Skogan, Hartnett, Bump, & Dubois, 2008). Program evaluations conducted in the United States have found that the Cure Violence model is associated with significantly reduced rates of gun violence (Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, 2016).

**Hospital-Based Violence Intervention Programs (HVIPs)** – These programs focus services on young adults recovering from violent injuries like gunshot wounds. This group is at an extremely high risk of being injured again, as well as of retaliating with violence. HVIPs call for screening patients based on predetermined criteria to identify those individuals most at risk for re-injury and then connecting qualifying candidates with trained, culturally competent case managers. These case managers provide clients with intense oversight and assistance both in the hospital and in the crucial months following the patient’s release. During this time, case managers help connect high-risk individuals to a variety of community-based organizations to give them access to critical resources such as mental health services, tattoo removal, education programs, employment, court advocacy, and housing. Through the provision of these services, HVIPs can supplement an individual’s desire to leave the gang with concrete resources to achieve this goal. One evaluation of a HVIP in Oakland demonstrated a reduction in re-injury and subsequent criminal involvement (Cooper et al., 2006; Johnson et al., 2007; Roman et al., 2017; Snider et al., 2015). An example of Canadian HVIP is the Winnipeg Health Sciences Centre Emergency Department Violence Intervention Program. In operation since 2013, it engages young people in the emergency department at the time of their injury and pairs them with a support worker trained in providing wraparound care to minimize their future risk of violence-related injury.

### Societal Strategies

The following are examples of societal strategies that shift the focus from ‘individual’ level issues to wider ‘social’ level issues. They seek to tackle systemic and widespread social problems through a coordinated multisector approach. The frameworks employed by these strategies may serve as inspiration for the future development of a comprehensive approach to address the issue of youth gangs:

**INSPIRE: Seven Strategies for Ending Violence Against Children** – The World Health Organization has brought together a partnership of major organizations (e.g., UNODC, UNICEF, The World Bank) to promote evidence-based strategies to end violence against children. The INSPIRE strategies target underlying risks for violence against children including in the areas of poverty, health, gender equality, education, safe environments, and justice. The INSPIRE strategies are most effective when implemented as part of a comprehensive, multisectoral plan that harnesses their synergies, as the strategies are intended to work in combination and reinforce each other. Further, monitoring and evaluation is promoted as a cross-cutting activity to assess progress toward the goals of the seven strategies (World Health Organization, 2016).

**United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals** – In 2015, several countries adopted a set of goals to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all as part of a new sustainable development agenda, *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. Each goal has specific targets to be achieved over 15 years. Governments have committed to transform their actions so that they can achieve these targets, including through a significant shift in their strategies that includes investment, capacity development, partnerships, and evidence-informed action. To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and their related targets, there must be a coordinated, multidisciplinary effort to address the multiple root causes of delinquency, violence, and insecurity (United Nations, 2017).

## **APPENDIX B – ETHICS APPROVAL NOTICES**

Certificates from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board  
of the University of Ottawa



**Ethics Approval Notice**  
**Social Science and Humanities REB**

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

<u>First Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Affiliation</u>	<u>Role</u>
Ross	Hastings	Social Sciences / Criminology	Principal Investigator
Laura	Dunbar	Social Sciences / Criminology	Research Assistant

**File Number:** 05-13-09

**Type of Project:** Professor

**Title:** Provincial Asset Mapping and Program Inventory Project for Gang-Involved Youth in Custody/Detention: Case Study of Eastern Ontario Youth Justice Region

<b>Approval Date (mm/dd/yyyy)</b>	<b>Expiry Date (mm/dd/yyyy)</b>	<b>Approval Type</b>
07/03/2013	07/02/2014	Ia

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

**Special Conditions / Comments:**

Full approval: Permissions letters received from Youth Services Bureau and MCYS, Youth Justice Services Divison (Aug 6<sup>th</sup>, 2013).





**Université d'Ottawa** **University of Ottawa**  
Service de subventions de recherche et déontologie Research Grants and Ethics Services

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 subjects 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:

<http://www.research.uottawa.ca/ethics/forms.html>.

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:

<http://www.research.uottawa.ca/ethics/forms.html>.

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](mailto:ethics@uOttawa.ca).

Signature:



Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research  
For Barbara Graves, Chair of the Social Sciences and Humanities REB



**Ethics Approval Notice**  
**Social Sciences and Humanities REB**

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

<u>First Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Affiliation</u>	<u>Role</u>
Patrice	Coriveau	Social Sciences / Criminology	Supervisor
Laura	Dunbar	Social Sciences / Criminology	Student Researcher

**File Number:** 06-15-12

**Type of Project:** PhD Thesis

**Title:** Getting Out: Examining Desistance Among Gang-Involved Youth in the Criminal Justice System

<b>Approval Date (mm/dd/yyyy)</b>	<b>Expiry Date (mm/dd/yyyy)</b>	<b>Approval Type</b>
10/15/2015	10/14/2016	Ia

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

**Special Conditions / Comments:**  
N/A



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

This is to confirm that the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board identified above, which operates in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement (2010) and other applicable laws and regulations in Ontario, has examined and approved the ethics application for the above named research project. Ethics approval is valid for the period indicated above and subject to the conditions listed in the section entitled "Special Conditions / Comments".

During the course of the project, 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 project (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, including consent and recruitment documentation, should be submitted to the Ethics Office for approval using the "Modification to research project" form available at: <http://research.uottawa.ca/ethics/submissions-and-reviews>.

Please submit an annual report to the Ethics Office four weeks before the above-referenced expiry date to request a renewal of this ethics approval. To close the file, a final report must be submitted. These documents can be found at: <http://research.uottawa.ca/ethics/submissions-and-reviews>.

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](mailto:ethics@uOttawa.ca).

**Signature:**



Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research  
For Barbara Graves, Chair of the Social Sciences and Humanities REB

## **APPENDIX C – RECRUITMENT MATERIALS FOR FOCUS GROUPS**

Letter of Information / Invitation for Participation  
for Justice-Involved Youth and Youth Justice Practitioners



## **Justice-Involved Youth – Letter of Information for Participation in a Research Study**

We are Professor Ross Hastings and Laura Dunbar (PhD student). We are researchers at the University of Ottawa in the Department of Criminology. We are working with the Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa and the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services – Youth Justice Services Division as part of a larger project on youth in gangs.

We are interested in the type of initiatives that are available for gang-involved youth when they leave places like the William E. Hay Centre and the Livius Sherwood Detention and Custody Centre to return to their community. We will be talking to youth justice staff, community agencies/organizations, and youth to identify what is helpful and the ways that things could be improved. We are interested in learning about the type of things that will help youth plan for their release and/or what things they need when they are back home.

We hope to conduct in-person interviews and focus groups with young people who have knowledge of the gang lifestyle. We are interested in learning about what it is like to be in a gang and what supports would help individuals who want to leave. We will be asking young people their opinions about possible reasons for being in a gang, the type of things they believe would be helpful for individuals involved in a gang and the problems that gang-involved youth face.

If you are between 16 and 25 years old and would like to share your thoughts and views on gang involvement, we would like to invite you to participate in this research study. Please note that interviews and focus groups will take place in English. You will be compensated for your participation (\$20.00 CAD in cash).

Please indicate your interest by filling out the information on the following page. When you are finished, please place the form in the envelope provided, seal it and return it to the person that gave it to you.

Please note that you do not have to participate in this research study. Your decision will not be shared – your prime worker, reintegration counselor, and/or probation officer will not be told if you choose to participate or not. Nothing bad will happen to you if you decide that you do not want to participate.

Ross Hastings  
Professor, Department of Criminology  
University of Ottawa

Laura Dunbar  
PhD Student, Department of Criminology  
University of Ottawa



**Justice-Involved Youth – Invitation to Participate in a Research Study**

I have read the attached letter of information on a research study being carried out by Professor Ross Hastings and Laura Dunbar (PhD student) in the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa. They are interested in the type of initiatives (programs, services, supports and resources) that help youth who may be involved in gangs as they return back to the community.

Based on the information provided:

- I am interested in participating in a 60-minute interview.  
*This will be a one-on-one session – just the researchers and me.*
- I am interested in participating in a 60-minute focus group.  
*This will be a group session – the researchers, other youth and me.*
- I would like to speak to the researchers before making a decision.  
*The researchers will contact me.*

YES	NO

If you indicated that you are interested in participating in this research study, please complete the following section:

First Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Last Initial: \_\_\_\_\_

## Youth Justice Practitioners – Letter of Information for Participation in a Research Study

We are Professor Ross Hastings and Laura Dunbar (PhD student), and are researchers at the University of Ottawa in the Department of Criminology. As part of a provincial asset mapping and program inventory project for gang-involved youth in custody/detention, we are supporting the Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa in conducting a case study of Eastern Ontario. This project is funded by the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services, Youth Justice Services Division and is part of the Ministry's multi-year *Strategy to Support Gang-Involved Youth in Custody / Detention*.

The purpose of this case study is to map the community programs and supports for gang-involved youth justice clients in the Eastern Ontario youth justice region who are transitioning from custody/detention settings and/or those being supervised in the community. This will involve identifying and compiling information on the interventions currently available for gang-involved youth to enable the development of an electronic inventory. Additionally, to map assets, it will involve the engagement of youth justice staff, community youth service providers, and youth to identify local strengths and speak to areas that require further development. This goal of this case study is to provide information about the region's capacity to address the complex issues related to gang involvement with the aim of supporting the rehabilitation and reintegration of gang-involved youth in custody/detention and to increase youth justice staff's ability to work with this population.

In order to address the themes outlined above, we hope to conduct focus groups with youth justice practitioners. We are interested in learning about your professional relationship with gang-involved youth and your role in their lives as it relates to service provision.

If you are interested in sharing your thoughts and views on working with gang-involved youth and would like to participate in one 60-90 minute focus group session, please respond by e-mail to Laura Dunbar. We will be contacting interested participants to schedule focus group sessions between November 2013 and January 2014 at a mutually acceptable location and time. Please note that focus groups will be conducted in English.

If you have any questions or concerns, or would like to know more about this research study, please don't hesitate to contact us by e-mail.

Please note that there is no obligation on your part to participate in this research study.

Ross Hastings  
Professor, Department of Criminology  
University of Ottawa

Laura Dunbar  
PhD Student, Department of Criminology  
University of Ottawa

## **APPENDIX D – FOCUS GROUP GUIDES**

Research Protocol and Focus Group Guide  
for Justice-Involved Youth and Youth Justice Practitioners



## **Justice-Involved Youth – Research Protocol and Focus Group Guide**

Date of Focus Group:

Location:

Facilitators:

### Introduction and Project Overview

We are researchers at the University of Ottawa in the Department of Criminology. We are working with the Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa and the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services – Youth Justice Services Division as part of a larger project on youth in gangs.

We are interested in the type of initiatives that are available for gang-involved youth when they leave places like the William E. Hay Centre and Sherwood Detention and Custody Centre to return to their community. We will be talking to youth justice staff, community agencies / organizations, and youth such as yourselves to identify what is helpful and the ways that things could be improved. We are interested in learning about the type of things that will help youth plan for their release and/or what things they need when they are back home.

We are interested in learning about what it is like to be in a gang and what supports would help individuals who want to leave. We will be asking you your opinions about possible reasons for being in a gang, the type of things you believe would be helpful for individuals involved in a gang and about the problems that gang-involved youth face when trying to leave a gang / returning to the community.

### Description of ‘Gang’ and ‘Gang Member’

*Definition of ‘Gang-Involved Youth’: An individual between the age of 12 and 25 who is part of a self-formed group of 3 or more youth, formally or informally organized with a common identity, who are involved in antisocial and/or criminal activities. This description is adapted from the definition of gangs drafted by the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police Street Gangs Committee in June 2011.*

1. What does the word ‘gang’ mean to you and what do you think it means to be a ‘gang member’?
  - What activities are these individuals involved in; how can you tell that an individual is a gang member?
  - What do you think about the label of ‘gang member’ (perceptions)? How do you think this label impacts an individual (positive/negative)?

## Benefits and Consequences of Gang Involvement

2. Can you tell us why you think a young person may want to be involved in a gang?
  - What do you think are some of the benefits – what does the gang offer, what can it provide, what are the good things, etc.
3. Can you tell us why you think youth may want ‘out’ of the gang?
  - What do you think are some of the costs, drawbacks, and limitations of involvement?
  - What do you think are some of the reasons (motivations or incentives) to leave the gang

## ‘Gang Members’ Leaving Institutions and Returning to the Community

4. In returning to the community, what do you think would help youth who want to get out of a gang, what would help them stay on track, what would improve their lives?
  - Are there certain people, programs, services, supports, resources that are important?
  - What needs do you think should be addressed (personal identity, relationships, education, employment, life skills, health, housing, etc.)?
5. What do you think are some of the challenges (obstacles/barriers) that gang-involved youth face in returning to the community?
  - What needs do you think are not being addressed? What do you feel is missing?
  - What are the things that make it difficult for gang-involved youth to get the help that they need (knowing where to go, access, etc.)?

## What Should be Done in the Future to Help Gang-Involved Youth?

6. What are some of the things that the youth justice staff do and/or should do to help gang-involved youth who are leaving the facility and returning to the community?
  - Is there certain information that they should be providing to these youth?
  - Are there connections that need to be made, if so with whom (family, school, peers, community agencies/organizations, etc.)?

### Scenario

7. What do you think is the most important thing that would help youth who may want 'out' of the gang?
  - If you had a sibling and/or friend who were in a gang, what would you like to see done for them?

### Closing

Do you have any questions or any other things you want us to know about gang-involved youth and what can be done to help them?

## **Youth Justice Practitioners – Research Protocol and Focus Group Guide**

Date of Focus Group:

Location:

Facilitators:

### Introduction and Project Overview

This project is funded by the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services, Youth Justice Services Division and represents one component of a larger Provincial Asset Mapping and Program Inventory Project, part of the Ministry's *Strategy to Support Gang-Involved Youth in Custody/Detention*.

The purpose of the study is to map the community programs and supports for gang-involved youth justice clients in the in the Eastern Ontario youth justice region who are transitioning from custody/detention settings and/or those being supervised in the community. This will involve identifying and compiling information on the interventions currently available for gang-involved youth to enable the development of an electronic inventory. Additionally, to map assets, it will involve the engagement of youth justice staff, community youth service providers, and gang-involved youth to identify local strengths and speak to areas that require further development.

We are collecting information about the region's capacity to address the complex issues related to gang involvement to provide youth justice staff and youth service providers with an inventory and asset map of local programs, services and resources available for gang-involved youth, with the aim of supporting the rehabilitation and reintegration of this population and increasing staff capacity to work with them. For youth justice staff, this research project will help improve the identification of interventions for gang-involved youth to include in a reintegration plan, and to make referrals to the types of supports that are perceived by gang-involved youth to help them after they are released. For youth service providers, this research project may offer agencies and organizations the opportunity to reflect on their work with gang-involved youth - acknowledging and valuing existing resources and allowing them to build on this foundation when undertaking formal and/or informal planning processes and partnerships. This research project will contribute to the advancement of knowledge on gang involvement and recommendations emerging from this study will help guide the development of future policy and program initiatives to support gang-involved youth in the criminal justice system.

## Description of Work with Gang-Involved Youth

*Definition of ‘Gang-Involved Youth’: An individual between the age of 12 and 25 who is part of a self-formed group of 3 or more youth, formally or informally organized with a common identity, who are involved in antisocial and/or criminal activities. This description is adapted from the definition of gangs drafted by the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police Street Gangs Committee in June 2011.*

1. How is the ‘gang’ label relevant to the work that you do?
  - Prompt: How is it relevant to your work with partners?
2. How do you work with youth that you know or suspect to be gang-involved?
  - Prompt: How do you know if they are gang-involved (formal/informal identification, process, assessment tool, etc.)?
  - Prompt: Do you take a different approach? If so, in what way?
    - Is there a gendered-approach?
    - Is there an ethno-cultural approach?
  - Prompt: Do you offer/refer to programs, services, resources, etc., specifically targeted to address the needs of this population?
3. What risk and protective factors do you prioritize in the development of a plan for gang-involved youth?
  - Prompt: Are there factors and/or issues that are specific to gang-involved youth? If so, what are they and how are they relevant?
4. How do you work to address these risk and protective factors?
  - Prompt: Are there factors and/or issues that you consider relevant but that you are not in a position to address? Which ones? Why?
5. Please discuss your capacity to work with gang-involved youth. Are there specific issues or concerns relating to gang-involved youth that are important to your agency/organization? If so, how do you deal with these?
  - Prompt: What do you think are the strengths of your approach to working with gang-involved youth? What types of youth are you best able to help? What has worked well?
  - Prompt: What are the most common barriers and limitations you encounter when working with gang-involved youth?
  - Prompt: What would help you to increase your capacity, to work more effectively, etc.?

### Partnerships and Collaboration

6. In working with gang-involved youth, what is the nature of your partnerships with other agencies/organizations?

- Prompt: Do you have formalized protocols, informal relationships, key contacts, etc., with other agencies/organizations?
- Prompt: How do you work with others?
- Prompt: Is there an 'inventory of services' that your agency/organization is connected to address issues faced by this population?

### Closing Remarks

Do you have any questions, or anything else you would like to discuss with respect to working with gang-involved youth and what can be done to help them?

Do you have any suggestions/recommendations for us as we move forward in this data collection process and/or with this project as a whole?

**APPENDIX E – RECRUITMENT MATERIALS FOR INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS**

Recruitment Flyer, Letter of Information / Invitation for Participation  
for Justice-Involved Youth and Youth Justice Practitioners

**Department of Criminology  
University of Ottawa**

**YOUTH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR  
RESEARCH ON YOUTH GANGS**

I am looking for individuals 16 years of age and up to take part in a study looking at why and how justice-involved youth make decisions concerning gang involvement and leaving the gang.

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview (that will take place in English).

Your participation would involve one session, lasting approximately 60 minutes.

In appreciation for your time, you will receive \$20.00 CAD in cash.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact your unit manager / a coordinator who will pass your name along to me.

Laura Dunbar  
PhD Candidate (ABD) in Criminology

**This study has been reviewed by and received ethics clearance through the University of Ottawa Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board, the Adult Correctional and Youth Justice Services Research Committee, and the YSB Research Ethics and Advisory Committee.**



## Justice-Involved Youth – Letter of Information for Participation in a Research Study

My name is Laura Dunbar and I am a student in the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa. For my PhD thesis (a large research-based project), I am doing a study to look at *why and how justice-involved youth in the city of Ottawa leave the gang lifestyle*. My focus is on youth living in youth justice facilities and youth who have a probation officer in the community.

The focus of this study is on the personal experiences of justice-involved youth. I am interested in seeing how different things like young people's attitudes, experiences and relationships can influence how they make decisions and what they see as possible way(s) out of the gang.

I will be talking to justice-involved youth (who say they are in a gang) and youth justice staff that work with gang-involved youth. I want to find out how youth understand the gang and its activities, why they consider leaving the gang (or not) and how they make a decision to leave. I am also interested in learning about what things limit them and what things help them.

In order to do this, I hope to interview gang-involved youth in the criminal justice system. I will be asking participants about what the term gang means to them, why they wanted to be involved in a gang, why they might consider getting out of the gang, and how they might go about leaving.

You can participate in a 60-minute interview if you are male, at least 16 years old, and are involved in a gang. The interviews will take place in English. You will be given \$20.00 CAD in cash for your participation.

If you want to participate, you can tell a coordinator or your probation officer. With your permission, your name will be passed along to me. Please provide your answer by **April 30, 2016**.

You do not have to participate in this study. If you choose to participate, please note that the coordinator is only collecting your name to pass it along to me – they do not have an interest in this research study. They are not keeping track of who participates and who does not participate.

Further, your decision will be kept private – your unit manager and I will not tell your prime worker, reintegration counselor, and probation officer if you choose to participate or not. Nothing bad will happen to you if you decide that you do not want to participate.

Laura Dunbar  
PhD Candidate (ABD), Department of Criminology  
University of Ottawa

## Youth Justice Practitioners – Letter of Information for Participation in a Research Study

My name is Laura Dunbar and I am a PhD candidate in the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa. For my PhD thesis, I am conducting an exploratory study to look at *why and how justice-involved youth in the city of Ottawa leave the gang lifestyle*. My focus is on youth living in youth justice facilities and youth who have a probation officer in the community.

The focus of this research project is on the subjective experiences of justice-involved youth as it relates to the process of desistance from gang involvement. I am interested in examining how several factors (elements internal to the individual and/or in the external environment), and their interactions, may influence individuals' decision-making processes and/or have an impact on the perceived availability of pathway(s) out of the gang.

I will be talking to justice-involved youth (who self-identify as gang involved) and youth justice practitioners with knowledge of and experience working with gang-involved youth in the criminal justice system to find out how justice-involved youth understand the 'gang' and its associated activities, why they consider leaving the gang (or not) and how/when they make a decision to leave. I am also interested in learning how justice-involved youth begin to engage in and navigate the process of desistance and in particular what hinders and what helps them in this process.

In order to address the themes outlined above, I hope to conduct in-person interviews with youth justice practitioners who have knowledge of and experience working with gang-involved youth in the criminal justice system. The purpose of these interviews is to gain additional insight into the desistance process for this population from the perspective of practitioners who are involved in their lives.

If you have expertise in this area and are interested in sharing your thoughts and views on working with gang-involved youth in the criminal justice system and would like to participate in one 60-minute interview, please respond to this e-mail by **March 31, 2016** (indicating your preferred method of contact). I will be contacting interested participants to schedule interviews in March and April 2016 at a location and time convenient for them. The interview will be in English.

Please note that there is no obligation on your part to participate in this research project.

Laura Dunbar  
PhD Candidate (ABD), Department of Criminology  
University of Ottawa

## **APPENDIX F – INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW GUIDES**

Individual Interview Guide  
for Justice-Involved Youth and Youth Justice Practitioners

## **Justice-Involved Youth – Interview Guide**

### Identification

Interview #:

Interviewee Pseudonym:

Date:

Location:

### Disclaimer

As you know, I am conducting research on gang involvement. The purpose of this research study is to look at why and how justice-involved youth in the city of Ottawa leave the gang lifestyle.

I can assure you that the information you provide me will be kept confidential and your anonymity will be protected. I must remind you however that if you tell me about new crimes, about abuse that you have experienced, or that someone else may be hurt then I have a duty to report it.

There are no right or wrong answers; I am interested in knowing about you and your own experiences of gang involvement.

### Demographics

Age:

Ethnicity:

Current or recent gang membership:

Education (highest grade level achieved):

Past legal employment:

Living arrangements in the community:

Relationship status:

Any dependents:

## Understanding the ‘Gang’ and Its Associated Activities

*If it is alright with you, I would like to start off by talking about your gang involvement. To better understand who you are and how you see yourself, I would like to hear your perspective on the following:*

1.1 What does the word ‘gang’ mean to you and what does it mean for you to be ‘gang involved’ and/or a ‘gang member’?

- Prompt: What are the criteria, characteristics and attributes of your gang and the other individuals involved in the gang? What do individuals involved in your gang have in common?
- Prompt: What is the purpose of your gang? What are the requirements of membership in your gang? Overall, can you tell me a bit about what it is like to be in your gang?
  - Do any of the following exist in your gang: established leaders; a gang name; adopted specific gang symbols, tattoos, burns, scars, colours; initiation rights; regular meetings; specific rules; specific territory; hierarchy; other.

1.2 What types of activities is your gang involved in / what types of activities are you involved in as part of the gang? *\*Please do not identify any specific instances of criminal activity.*

- Prompt: What are some of the things you did or experienced that reflect(ed) your gang affiliation?

1.3 What does it mean to you to identify yourself as ‘gang involved’ and/or a ‘gang member’?

- Prompt: We often see those involved in a gang portrayed in a certain way: youth gangs and their criminal activities are the focus of a significant degree of police activity; they are increasingly presented as a serious problem by the media: and seem to be a growing concern for the public. What do you think about these images? Do these images match how you see yourself? Do these images match how you feel others see you?
- Prompt: Do you have the impression that you have been labelled as a ‘gang member’? If so, how does it feel to be labelled as a ‘gang member’? How does this label impact on you in your daily life?

## Experiences and Benefits of Gang Involvement

2.1 Can you tell me about why you wanted to be involved in a gang?

*Think back to the time in your life when you were in the earliest stages of the path leading to gang life. Start at the beginning of your path; please describe a particular incident when you did/experienced something that got you involved with gang life.*

*Describe the experience, how you felt, what you did, what you said, what thoughts did you have about it?*

- Prompt: What was the appeal of the gang (group); what was the appeal of other members in the gang (individuals); when did you first join; what were your reasons for joining?

2.2 What were/are some of the benefits of gang membership?

- Prompt: What does the gang offer you, what can it provide you, what are the good things, etc. Do you get satisfaction/fulfillment from being a gang member?
- Prompt: Why does continued involvement in the gang make sense; what are the reasons why you would stay with the gang? Do you feel that being a gang member is beneficial or rewarding in terms of the future?

### Leaving the Gang and Navigating the Desistance Process

*\*Confirm intention to desist vs. experience in the desistance process.*

#### **Option A: Contemplation / Intention to Desist**

3.1 Can you tell me about the possibility of getting ‘out’ of your gang?

- Prompt: What do you feel are some of the costs, drawbacks, and limitations of your involvement in your gang?
- Prompt: What are some of the reasons (motivations or incentives) why you might consider leaving your gang?

3.2 When would you consider leaving – are there circumstances and/or events in your life that may encourage you to leave?

- Prompt: Did something happen to you that made you reconsider your involvement in the gang (even for an instant)?

*Describe the experience, how you felt, what you did, what you said, what thoughts did you have about it?*

3.3 If you want ‘out’, how might you go about leaving your gang?

- Prompt: Do you need to stop calling/considering yourself ‘gang involved’ or a ‘gang member’? Do you need to cut yourself off from other gang-involved individuals? Do you need to stop participating in gang activities?

- Prompt: Is it completely up to you to leave the gang? Do other things and/or people impact your decision? How do you think others will see you if you decide to leave?
- Prompt: Who would you turn to if you needed help to leave your gang? Do you look for influences in your life that might support you; are there certain people, programs, services, supports, and resources? Are there certain needs to be addressed?

3.4 Do you anticipate challenges (barriers/obstacles) that may impact the process of leaving? If so, what might they be? How might you overcome these challenges? What can be done to assist you to overcome barriers?

### **Option B: Experience in the Desistance Process**

3.1 Can you tell me about your experience of getting ‘out’ of your gang?

- Prompt: What were some of the costs, drawbacks, and limitations of your involvement in your gang?
- Prompt: What were some of the reasons (motivations or incentives) to leave your gang?

3.2 When did you consider leaving – were there circumstances and/or events in your life that encouraged you to leave?

- Prompt: Did something happen to you that made you reconsider your involvement in the gang?

*Describe the experience, how you felt, what you did, what you said, what thoughts did you have about it?*

3.3 How did you go about leaving your gang?

- Prompt: Did you need to stop calling/considering yourself ‘gang involved’ or a ‘gang member’? Did you need to cut yourself off from other gang-involved individuals? Did you need to stop participating in gang activities?
- Prompt: Was it completely up to you to leave the gang? Did other things and/or people impact your decision? How did others see you during/after you decided to leave?
- Prompt: Who did you turn to if you needed help to leave your gang? Did you look for influences in your life that might support you; were there certain people, programs, services, supports, and resources? Were there certain needs to be addressed?

3.4 Did you encounter challenges (barriers/obstacles) that impacted the process of leaving? If so, what were they? How did you overcome these challenges (or not)? What could have been done to assist you to overcome barriers?

3.5 Have you stayed out of the gang and/or away from gang involvement or have you since returned? Why or why not?

### Involvement in the Criminal Justice System

4.1 How do you feel about the place you are now (involved in the criminal justice system)?

- Prompt: What are your experiences of detention/custody and/or probation?

4.2 How do you perceive the interventions that you have been provided as it relates to your gang involvement and/or in your decision to desist from gang involvement?

- Prompt: What types of interventions are available that may assist in promoting desistance from gang involvement post release? E.g., securing accommodations, counselling, education, employment training and placement assistance, substance abuse, mental health, establishing prosocial relationships (family and peers), parenting, recreation opportunities, etc.

4.3 What role do practitioners play in addressing your gang involvement and/or in your decision to desist from gang involvement?

- Prompt: Do you feel that youth justice practitioners influence and/or impact on your decisions to contemplate, initiate, or sustain movement away from gang involvement? If so, how?
  - Personal and professional commitment, advice, interest in well-being, fostering motivation, increasing capacities, providing practical support and opportunities, supporting the development of alternative narratives, encouragement and championing to others, etc.

### Closing Remarks

We are now at the end of the interview.

5.1 Do you have anything else that you would like me to know about your experience as a gang-involved youth in the criminal justice system?

5.2 Are there areas that I did not ask about but that you think are important?

5.3 Do you have any questions or is there anything that you would like to ask me about the research?

I want to thank you for taking part in this interview. I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me and to discuss your life and experiences.



## **Youth Justice Practitioners – Interview Guide**

### Identification

Interviewee:

Date:

Location:

### Disclaimer

As you know, I am conducting research on gang involvement. The purpose of this research study is to look at why and how justice-involved youth leave the gang lifestyle in the city of Ottawa.

I can assure you that the information you provide me will be kept confidential and your anonymity will be protected.

### Demographics

Gender:

Employment status (full-time / part-time):

Organization / Position:

Work experience in youth justice system (number of years):

### Description of Work with Gang-Involved Youth

*If it is alright with you, I would like to start off by talking about the work that you do as it relates to gang-involved youth in the criminal justice system.*

1.1 What is the overall role of your agency/organization as it relates to working with gang-involved youth in the criminal justice system?

- Prompt: What is the mission and mandate of your agency/organization? What are its roles and responsibilities as it relates to working with gang-involved youth?

1.2 What is your specific role as it relates to working with gang-involved youth in the criminal justice system?

- Prompt: What are your objectives and responsibilities in your work with gang-involved youth in the criminal justice system? What type and frequency of contact do you have with gang-involved youth?

1.3 How do you work with youth that you know or suspect to be gang-involved?

- Prompt: How do you know if a youth is gang-involved (formal/informal identification process, assessment tool, etc.)?
- Prompt: Do you take a different approach in working with gang-involved youth? If so, in what way?
- Prompt: Do you offer/refer to programs, services, resources, supports, etc., specifically targeted to address the risks and needs of this population?

### Understanding the ‘Gang’ and Its Associated Activities

*Based on your experience working with gang-involved youth in the criminal justice system...*

2.1 What do you believe the word ‘gang’ means to these justice-involved youth and what do you think it means for them to be a ‘gang member’?

- Prompt: What do you believe are some of the criteria, characteristics and attributes of gangs and their members?
- Prompt: What do you believe is the purpose of the gang? What do you believe are the requirements of membership? What do you think is it like for justice-involved youth to be gang members?
  - Do you believe any of the following exist in the gangs in which justice-involved youth are affiliated: established leaders; a gang name; adopted specific gang symbols, tattoos, burns, scar, colours; initiation rites; regular meetings; specific rules; specific territory; hierarchy; other.

2.2 What types of activities do you believe gangs are involved in / what types of activities do you believe these justice-involved youth gang members are involved in?

- Prompt: What are some experiences that you believe reflect gang affiliation among justice-involved youth?

2.3 What do you believe it means for a justice-involved youth to identify himself as a ‘gang member’?

- Prompt: We often see gang members portrayed in a certain way: youth gangs and their criminal activities are the focus of a significant degree of police activity; they are increasingly presented as a serious problem by the media: and seem to be a growing concern for the public. What do you think about these images? Do these images match how you see justice-involved youth who are in gangs?
- Prompt: How do you think it feels for a justice-involved youth to be labelled as a ‘gang member’? How do you think that this label impacts on their daily lives?
- Prompt: How is the gang label relevant to the work that you do with justice-involved youth?

### Experiences and Benefits of Gang Involvement

*Based on your experience working with gang-involved youth in the criminal justice system...*

3.1 Can you tell me why you think justice-involved youth may want to be involved in a gang?

- Prompt: What do you think is the appeal of the gang (group); what do you think is the appeal of other members in the gang (individuals); what do you believe justice-involved youths’ reasons are for joining a gang?

3.2 What do you think are some of the benefits of gang membership for justice-involved youth?

- Prompt: What do you think the gang offers, what can it provide to justice-involved youth? Do you think that justice-involved youth get satisfaction/fulfillment from being a gang member?
- Prompt: Why do you think continued involvement in the gang makes sense to justice-involved youth; what do you think are the reasons why they would stay with the gang? Do you think that they believe that being a gang member is beneficial or rewarding in terms of their futures?

### Leaving the Gang and Navigating the Desistance Process

*Based on your experience working with gang-involved youth in the criminal justice system...*

4.1 Can you tell me why you think justice-involved youth may consider leaving the gang?

- Prompt: What do you think are some of the costs, drawbacks, and limitations of involvement in the gang for justice-involved youth?

- Prompt: What do you think are some of the reasons (motivations or incentives) for justice-involved youth to leave the gang?

4.2 When do you think a justice-involved youth would consider leaving the gang – do you believe that there are circumstances and/or events in their lives that may encourage them to leave?

4.3 If justice-involved youth want ‘out’, how do you think they might they go about leaving the gang?

- Prompt: Do you think that justice-involved youth need to stop calling/considering themselves as ‘gang involved’ or as ‘gang members’? Do you think they need to cut themselves off from other gang-involved individuals? Do you think they need to stop participating in gang activities?
- Prompt: Do you believe that it is up completely up to justice-involved youth to leave the gang? Do you think that other things and/or people impact their decisions? How do you think others will see them if they decide to leave?
- Prompt: To whom do you think justice-involved youth would turn if they needed help to leave the gang? Do you think that they would look for influences in their lives that might support them; are there certain people, programs, services, supports, and resources? Do you think that they have certain needs that must be addressed?

4.4 Do you think that there are challenges (barriers/obstacles) that may impact the process of leaving the gang for justice-involved youth? If so, what do you think they might be? How do think justice-involved youth may overcome these challenges? What do you think can be done to assist these justice-involved youth to overcome these obstacles?

### Role of the Criminal Justice System

*Based on your experience working with gang-involved youth in the criminal justice system...*

5.1 How do you think that justice-involved youth perceive the interventions that they are provided as it relates to their gang involvement and/or their decision to desist from gang involvement?

- Prompt: What types of interventions are currently available that may assist in promoting desistance from gang involvement post release/post community supervision? E.g., securing accommodations, counselling, education, employment training and placement assistance, substance abuse, mental health, establishing prosocial relationships (family and peers), parenting, recreation opportunities, etc.

5.2 What role do you think that youth justice practitioners play in addressing gang involvement and/or in a justice-involved youth’s decision to desist from gang involvement?

- Prompt: Do you feel that youth justice practitioners influence and/or impact on justice-involved youths' decisions to contemplate, initiate, or sustain movement away from gang involvement? If so, how?
  - Personal and professional commitment, advice, interest in well-being, fostering motivation, increasing capacities, providing practical support and opportunities, supporting the development of alternative narratives, encouragement and championing to others, etc.

### Closing Remarks

We are now at the end of the interview.

6.1 Do you have anything else that you would like to discuss with respect to working with gang-involved youth in the criminal justice system and the desistance process?

6.2 Are there areas that I did not ask about but that you think are important?

6.3 Do you have any questions or is there anything that you would like to ask me about the research?

I want to thank you for taking part in this interview. I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me and to discuss your experience working with gang-involved youth in the criminal justice system.

## **APPENDIX G – CONSENT FORMS FOR FOCUS GROUPS**

Consent Forms for Focus Groups  
with Justice-Involved Youth and Youth Justice Practitioners

**Consent to Participate in a Research Project:  
Focus Group with Justice-Involved Youth**

**Title of Study:** Provincial Asset Mapping and Program Inventory Project for Gang-Involved Youth in Custody/Detention: Case Study of Eastern Ontario Youth Justice Region

Ross Hastings  
Principal Investigator  
Professor, Department of Criminology  
University of Ottawa

Laura Dunbar  
Co-Investigator  
PhD Student, Department of Criminology  
University of Ottawa

**Invitation to Participate:** Ross Hastings and Laura Dunbar from the University of Ottawa have asked me to participate in a research study. They are doing some work with Youth Justice Services as part of a larger project on youth in gangs. This project is funded by the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services.

**Purpose of the Study:** They are interested in the type of supports that are available for gang-involved youth when they leave places like the William E. Hay Centre, Livius Sherwood Detention and Custody Centre, Phoenix House for Youth, Inc., Talitha House, Inc., or Laurencrest Youth Services, Inc. and return to their community.

The researchers are going to look at the different programs, services, supports and resources that help youth in gangs as they go back to the community. They will be talking to youth justice staff, community agencies/organizations, and youth to identify what is helpful and the ways that things could be improved. They want to know what things I think will help me plan for my release and/or what things I need when I am back home.

**Participation:** The researchers are asking me to participate in a 60-minute focus group session sometime between July 4, 2013 and August 31, 2013. In a group setting with other youth, I will be asked to talk about youth gangs. The other youth and I will be asked to reflect on experiences and provide our input on what should be done to address this issue. I understand that they will be audio recording what I say. If I would like to see the transcript for the focus group session, I may contact the researchers.

**Risks:** The researchers will ask me to talk about gang involvement in general. This may bring up some negative or harmful experiences that may make me upset. I know that the researchers will do everything they can to make sure that I don't get upset. I know that I can stop at any time if I feel uncomfortable or if I don't want to participate anymore. I have been given a document with names of people that I can contact if I want to talk to someone or if I want some help.

**Benefits:** By answering the focus group questions, I can give the researchers information about youth gangs. This will help different adults who work with youth in gangs. This research project will let me talk about my experiences and talk about the things that helped me. This research project may also help other youth that are in gangs in the future.

**Confidentiality and Anonymity:** I understand that the information I share is private and my name won't be used. My identity will be a secret but if I talk about new crimes, or about abuse that I have experienced, or that someone else may be hurt, then the researchers cannot keep this a secret. They may have to tell the staff or call the police and/or the Children's Aid Society.

I understand that the content of this focus group session will be used to complete this research project and in printed materials. My comments may also be used in a graduate student's research project. In both cases, everything I say will be kept private.

I understand that a focus group is a group discussion and my identity cannot be kept a secret during the session. However my identity will be protected in printed materials; everything I say will be combined with the comments from the other youth who participate in this focus group session. At the same time, I agree to protect the identity of the other youth who are in this focus group by not talking to others about what we discuss.

**Conservation of Data:** The information collected from this focus group (audio recordings of the session, researchers' notes) will be kept safe – on a locked computer and/or in a locked cabinet in the principal investigator's office at the University of Ottawa. Only Ross Hastings, Laura Dunbar and their research assistant(s) will be able to see and/or hear what was said. The focus group discussion will be kept for 5 years after the research study is done. At the end of 5 years, all of the information will be erased and/or destroyed.

**Compensation:** For participating in this project, I will get \$20.00 (CAD) in cash at the start of the focus group session. I get to keep this money even if I choose not to make any comments. I know that if I am in custody when I do this focus group, that the staff get to decide what happens to my \$20.00 (CAD) until I leave the facility.

**Voluntary Participation:** I understand that I don't have to participate and if I choose to participate, I can stop at any time and/or not make any comments, without anything bad happening to me. If I don't want to participate anymore, I can leave. However, anything that I said before deciding to leave may continue to be used in the final research project.

My participation in this study will not have an effect on any programs and/or services I receive. My prime worker, reintegration counselor and/or probation officer will not be told if I choose to participate or not.



**Acceptance:**

I, (pick a non-identifying name to use during the focus group) \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in this research project by Ross Hastings and Laura Dunbar of the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa.

If I have any questions about the study, I can contact these people.

If I have any questions that I don't feel comfortable asking the researchers, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5.

Telephone: (613) 562-5387

Email: [ethics@uottawa.ca](mailto:ethics@uottawa.ca)

There are two copies of this consent form, I get to keep one.

Researcher's signature confirming that the youth agreed to participate: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Consent to Participate in a Research Project:  
Focus Group with Youth Justice Practitioners**

**Title of Study:** Provincial Asset Mapping and Program Inventory Project for Gang-Involved Youth in Custody/Detention: Case Study of Eastern Ontario Youth Justice Region

Ross Hastings  
Principal Investigator  
Professor, Department of Criminology  
University of Ottawa

Laura Dunbar  
Co-Investigator  
PhD Student, Department of Criminology  
University of Ottawa

**Invitation to Participate:** I am invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Ross Hastings and Laura Dunbar. This project is funded by the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services, Youth Justice Services Division and represents one component of a larger Provincial Asset Mapping and Program Inventory Project, part of the Ministry's *Strategy to Support Gang-Involved Youth in Custody/Detention*.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of the study is to map the community programs and supports for gang-involved youth justice clients in the in the Eastern Ontario youth justice region who are transitioning from custody/detention settings and/or those being supervised in the community. This will involve identifying and compiling information on the interventions currently available for gang-involved youth to enable the development of an electronic inventory. Additionally to map assets, it will involve the engagement of youth justice staff, community youth service providers, and gang-involved youth to identify local strengths and speak to areas that require further development.

**Participation:** My participation will consist essentially of one focus group session, lasting no more than one hour, during which I will be asked to reflect on my professional relationship with gang-involved youth and my role in their lives. I will be asked to discuss their decision-making processes, how they engage with programs, services and resources, and what challenges they face. The focus group will be scheduled at a location and time convenient to participants between July 4, 2013 and August 31, 2013. I understand that the session will be audio recorded. If I would like to see the transcript for the focus group session, I may contact the principal investigator or con-investigator.

**Benefits:** My participation in this study will provide information about the region's capacity to address the complex issues related to gang involvement and will provide youth justice staff and youth service providers with an inventory and asset map of local programs, services and resources available for gang-involved youth, with the aim of supporting the rehabilitation and

reintegration of this population and increasing staff capacity to work with them. For youth justice staff, this research project will help improve the identification of interventions for gang-involved youth to include in a reintegration plan, and to make referrals to the types of supports that are perceived by gang-involved youth to help them after they are released. For youth service providers, this research project may offer agencies and organizations the opportunity to reflect on their work with gang-involved youth - acknowledging and valuing existing resources and allowing them to build on this foundation when undertaking formal and/or informal planning processes and partnerships. This research project will contribute to the advancement of knowledge on gang involvement and recommendations emerging from this study will help guide the development of future policy and program initiatives to support gang-involved youth in the criminal justice system.

**Confidentiality and Anonymity:** I have received assurance from the researchers that the information I will share in this focus group will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the content of the session will be used for the purposes of completing this research project and related publishing. Additionally, the co-investigator may use this content for the purposes of completing a PhD dissertation in Criminology. In both instances, my confidentiality will be protected. I understand that the institution/organization to which I belong (if applicable) may appear in a list of participants in an appendix in order to demonstrate the scope/representativeness of the sample and to add to the legitimacy of the findings.

I am aware that due to the nature of focus group research, ensuring the anonymity of participants is a particular issue - the protection of my identity cannot be guaranteed within the immediate focus group setting. However, I have received assurance from the researchers that my anonymity will be maintained in the publication of research results as all information gathered from the focus group sessions will be consolidated and not attributed to the individual contributors. Further, as a focus group participant, I agree to ensure the confidentiality of the information discussed and to protect the identity of the other participants.

**Conservation of Data:** The data collected from this focus group (digital audio recording of session, electronic transcripts, written notes) will be kept in a secure manner – stored on the principal investigator’s computer which has anti-virus software installed and a password to protect information from unauthorized access, loss or modification and/or in a locked cabinet in the principal investigator’s office at the University of Ottawa. Only the principal investigator, co-investigator and research assistant(s) will have access to this data. All data will be conserved in this manner for a period of 5 years after publication of this research study. At the end of this storage period, the audio recordings and electronic transcripts will be deleted and any written documents will be shredded.

**Voluntary Participation:** I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the research study at any time, without suffering any negative consequences. Given that focus group data are highly dependent on the overall group discussion, if I choose to withdraw, my contributions up to the point of withdrawal may continue to be used in the final research project.

**Acceptance:**

I, \_\_\_\_\_,  
agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Ross Hastings and Laura Dunbar of  
the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the principal investigator or the co-  
investigator.

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.

Telephone: (613) 562-5387

Email: [ethics@uottawa.ca](mailto:ethics@uottawa.ca)

There are two copies of this consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX H – CONSENT FORMS FOR INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS**

Consent Forms for Individual Interviews  
with Justice-Involved Youth and Youth Justice Practitioners

**Consent to Participate in a Research Project:  
Interview with Justice-Involved Youth**

**Title of the Study:** Getting Out – Examining Desistance Among Gang-Involved Youth in the Criminal Justice System

Laura Dunbar  
Researcher  
PhD Candidate (ABD), Department of Criminology  
University of Ottawa

Patrice Corriveau  
Thesis Supervisor  
Professor, Department of Criminology  
University of Ottawa

**Invitation to Participate:** The researcher Laura Dunbar and her thesis supervisor Patrice Corriveau from the University of Ottawa have asked me to participate in a research project.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research project is to look at why and how justice-involved youth leave the gang lifestyle in the city of Ottawa. The researcher will be talking to youth at the William E. Hay Centre or Sherwood Detention and Custody Centre and/or youth who are supervised by a probation officer in the community. The focus of this research project is on the personal experiences of justice-involved youth. The objective is to see how several factors (such as young people's beliefs, attitudes and behaviours concerning the gang and/or elements in young people's environment such as life events and relationships) may affect how justice-involved youth make decisions and/or what they see as possible way(s) out of the gang.

**Participation:** The researcher is asking me to participate in one 60-minute interview sometime between **January 1 and April 30, 2016**. I will be asked to talk about how I understand the 'gang' and its activities, why I might consider leaving the gang (or not) and how/when I might make a decision to leave. I will also be asked about how I might begin to leave the gang (including what things might limit me and what things might help me). I understand that the researcher will be audio recording what I say, but I can tell her not to if I like. If I wish to review my transcript, I may contact the researcher. I will have until **May 31, 2016** to provide her with any changes. The document will be printed and placed in a sealed envelope to be delivered to me in person or if I am in detention/custody it will be provided to someone in charge at my youth justice facility who has agreed to deliver it to me in a sealed envelope.

**Risks:** The researcher will ask me to talk about my gang involvement and possibilities of leaving the gang. This may bring up some negative or harmful experiences that may make me upset. I know that the researcher will do everything she can to make sure that I don't get upset. I know that I can stop the interview at any time if I feel uncomfortable or if I don't want to answer any

more questions. I have been given a document with names of people that I can contact if I want to talk to someone or if I want some help.

**Benefits:** By answering the interview questions, I can give the researcher information about youth gangs including why and how justice-involved youth might consider leaving the gang and what can be done to support them. This will help different individuals in the criminal justice system who work with youth in gangs. This research project will let me talk about my own experiences and talk about the different factors that influence my decisions and the supports that might help me. This research project may also help other youth that are in gangs in the future (for example by helping to improve current gang exit programming).

**Confidentiality and Anonymity:** I understand that my answers are private and my name won't be used. My identity will be a secret but if I tell the researcher about new crimes (for which I have not been charged), or about abuse that I have experienced (physical, sexual verbal or neglect), or that someone else may be hurt (threats or acts of violence), then the researcher cannot keep this a secret. She has a duty to report and will have to tell the staff or call the police and/or the Children's Aid Society. I understand that my answers will be used to complete this research project, which is part of the researcher's PhD thesis, and in any printed materials that are part of it. My answers will be kept private. My identity will be protected, as all my answers from the interview will be combined with the answers from the other justice-involved youth who participate in this research project.

**Conservation of Data:** The information collected from my interview (audio recordings of my answers, researcher's notes) will be kept safe – password protected files on the researcher's locked computer and/or in a locked cabinet in her thesis supervisor's office at the University of Ottawa. Only Laura Dunbar and Patrice Corriveau will be able to see and/or hear what I said. This information will be kept for 5 years after the research project is done. At the end of 5 years, all of the information will be erased and/or destroyed.

**Compensation:** For participating in this research project, I will get \$20.00 (CAD) in cash at the start of my interview. I get to keep this money even if I choose not to answer any questions. I know that if I am in detention/custody when I participate in this interview, that the staff get to decide what happens to my \$20.00 (CAD) until I leave the facility.

**Voluntary Participation:** I understand that I don't have to participate and if I choose to participate, I can stop at any time and/or not answer any questions, without anything bad happening to me. If I don't want to participate anymore, all my answers will be erased and won't be used in this research project. My participation in this research project will not have an effect on any programs and/or services I receive. My prime worker, reintegration counselor and/or probation officer will not be told if I choose to participate or not.

**Acceptance:** I, \_\_\_\_\_  
(pick a non-identifying name to use during the interview), agree to participate in this research project by Laura Dunbar of the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa, which is supervised by Patrice Corriveau.

\_\_\_ I agree to the interview being audio recorded.

\_\_\_ I don't want the interview to be audio recorded.

If I have any questions about the research project, I can contact the researcher or her thesis supervisor.

If I have any questions that I don't feel comfortable asking the researcher or her thesis supervisor, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5.

Telephone: (613) 562-5387

Email: [ethics@uottawa.ca](mailto:ethics@uottawa.ca)

There are two copies of this consent form, I get to keep one.

Researcher's signature confirming that the justice-involved youth agreed to participate:

\_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



**Consent to Participate in a Research Project:  
Interview with Youth Justice Practitioners**

**Title of the Study:** Getting Out – Examining Desistance Among Gang-Involved Youth in the Criminal Justice System

Laura Dunbar  
Researcher  
PhD Candidate (ABD), Department of Criminology  
University of Ottawa

Patrice Corriveau  
Thesis Supervisor  
Professor, Department of Criminology  
University of Ottawa

**Invitation to Participate:** I am invited to participate in the abovementioned research project conducted by Laura Dunbar and her supervisor Patrice Corriveau at the University of Ottawa.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research project is to examine desistance from gang involvement among justice-involved youth (those in residence in an open or secure detention/custody facility and/or who are supervised by a probation officer in the community) in the city of Ottawa. The focus of this research project is on the subjective experiences of justice-involved youth as it relates to the process of desistance from gang involvement. The objective is to examine how several factors (elements internal to the individual and/or in the external environment), and their interactions, may influence individuals' decision-making processes and/or have an impact on the perceived availability of pathway(s) out of the gang.

**Participation:** My participation will consist essentially of one interview, lasting no more than one hour, during which I will be asked to reflect on my knowledge of and experience working with gang-involved youth in the criminal justice system. I will be asked to offer my perspective on how justice-involved youth understand the 'gang' and its associated activities, why they consider leaving the gang (or not) and how/when they make a decision to leave. I will also be asked how justice-involved youth begin to engage in and navigate the process of desistance and in particular what hinders and what helps them in this process. The interview will be scheduled at a location and time convenient to participants between **March 1 and April 30, 2016**. I understand that the interview will be audio recorded. If I wish to review my transcript, I may contact the researcher. I will have until **May 31, 2016** to provide revisions or clarifications. The document will be printed and placed in a sealed envelope to be delivered to me in person.

**Benefits:** In identifying the meaning that I perceive justice-involved youth to attribute to the gang and the desistance process, my participation in this research project will provide information about why and how desistance from gang involvement occurs, and what can be done to support it (e.g., how to improve existing gang interventions and to assist in the development of appropriate exit strategies). As a youth justice practitioner, this research project may help me to better understand the needs of my gang-involved youth justice clients and may also help me to

improve the reintegration planning process (e.g., to make better referrals to the types of social supports that are perceived by justice-involved youth to assist them in leaving the gang). This research project will contribute to the advancement of knowledge on desistance from gang involvement and recommendations emerging from it will hopefully help guide the development of future policy and program initiatives to support gang-involved youth in the criminal justice system.

**Confidentiality and Anonymity:** I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share in this interview will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the content of my interview will be used for the purposes of completing this research project, which is part of the researcher's PhD thesis, and any related publishing. My confidentiality will be protected. I understand that the organization to which I belong may appear in a list of participants in an appendix in order to demonstrate the scope/representativeness of the sample and to add to the legitimacy of the findings. However, my name and position will be omitted from this list and in this way my anonymity will be protected. In addition, my anonymity will be protected, as all information gathered from the interviews will be consolidated and not attributed to the individual contributors.

**Conservation of Data:** The data collected from this interview (digital audio recordings of interviews, electronic transcripts, researcher's notes) will be kept in a secure manner – password protected files stored on the researcher's computer which has anti-virus software installed and a password to protect information from unauthorized access, loss or modification and/or in a locked cabinet in her thesis supervisor's office at the University of Ottawa. Only the researcher and her thesis supervisor will have access to this data. All data will be conserved in this manner for a period of 5 years after publication of this research project. At the end of this storage period, the audio recordings and electronic transcripts will be deleted and any written documents will be shredded.

**Voluntary Participation:** I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the research project at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data collected up to the time of withdrawal will be destroyed and not considered in the final research project.

**Acceptance:** I, \_\_\_\_\_,  
agree to participate in the above research project conducted by Laura Dunbar of the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa, which is under the supervision of Patrice Corriveau.

\_\_\_ I agree to the interview being audio recorded.

\_\_\_ I don't want the interview to be audio recorded.

If I have any questions about the research project, I may contact the researcher or her thesis supervisor.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this research project, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5.

Telephone: (613) 562-5387

Email: [ethics@uottawa.ca](mailto:ethics@uottawa.ca)

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX I – RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE**

General Recommendations to Inform the Future Development of Prevention, Intervention,  
and Desistance Initiatives for At-Risk and Gang-Involved Youth

## **General Recommendations for Prevention, Intervention, and Desistance Initiatives**

The following general recommendations may be of interest to policymakers and practitioners to inform the future development of initiatives to prevent gang involvement among at-risk youth, to intervene with active gang members, and to support desistance by helping motivated gang members to pursue alternatives to gang life.

These recommendations are by no means exhaustive, as there are many considerations in the development of strategies to better address the needs of at-risk and gang-involved youth, but they may serve as a point of departure for further discussion.

- Explore the development and implementation of trauma-informed supports for at-risk youth, gang-involved youth, and former gang members that are designed to address the consequences of trauma and to facilitate healing.
- Identify and implement a continuum of family-focused supports for at-risk youth and gang-involved youth that are context-specific and gang-sensitive.
- Explore the effectiveness of different types of informal supports, such as community-based mentorship and sports-based programs, in the development of future prevention and intervention initiatives to address youth gang involvement.
- Explore new options for secure and independent housing and meaningful employment-based initiatives that address barriers to employment, both of which may support gang-involved and formerly incarcerated youth in their transition to a prosocial lifestyle.
- Explore the effectiveness of former gang-affiliated individuals and reformed gang members acting as mentors, in conjunction with other formal supports, in interventions for gang-involved youth. Explore options for engaging this group in knowledge dissemination and awareness raising activities on the myths and consequences of gang life for at-risk youth.
- Identify key moments (e.g., visit to an emergency room following a violent incident, release from youth justice facility to the community) as opportunities to intervene in the lives of gang-involved youth by utilizing comprehensive case management services and a wraparound care model with appropriate supports.
- Explore options to address the penalties of labelling and barriers to participation in society (e.g., establish criteria for removing individuals from police databases, removing criminal record restrictions on service access). Explore more options for community integration practices that focus on identifying opportunities for individuals to make positive contributions to the community (e.g., education, leadership, mentorship, community service activities) and that acknowledge and recognize gang-involved youths' efforts at reform.

- Explore the development and implementation of desistance initiatives that shift the focus from ‘individual’ level issues to wider ‘social’ level issues. This requires tackling systemic and widespread social problems through a coordinated approach.
- Explore the development and implementation of desistance initiatives that focus on incremental behaviour change over time. Employ measures examining improvements in social determinants of health and not those that focus exclusively on gang status and a reduction in gang-related activities.
- Explore the development and implementation of a comprehensive, multi-systemic, multi-modal approach to address desistance from gang involvement. A comprehensive strategy should include intervention at three levels: ‘individual’, ‘social’, and ‘structural’ and the implementation of corresponding evidence-informed initiatives. It should involve communication and collaboration between various sectors working together. It should accommodate issues of variability and diversity by considering multiple factors in the lives of gang-involved youth in the development and implementation of individualized interventions. Finally, to put a comprehensive strategy into practice, the following factors should be considered in the development process: planning, implementation, evaluation, and coordination.