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**EXITING GANGS:
TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF PROCESSES AND BEST
PRACTICE**

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

In 2010, the Government of Alberta developed the *Alberta Gang Reduction Strategy*, “a comprehensive, strategic approach to addressing the challenge of gangs in Alberta through the efficient use of existing resources and support of community partnerships” (Government of Alberta, 2010, p. 5). The strategy was developed in response to the increasing presence of gangs and gang violence in Alberta. The goals of the Gang Reduction Strategy are twofold (Government of Alberta, 2010, p. 8):

- (1) To reduce gang related crime and violence in Alberta; and
- (2) To strengthen efforts to develop an integrated, comprehensive, and sustainable approach to gang suppression.

The strategy lists a number of awareness, prevention, and intervention elements to meet these goals, one of which is to develop exit strategies for individuals wishing to exit gangs. The strategy recognizes that few intervention programs to support gang disengagement exist in Alberta, particularly those with a significant gang presence. The strategy recommends that intervention programs be designed for community based and correctional (custodial, community supervision) settings to ensure that gang members have numerous opportunities to disengage. Importantly, the strategy highlights the importance of developing intervention strategies in Aboriginal communities to provide alternatives to gang membership for Aboriginal people (Government of Alberta, 2010). As the Government of Alberta moves forward with its Gang Reduction Strategy, and specifically, the development of intervention and exit strategies for gang members, it is important to examine known best practices

Gangs in Alberta

Though there are few recent and comprehensive studies of gangs in Alberta, intermittent statistics made available in the past decade point to a growing problem in the province. The 2002 Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs reported the emergence of youth gangs in Calgary dating back to 1985 (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2003), though major organized crime groups have a longer history. The 2010 Report on Organized Crime (Criminal Intelligence Service of Canada, 2010) reports that the number of street gangs identified by Canadian law enforcement has increased since 2006, not only in cities but in correctional facilities, on reserves, and in rural communities. More recently, Statistics Canada (2008) reported that in 2008, Calgary had the highest per capita rate of gang-related in homicides among the 10 largest metropolitan areas in Canada.

Though attempts have been throughout the country to study the composition of gangs, it is important to note that gang composition must be understood in a local context so that appropriate interventions can be developed. Though Gordon’s (1993) study of gang members in

British Columbia suggests that gangs in that province are largely composed of Canadian-born individuals of European descent and non-Canadian born individuals, Totten (2008) indicates that gang composition likely varies across the country. The 2005/2006 Annual Report of the Criminal Intelligence Service of Alberta (CISA) revealed the presence of major motorcycle gangs, as well as Asian-based organized crime groups, Aboriginal organized crime groups and street gangs, and some European organized crime groups (Criminal Intelligence Service of Alberta, 2006). The CISA also reported that gangs and organized crime groups are present throughout the province, including urban and rural communities and on reserves. The major activities of these groups relate to the drug trade and resulting violence between groups. The CISA also reports gang-related activity in correctional institutions, which often transfers to the communities once inmates are released. The 2009/2010 Annual Report of the Alberta Law Enforcement Response Teams (ALERT) confirms the continued presence of organized crime groups and street gangs in communities across the province (Alberta Law Enforcement Teams, 2010). It is evident from the information available that organized crime groups and gangs are active throughout the province, with the nature of the activity varying by community.

Defining and Classifying “Gangs”

The term “gang” presents ongoing issues in the literature given the range of definitions that have been used by academics, government, law enforcement, and corrections. There is considerable discussion in the literature regarding how “gangs” are defined (e.g., Aldridge, Shute, Ralphs, Medina, 2011; Goodwill, 2009; Gordon, 2000; Schram & Gaines, 2007; Spergel, 1992). As Gordon (2000) observes, groups are often termed “gangs” even though members do not define themselves as such. “Gang” broadly encompasses a diverse set of criminal groups – from low level street gangs to highly organized criminal organizations. The *Criminal Code of Canada* (Section 467.1) adopts a broad definition of organized criminal groups, referring to “criminal organizations” as a group who is composed of at least three people and has the purpose of committing serious offences that may result in direct or indirect material benefit to the members or group as a whole (Criminal Code, 1985). As documented in the 2010 Report on Organized Crime by the Criminal Intelligence Service of Canada, perceptions of criminal organizations by law enforcement has shifted over the past 25 years from a view of highly organized, hierarchical, culturally homogenous groups to one that includes more loosely structured, heterogeneous groups.

Canadian academics studying gangs have offered a number of classifications to understand the complexion of the issue. Mellor, MacRae, Pauls and Hornick (2005) and Gordon (2000) offer multi-dimensional frameworks that address a number of key aspects: activity, organization, motivation to join, recruitment, and importantly, exit strategies. Chettleburgh (2007) also notes that leadership, common colours, territory, and title also characteristics to consider in the classification of Canadian gangs. The typologies define a broad range of groups, from non-criminal friendship groups, to street gangs, to structured criminal organizations. Mellor and colleagues (2005) observe that the more criminally involved the gang, the more dangerous and difficult it is to exit.

As stressed by Gordon (2000), “analysts and policy-makers should view the phenomenon along a continuum ranging from groups of friends who spend time together and who

occasionally get into trouble, to more serious, organized criminal groups and gangs” (p. 44). However, Spergel (1992) cautions that local social and policy interventions must “define as precisely and consensually as possible what the phenomena are.” (p. 126). Schram and Gaines (2007) argue that a combination of self-report and criminal report provides the most accurate definition of gang membership in a community.

Arguably, when considering intervention strategies, it is important to consider a broad definition given the individual’s connection to the group may have greater implications for exit than how the individual is externally defined as a member. Consideration of “gang membership” must involve an understanding how the group meets the particular needs for their members – and ultimately how this poses challenges for disengagement. However, it is also vital that groups are not improperly or inaccurately targeted as “criminal organizations,” given the social implications in the community and potential legal ramifications. For the purpose of this review, a “gang” will be considered generally to include criminal groups and organizations, street gangs, and youth gangs.

Gang Interventions

As discussed by the National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC) (2007), responses to gangs generally fall into three categories: prevention, intervention, and suppression. Prevention programs “typically focus on discouraging children and youth, especially those at high risk, from joining gangs” (NCPC, 2007, p. 2). On the other hand, intervention programs “generally target active gangs and gang members,” while suppression programs “usually involve specialized gang units (typically led by the police and/or criminal prosecutors) that target gang members and their illicit activities through aggressive enforcement of laws” (NCPC, 2007). Naturally, it is optimal for community strategies to focus efforts on child development, decreasing risk factors and promoting protective factors from a young age in order to prevent gang membership. As discussed by Totten (2008), “it is less costly and more effective to prevent youth from joining gangs than it is to support a member to exit a gang” (p. 8). However, the fact remains that current gang activity is facilitated by membership, and opportunities to disengage gang members must also be explored and addressed to reduce the impact of gangs in communities.

Often referred to as tertiary prevention programs, strategies for gang exit often involve two elements: an understanding of the level of difficulty in disengaging from a gang, and a strategy for implementing an exit plan (Mellor et al., 2005). As Totten elaborates in his examination of youth gang programs in Canada, “tertiary prevention targets gang members and recruits directly to rehabilitate or incapacitate [them], address the needs of victims, and provide exit strategies and support to leave and remain out of gangs” (Totten, 2008, p. 8). Mellor and colleagues (2005) stress that exiting a “gang” often involves a difficult process, regardless of the level of organization, involvement, and criminal activities. However, for more organized crime groups, “there is often the need for relocation, police protection for the ex-gang member as well as their family, and a multifaceted support network of police, community, and family support” (Mellor et al., 2005: 11).

Though there are a number of promising prevention and suppression strategies, this review will focus specifically on tertiary prevention, intervention, and exit initiatives – programs that specifically target gang members who are exiting their criminal organizations.

1.2 Purpose of the Report

Gang exit strategies have been identified in the Alberta's Gang Reduction Strategy as a key activity in reducing gang related violent crime and violence in the province. Given the presence of gangs in Alberta and the identified need to develop strategies to support disengagement, it is important to ensure the effectiveness of future initiatives. Therefore, the purpose of this report is to explore the available literature on gang exit. Specifically, this review will address the following research questions:

- (1) What factors lead to gang membership or affiliation?
- (2) What factors and conditions lead to a gang member to want to disengage from a gang?
- (3) What social and cognitive processes define disengagement?
- (4) What services and supports do gang members require to effectively exit a gang?
- (5) What are some examples of best practice models in supporting gang members' disengagement?

1.3 Methodology

This review examined the available academic and grey literature related to gang exit and disengagement. Specifically, three general bodies of literature were explored. First, to facilitate an understanding of how and why individuals exit gangs, a brief review of risk factors for gang *entry* was conducted. Second, the literature discussing the processes, theories, and factors related to gang disengagement was examined. Third, to determine what is working among available initiatives, best practice programs were sought. As observed by the National Crime Prevention Centre (2007), best practice community responses to gangs generally incorporate elements of prevention, intervention, and suppression. However, this review focused specifically on programs or aspects of strategies that have the specific objective of facilitating gang exit. Further, though efforts were made to understand gang exit in a Canadian context, the review drew on available literature on gang intervention from the United States.

2.0 UNDERSTANDING GANG ENTRY

2.1 Background

Though the main purpose of this report is to examine gang exit processes and strategies, it is important to contextualize this within a broader understanding of gang involvement. The following chapter will provide a brief overview of the literature on gang entry.

2.2 Theoretical Explanations

In an attempt to understand why individuals join gangs, researchers have drawn on a number of theoretical perspectives from sociology, criminology, and psychological (e.g., Heath, 2000; Herrmann, McWhirter, & Sispas-Herrmann, 1997; Howell & Egley, 2005; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Spergel, 1992). Spergel's (1992) review of nine gang studies posits that generally, there are two sets of theories used to explain the gang involvement. The first is related to poverty and opportunity, focusing on unavailability of legitimate employment and opportunities and the appeal of the economic opportunities that criminal groups may provide. This is reminiscent of Merton's classic strain theory, which posits that the failure of an individual to find a legitimate means to meet basic needs and goals results in strain, which in some cases is addressed via illegitimate activities such as criminal activity. The gang may provide the social and economic means to alleviate this strain. Goodwill (2009) argues that strain theory is effective in explaining the relationship between the social structural effects of colonization and gang membership for Aboriginal people. The second perspective discussed by Spergel (1992) is the classic theory of social disorganization, which posits that social change and the resultant disorganization lead to a weakening social controls and the need for alternatives to mainstream sources of socialization. These alternatives are found in gangs. While these two perspectives were predominant in the literature at the time of his review, Spergel (1992) concluded that neither alone effectively explains gang phenomenon in its entirety.

Forms of Hirschi's social control theory have also been used to explain gang membership. Social control theory poses that "abnormal or defective relationships can lead to a lack of emotional attachment to both family and society" (Heath, 2000:18). The lack of attachment to family and community leads to the failure of pro-social values and norms being transferred to youth. The lack of emotional attachment leads to a lack of care and concern for others – and to the tendency to commit deviant acts. Gang membership may be a conduit for this type of activity.

Howell and Egley (2005) examine gang involvement from a developmental perspective, offering that certain risk factors present at particular stages of development create particular pathways to gang involvement. This perspective, developed from Thornberry's and Krohn's (2001) interaction theory, incorporates both structural variables and more discreet process-related variables – social, familial, and community factors (e.g., poverty, discrimination, family violence, exposure to violent crime in the community) influence gang membership indirectly by negatively affecting pro-social bonds, and increasing vulnerability to anti-social influences. Testing of this model has revealed considerable support.

Other theories used in the literature view gang membership in terms of psychological and cultural processes. Herrmann and colleagues (1997), in their study of juvenile gang involvement, examine gang membership from the perspective of self concept, arguing that low self esteem and poor self concept is alleviated in the emotional bonds created in gang membership. However, Herrmann et al's (1997) examination of different dimensions of self-concept (e.g., self esteem, self perception) revealed that though dimensions of low self-concept are significantly related to high gang involvement, it does not completely explain why individuals become involved in gangs. Klein and Maxson (2006) adopt a social-cultural approach, demonstrating that an "oppositional culture" may form among gang members who are collectively marginalized or victimized – which proves very difficult for intervention strategies. Scott and Ruddell (2011), in their examination of female gang membership, offer a psychological explanation for gang membership, considering status, peer relationships, a sense of community, social support, and acquisition of material needs. They also highlight feminist perspectives, explaining gang membership as empowering, a means to resist dominant stereotypes, and as a safe refuge from often abusive circumstances.

Existing theoretical perspectives offer diverse explanations for gang entry. Arguably, an integrated approach that incorporates structural, social, and individual processes is likely most effective in understanding gang entry. Ultimately, the understanding created through the lens of an integrated theoretical approach will be most effective in developing proper strategies for gang disengagement.

2.3 Risk Factors for Gang Entry

As observed by Howell & Egley (2005), "knowledge of risk factors for youth gang membership has grown exponentially during the past decade" (p. 334). Generally, risk factors for delinquency have been considered as belonging to five general domains: individual, family, peer, school, and community (Howell & Egley, 2005; Maxson, Whitlock, & Klein, 1998). When considered in the context of gangs, risk factors have shown to span all five risk factor domains, have a cumulative effect, and enhance the likelihood of gang membership if present in multiple development domains (Howell & Egley, 2005; Maxson et al., 1998). It is important to note that risk factors do not exist in isolation, but rather, interact and reinforce one another over time. Further, Maxson and colleagues (1998) caution that many of the risk factors for gang involvement are also effects of or reinforced by gang membership.

Factors in the individual domain relate to demographic characteristics, behaviour, mental health, and attitude. Studies have shown that indicators of low self concept (e.g., self esteem, competence) or delinquent/trouble self concept are significantly related to gang involvement, particularly among youth (Herrmann et al., 1997; Maxson et al., 1998). Gangs also fulfill a need for respect not found in pro-social circles (Ward & Bakhuis, 2010). Totten and Dunn's (2011) evaluation of a gang intervention program showed that nearly all program participants had indicators of clinical depression. Maxson and colleagues' (1998) study of street gangs revealed that gang members often experience more stressful life events and perceive more barriers to future success. Negative attitude toward the justice system (Scott & Ruddell, 2011; Ward & Bakhuis, 2010) and mainstream social institutions (Bracken, Deane, & Morrissette, 2009; Scott

& Ruddell, 2011) is also a common risk factor. This contributes to the criminal profile of gang behaviour, with research demonstrating that gang members are more likely to be involved in more serious and violent crime (Scott & Ruddell, 2011; Totten & Dunn, 2011) and to have longer criminal careers (Scott & Ruddell, 2011).

The relationship between gang membership and substance abuse is complex. Often individuals are lured to the gang by economic opportunities associated with dealing drugs, and may ultimately become addicted and continue to work for the gang in this capacity to support their habit (Katz, Webb, & Decker, 2005). Others may join the gang as a way to support their existing addiction (Ward & Bakhuis, 2010). Either way, gang members are more likely to demonstrate addiction and substance abuse issues that are often started and/or reinforced by gang membership (Katz et al., 2005; Scott & Ruddell, 2011; Totten & Dunn, 2011).

Gang involvement also varies by individual characteristics such as gender and ethnicity. Though there are few comprehensive demographic studies of gang membership in Canada, Totten's (2008) examination of youth gangs suggests that a majority are male (Totten, 2008); consequently, research on risk factors for gang involvement and activities tends to focus on males. However, available literature from Canada and the United States suggests that gang membership among females is increasing (Scott & Ruddell, 2011). With regard to ethnicity, risk for gang involvement is particularly high among Aboriginal people (Grekul & Laroque, 2011). As reported by Totten (2008), 22% of youth gang members in Canada are Aboriginal. Further, though the Canadian research is limited, it has been suggested that immigrants and ethnic minorities are particularly vulnerable to gang membership (Evans & Sawdon, 2004; Gordon, 2000; Ngo, 2010)

Family factors include those related to consistency, attachment, violence, poverty, abuse, or exposure to substance abuse. Gang members often model substance abuse and criminal behaviour in their families (Totten & Dunn, 2011; Ward & Bakhuis, 2010). Studies have shown that individuals are more susceptible to gang involvement when they have criminal family members, and particularly if they have gang-involved family members (Aldridge et al., 2011; Maxson et al., 1998; Totten & Dunn, 2011; Ward & Bakhuis, 2010). Hoang (2007) suggests that female gang involvement may have a greater long-term impact than male gang involvement with respect to intergenerational influence, given women are often the nurturers of children. Inconsistent monitoring and supervision have also been linked to gang membership (Aldridge et al., 2011). When families fail in their role to provide support and stability, individuals may feel alienated, finding support in gangs (Spergel, 1992; Ward & Bakhuis, 2010). Sexual abuse has also been identified as a path to gang membership (Totten & Dunn, 2011).

Peer factors are of particular importance, given the peer-related attraction to gangs. Peer factors relate to the presence of anti-social peers and the absence of opportunities for exposure to pro-social peers and activities. By definition, gang members socialize with negative peers and often get in to trouble with their friends (Maxson et al., 1998; Scott & Ruddell, 2011). However, the cohesive, supportive nature of a gang often addresses feelings of isolation and a need for belonging (Badger & Albright, 2003; Spergel, 1992; Vigil, 1988; Ward & Bakhuis, 2010). As discussed by Hastings, Dunbar and Bania (2011), a key feature of criminal youth organizations is that it is a collective solution to shared issues. Substance abuse is often a source of cohesion

among the group (Scott & Ruddell, 2011; Spergel, 1992). Spergel (1992) observed in his examination of nine studies on youth gangs in America that the cohesive nature of the gang is encouraged with collective activities as well as substance use: “Drinking and drugs act as a social lubricant to facilitate the broadening, deepening, and solidifying of group affiliation and cohesiveness” (p. 131). However, Maxson and colleagues’ (1998) study of street gang youth revealed that gang members are more likely to denigrate their friendship group, and acknowledge that they are negative influences. This low attachment to their peers may provide opportunity for intervention.

Factors in the education/employment domain often relate to school attachment, educational and occupational opportunity, aptitude, and economic factors. Poor school opportunities and a lack of pro-social opportunities in schools were found by Ward and Bakhuis (2010) to be common school-related issues among a sample of children exposed to gang violence and professionals who work with gang members. Badger and Albright’s (2003) study of Aboriginal youth suggested a lack of attachment to school one reason why youth enter gangs. Maxson and colleagues (1998) found that street gang members were more likely to miss school and have negative perceptions of teachers. In Evans and Sawdon’s (2004) study of a gang exit strategy in Toronto, the youth in the program were shown to have multiple barriers to employment, including low educational attainment, negative perceptions by community and employers, poor employability, and school failures.

Community factors may include exposure to criminal activity, community disorganization, and lack of community attachment. A number of studies have found that gang members had previously been exposed to high levels of gang violence in their neighbourhood or community, as well as the greater presence and accessibility of guns (Maxson et al., 1998; Scott & Ruddell, 2011; Ward & Bakhuis, 2010). Badger and Albright (2003) suggest that feelings of disenfranchisement from the community may lead Aboriginal youth to join gangs.

In addition to risk factors in these five domains, it has been argued that foundations to gang membership often lie in the presence of social structural issues, such as colonization or discrimination. Ward and Bakhuis’ (2010) study of gang membership in South Africa revealed that the apartheid produced structural inequalities and poverty, which have been shown to be roots of gang involvement. In Canada, colonization and the residential school legacy have been discussed as the roots of Aboriginal gang involvement (Bracken et al., 2009; Grekul & Laroque, 2011).

Variations in Gang Entry

A general discussion of the risk factors for gang entry must be qualified by a brief discussion of the variation in risk factors by gender, ethnicity, and gang type. Gordon (2000), in the Greater Vancouver Gang Study, distinguishes risk for gang involvement by three different criminal groups. For those who join wanna-be groups, loosely structured groups of young people who engage in impulsive criminal activity, the group meets unmet emotional needs – a sense of belonging, a need for family, etc. Members of wanna-be groups tend to be young (age 16-17), Canadian-born and come from difficult family situations, becoming seriously involved with crime and displaying behavioural and school problems. Gordon (2000) distinguishes

wanna-be groups from street gangs, the members of which tend to be involved primarily due to peer group attraction. Street gang members are often older (average age 18) and of similar ethnic background, feeling marginalized due to poverty, discrimination, and unpleasant family lives (e.g., abuse, parental absence, violence). Street gang members often have low educational attainment. Finally, criminal business organizations tend to have adult membership, attracting members with the appeal of a social and cultural bond, addressing feelings of ethnic and cultural marginality. Members tend to be more educated and less economically disadvantaged due to the lucrative nature of the organization. Criminal business organizations often provide economic opportunities that new Canadians struggle finding due to cultural, social, and language barriers. It is the loss of income experienced that makes it difficult for members to leave these- groups.

Factors and processes specific to female gang membership are also worth noting. Female gang members tend to join gangs later and leave earlier (Spergel, 1992), display lesser bonds to the group, and play a secondary role (Spergel, 1992; Totten, 2008). In addition, they are often sexually exploited and treated poorly (Grekul & LaRoque, 2011; Hoang, 2007; Scott & Ruddell, 2011). Female gang members have often experienced victimization, including sexual abuse (Hoang, 2007).

Canadian research also examines specific risk factors for Aboriginal gang members. The available literature discusses a number of structural level risk factors, such as poverty and disproportionate involvement in the child welfare, social welfare, and criminal justice systems, of which they discuss the legacy of colonization as the foundation (Bracken et al., 2009; Goodwill, 2009; Grekul & LaRoque, 2011). Goodwill's (2009) study of Aboriginal ex-gang members identified a number of "critical incidents" related to gang entry among Aboriginal men. Among them, engaging in violence and association with delinquent activities, having family members involved in gangs, seeing the gang as a family or support system, and going to prison are among the most commonly cited critical incidents leading to gang entry. Others include admiring the gang lifestyle, depending on the gang, gaining respect, and reacting to authority (Goodwill, 2009).

Characteristics of gang entry are further distinguished for Aboriginal women. Scott and Ruddell's (2011) study of 337 incarcerated female gang members showed that one-half of the sample was Aboriginal. Grekul and LaRoque (2011), in their study of gang-involved Aboriginal women, argue for a social injury perspective on gang entry by Aboriginal women, rather than a liberation perspective that has been posed by some. Interviews with frontline professionals and a small sample current and former gang members revealed a number of issues commonly observed among female Aboriginal gang members, including: unresolved trauma; grief, loss, and damaged relationships, particularly in families (e.g., family violence, substance abuse, loss of a family member); and intergenerational issues, including sexual abuse. Gang membership often fulfills the need for protection and belonging experienced by many alienated and marginalized Aboriginal women.

Ngo (2010), in his thorough examination of criminal gang involvement among immigrant youth in Canada, similarly reveals unique factors related to gang entry. He suggests that the families of immigrant youth are often vulnerable in various ways prior to immigrating to Canada, or youth are impacted by their parents' histories prior to immigration. This vulnerability often

stems from poverty, extreme violence, and brutality in their home countries (Ngo, 2010). Upon arriving in Canada, youth experience a “gradual disintegration of their interaction with their families, schools and communities,” resulting in a “crises of identity and belonging” (Ngo, 2010, p. 115). Conflict between their home culture and dominant culture often contributes to the growing detachment from parents. Other family factors may include strict or neglectful parenting, parents who struggle with substance abuse or mental health issues, negative influences from older siblings, or criminal involvement among family members. Immigrant youth who become involved with gangs often struggle in educational pursuits, including English proficiency, learning disabilities, and disrupted school experiences. Further, they live in impoverished, high crime neighbourhoods, often lacking attachment to their communities. This leads immigrant youth to gravitate toward socially disconnected peers, followed by social cliques, and finally, criminal groups or gangs.

3.0 GANG EXIT: THEORIES AND PROCESSES

3.1 Background

As Decker and Lauritsen (2002) observe, “most analyses of gang involvement focus on becoming a gang member rather than discontinuing membership” (p. 51). Hastings et al. (2011) caution that there is “little consensus on why and how youth leave a gang, or on what types of programs work to help accomplish this successfully” (p. 2). The criminal desistance literature has been used to provide insight into gang exit, discussing the significance of marriage, employment, parenthood, and other life course events (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002). However, given the relationships formed in gangs, the needs fulfilled, and the repercussions often associated with leaving a criminal group or organization, a specific focus on the available literature on exit theories and processes is warranted. For effective interventions to be developed, some important questions of the literature need to be addressed: Why do members exit gangs? When are members most open to intervention? How do they disengage? What is the process?

3.2 Why Do Members Exit Gangs?

Researchers have attempted to explain why gang members decide to disengage from the group. Theories of age and maturation have been predominant in the literature (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Hastings et al., 2011; Vigil, 1988). Hastings and colleagues (2011) conducted a comprehensive review of the literature on desistance from crime and gang exit in an attempt to develop a local youth gang exit intervention strategy for Ottawa. From their review, the authors suggest that gang membership is usually temporary, that most members leave eventually, and that exit is associated maturity and life course events – marriage, employment, parenthood, etc. They also suggest that gang members are more open to change the older they get. Vigil (1988) echoes this notion, suggesting that exit is a process that occurs over time and involves increasing ties to conventional activities and institutions (Vigil, 1988). Decker and Lauritsen’s (2002) interviews with St. Louis gang members suggest obligations to family as a reason for leaving. However, as Decker & Lauritsen (2002) note, the role of maturation may depend on how entrenched the member is in the gang.

Researchers also suggest that gang exit is associated with violent incidents (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Hastings et al., 2011; Ngo, 2010; Totten & Dunn). Hastings et al. (2011) note that gang members often have a strong motivation to escape violence. In Decker and Lauritsen’s (2011) study, personal experience of violence was the most commonly reported reason for leaving the gang. Totten & Dunn’s (2011) evaluation of an intervention program for Aboriginal gang members revealed that members often leave after surviving a vicious attack or losing a friend or close gang associate (Totten & Dunn, 2011). Ironically, though violent gang initiation (e.g., “beating in”) and “mythic violence” mark gang entry, the real experience of violence is often a turning point for disengagement (Hastings et al., 2011).

Just as the experience of gang entry varies along gender and ethnic lines, so does the experience of gang exit. A small number of studies have examined why female gang members

exit their gangs. Hoang (2007) suggests that though maturation may be one of the leading reasons why men leave gangs, “maturing or transitioning out of gang can be a difficult process for females because there are social and economic pressures that serve as barrier to exiting gang life” (p. 32). Women may be limited in their social and economic opportunities, and be hesitant to access social assistance upon leaving the gang for fear of their children being apprehended. However, women are more likely to cite parenthood as a reason to exit the gang than male gang members (Hoang, 2007). Fleisher and Krienert (2004) and Varriale (2006) have more thoroughly examined motherhood as a motivating factor. Fleisher and Krienart’s (2004) qualitative study of gang exit among women suggest that women use pregnancy as an exit strategy to avoid violent repercussions from the gang. On the other hand, Varriale’s (2006) quantitative study using the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth revealed the temporally, female gang members did not become pregnant before leaving the gang, but rather following desistance. Hoang (2007) suggests that though motherhood may decrease gang involvement, women may still find a sense of belonging and security with the gang if there is no available alternative.

Goodwill’s (2009) study of perspectives of Aboriginal ex-gang members in the western provinces examined key “critical incidents” related to gang exit for Aboriginal men. These include (p. 89):

- (1) Opportunity to work in the legal workforce;
- (2) Accepting supporting from family or girlfriend;
- (3) Helping others leave and stay away from gang life;
- (4) Not wanting to return to jail;
- (5) Accepting responsibility for family;
- (6) Accepting guidance and protection;
- (7) Participating in ceremony and Aboriginal traditions;
- (8) Avoiding alcohol;
- (9) Publically declaring one has left the gang;
- (10) Desire for legitimate relationships outside the gang;
- (11) Experiencing native brotherhood;
- (12) Self control in reacting like the gang would; and
- (13) Acknowledging the consequences of gang violence.

Grekul and Laroque’s (2011) study of female Aboriginal gang members provides further insight. The authors explain that Aboriginal women in gangs work a “double shift” – being sexual objects, caregivers, and bearers of children in addition to doing the work of the gang – transporting drugs, recruiting women for prostitution, etc. It is because of this that they may have “more incentive to leave an ‘organization’ that does not treat them well in the first place” (p. 153) – a factor that exit strategies should seriously consider. As Grekul and Laroque (2011) explain, efforts “should capitalize on the dire straits that many gang-involved girls find themselves” (p.153). According to the authors, these situations may include child birth, jail sentences, or involvement of child welfare.

Ngo’s (2010) study of gang involved immigrant youth suggests that, in addition to the experience of gang-related violence or death, immigrant youth also may experience “cognitive

maturity and religious awakening” that encourages their disengagement (p. 99). Betrayal by peers was also cited as a turning point for gang disaffiliation.

A notable pattern in the literature is that gang members who have exited rarely cite justice system involvement as a reason for exit. As observed by Decker and Lauritsen (2002), most cite “gang experiences and social processes, rather than institutional commitments,” as reasons for leaving (p. 61). Finally, researchers suggest that some gang members simply just leave their gang for no particular reason (Bovenkerk, 2011; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002). Regardless of the specific reason for leaving their gangs, studies suggest that individuals must be ready for it in order for them to be successful (Totten & Dunn, 2011).

3.3 How Do Gang Members Decide to Leave the Gang, and Disengage?

Though the reasons why individuals exit gangs offer some insight, it is important to understand how they go about it – particularly given the strong ties to the group. On an individual level, general theories of criminal desistance may offer some insight, particularly that of Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002), who offer a theory of cognitive transformation. Giordano and colleagues (2002) stress that cognitive shifts occur when an individual chooses to desist from crime, and that agency is a key factor in this shift. External environmental factors are what Giordano et al., (2002) label as “hooks for change” – occurrences in an individual’s life when a person chooses to desist from crime. Grekul and Laroque (2011) effectively argue that a similar theoretical perspective may be applied to the process of desistance from gangs, given evidence that individuals tend to make the decision to leave gangs after key life events occur. The various reasons “why” discussed previously are arguably the “hooks for change” that produce a cognitive transformation. Bovenkerk (2011) adds that the process of disengagement involves attitudes *and* behaviour.

Goodwill’s (2009) study of Aboriginal gang members suggest that members experience a number of positive outcomes that reinforce the process of gang exit. First, gang members report becoming more accountable – particularly to family and children. The feeling of satisfaction in being accountable to important people in their lives reinforces their disengagement from the gang. Second, gang members report feeling resistance to gang life – including crime, violence, and substance abuse – as an outcome of activities associated with exit. Third, ex-members report experiencing a new life – a shift in the way they live their day-to-day lives. Fourth, independence from the gang is a significant outcome, and the feelings associated with no longer being dependent on the gang financially, mentally, emotionally, and socially. Ex-members also report a sense of healing – mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. Finally, there was also a sense of maturity – an acknowledgement that gang life is temporary and that with age, an individual feels the need to move on (Goodwill, 2009).

Ngo’s (2010) study of immigrant gang members reveals that self-determination and family support often facilitate gang exit. Immigrant youth invest heavily in education and maintaining employment as the exit criminal groups, and re-engage in community by participating in community activities and accessing community services. Of particular importance is community mentorship and investment in religion.

The cognitive decision to leave the gang must be accompanied with certain physical or logistical changes. Decker and Lauritsen (2002), Bovenkerk (2011), and Canada's National Crime Prevention Centre (2011b) suggest that gang members sever ties with their gang by moving to a different city. Self report by Aboriginal gang members (Totten & Dunn, 2011) echo this assertion, suggesting that not hanging around gang members helps the exit process. Decker and Lauritsen (2002) also discuss the implications of leaving prison gangs, which they suggest is more difficult than leaving street gangs given the closed system of the prison.

Part of the process of exiting the gang involves addressing barriers to disengagement. Some of these barriers may come within the gang. As Decker and Lauritsen observed in their study of gang members in St. Louis, "most active gang members strongly expressed the belief that one can never leave the gang," despite having known members who had left (2002, p. 61). The entrenched notoriety of being unable to leave a gang – often due to an underlying threat of violence or death – is likely a significant barrier to the cognitive transformation associated with the decision to exit. Vigil's (1988) study of exit from Chicano gangs in Los Angeles discusses being "beaten out," a ritual that marks an individual's exit through violence. Though the available literature does not discuss this ritual to any degree, the fear of violence accompanying gang exit has been noted as a challenge to gang exit (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Totten & Dunn, 2011).

Bracken and colleagues (2009) argue that one barrier to gang exit for Aboriginal males is the oppositional culture that has formed amongst the group due to collective experiences of trauma and discrimination. Acts of intervention are perceived as disrespect toward the group, which further solidifies it and may make it appealing to others. The literature further explains that rejecting the peers that provided the sense of belonging that was absent for many prior to joining poses significant difficulty (Hastings et al., 2011; Vigil, 1988). However, Decker and Lauritsen's research suggests that peers may help, not hinder, gang exit: "Perhaps ironically, the peer group that facilitated gang membership later served to mitigate the consequences of leaving the gang..." (2002, p. 59).

External hurdles also present challenges to disengaging gang members. Both Hastings and colleagues (2011) and Decker and Lauritsen (2002) note that social barriers, such as the "gang" label, perceptions of the individual as a gang member, and stigma of former gang membership, limit opportunities as well as an individual's ability to leave the gang. In addition, long-term gang membership may have limited the individual's ability to acquire marketable skills for the workforce, thereby limiting the gang member's options for employment if he/she decides to leave. Limited opportunities in turn may result in the benefits of staying in the gang outweighing the consequences of being a gang member.

3.4 When are Members Most Open to Intervention?

Studies have attempted to determine key points at which gang members may be open to intervention. Decker and Lauritsen (2002) suggest four main opportunities for successful intervention with youth gang members:

- (1) When a youth is socially involved in the gang, but not a gang member;

- (2) When a youth is arrested for the first time;
- (3) After an individual has been arrested for a property offence, but before they commit a violent crime; and/or
- (4) When a youth experiences a violent event.

Similarly, Hastings and colleagues (2011) note three exit points commonly cited in the literature:

- (1) When a youth is involved in gangs, but not in the criminal justice system;
- (2) When a youth has formal contact with the criminal justice system but on minor charges; and/or;
- (3) When a youth has been convicted on serious charges and sanctioned – in custody, community supervision, etc.

It is evident that exit points are largely related to contacts with formal institutions, particularly the criminal justice system. As discussed previously, the child or social welfare systems may also be possible exit points for women. This suggests the need for formal institutions to be prepared as possible entry points for interventions. However, Decker and Lauritsen (2002) and Hastings and colleagues (2011) also suggest that interventions may be effective prior to formal contact with these systems – when individuals are involved or affiliated, but have not had justice or social system contact. This suggests the potential need for grass roots community agencies, such as shelters or youth centres, to also serve as entry points. For women, given the interpersonal violence they experience, women's emergency shelters may also be engaged.

4.0 BEST PRACTICE IN GANG EXIT PROGRAMS

4.1 Background

It is evident from the available literature that the process of gang exit is not a simple one, and that any intervention must have thorough knowledge of the barriers the individual faces as he/she exits the gang and further, the social and psychological factors that lead to them joining in the first place. Therefore, this chapter will discuss a number of key elements that must be considered in interventions, as well as some proven best practice programs that have incorporated these elements.

4.2 Key Elements of Effective Interventions

Hastings and colleagues (2011), in developing a gang exit intervention strategy for Ottawa, have conducted perhaps one of the most thorough examinations of best practice in gang intervention to date. Their review revealed that importantly, just as gang entry is a multi-dimensional process, so is gang exit – and that any strategy or intervention must also be multi-dimensional. Further, given the needs fulfilled by the gang, interventions must meet or exceed the options or incentives offered by the gang while eliminating the negative consequences attached to gang membership. Exit programs must address the root causes of membership – identified risk factors related to individual, family, peer, community, and school domains – as well as provide legitimate alternatives to fulfilling basic physical and social needs. Hastings and colleagues (2011) also stress that identified barriers to pro-social activities (education, training, employment) must be addressed, as does the absence of supportive relationships, challenging activities, and sense of belonging provided by the gang. All told, Hastings et al. (2011) suggest the following key elements of youth gang interventions (p. 9):

- (1) Providing a safe place to go;
- (2) Individual counselling and cognitive-behavioural development;
- (3) Education, training, and job opportunities;
- (4) Peer mentoring;
- (5) Addressing social determinants of health (e.g., health, mental health, substance abuse, family counselling, life skills, system supports, basic needs); and
- (6) Suppression.

As previously discussed, the needs and processes associated with gang exit likely vary by level of involvement in the gang, as well as the type of gang an individual belongs to (Bovenkerk, 2011; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002). Much of the available literature on gang exit is conducted with youth. Bovenkerk (2011) suggests that those involved in criminal youth gangs or street gangs are often impoverished and lack ties to conventional institutions – therefore interventions must be sure to focus on building social capital. However, for those involved with organized crime, the members' issues are less related to social capital and more so related to a lack of positive relationships and changing criminal values. Therefore, it is important that interventions consider the type of criminal organization the person is involved with – and the needs fulfilled by that organization – in developing an effective strategy. This may also have

implications for the level of protection required for the individual, given danger associated with exiting some criminal organizations (Mellor et al., 2005).

A number of authors (Hoang, 2007; Scott & Ruddell, 2011; Totten, 2008) stress that risk and protective factors unique to men and women must be considered in any intervention that is developed. Given that males compose a large majority of gang membership, specific interventions for female gang members are often inadequate. Hoang (2007) suggests that as a consequence, female gang members experience “multiple marginality” due to limited opportunities – both social and economic. However, Scott and Ruddell’s study of Canadian female gang inmates suggests that the increase in the number of women in prison with gang affiliations doubled between 1997 and 2000, outpacing male gang members. This suggests a real need for rehabilitative intervention both in prison, as gang membership tends to undermine rehabilitative efforts, and once women are released to the community. As Hoang (2007) articulates, “programs that do not capture gender differences may result in services that inadequately or ineffectively address the needs of females” (p. 31).

Ethnic differences must also be considered in gang intervention strategies, as the literature suggests unique experiences with regard to both entry and exit. A number of researchers have suggested that any interventions for Aboriginal communities must incorporate Aboriginal values and traditions (Bracken et al., 2009; Grekul & LaRoque, 2011; National Crime Prevention Centre, 2011b; Theriot & Parker, 2007). Badger and Albright’s (2003) study perceptions of gang membership in Saskatchewan suggested a number of potentially effective alternatives to gang membership for Aboriginal youth, including structured activities, non-competitive activities, affordable sporting activities, cultural camps, traditional Aboriginal pursuits, cultural activities and ceremonies, the presence of role models, development of parenting skills and parental support, employment opportunities, and having basic life needs met. The youth surveyed for the study also suggested the importance of awareness raising activities among police and community agencies to increase understanding of gang membership among at-risk families and youth to prevent recruitment.

Sensitivity to gender and ethnic differences may be extended further to Aboriginal women. As previously discussed, Aboriginal women have a number of unique risk factors associated with the legacy of colonization, poverty, family dysfunction, and abuse. Scott and Ruddell’s (2011) study revealed that female Aboriginal gang members have higher measureable risks and needs than non-Aboriginal offenders, and that low motivation to change is difficult to overcome. Grekul and LaRoque’s (2011) examination of female Aboriginal gang members suggest a number of important issues that must be addressed in interventions for women. First, Aboriginal women who are exiting gangs are faced with a lack of long-term housing – particularly those who are being released from prison. The authors note that without stable housing, there is a greater risk of returning to the gang. Further, female Aboriginal gang members often possess low levels of education. Grekul and Laroque (2011) argue that empowering women with education may lessen the likelihood of them becoming entrenched in the gang lifestyle. Finally, given a majority of gang members are male, there is a notable lack of programming aimed at Aboriginal women. In addition, wait times for detoxification and rehabilitation services, combined with a lack of housing options, poses a significant threat to positive outcomes for Aboriginal women attempting to exit gangs. Grekul and Laroque (2011)

suggest a number of key features for effective interventions, including: increased support and services for women and their families (e.g., addiction, financial, child care, recreational); protective programs for women leaving gangs to ensure their safety; support for children of women who choose to disengage, particularly those that must enter treatment; the importance of the professionals delivering the programs developing “positive, trusting, and respectful relationships with their clients” (p. 148); the effectiveness of mentoring, and demonstrating that women will not be alone; and, sharing circles – healing through restoration (e.g., community support, empowerment through sharing, etc.).

Ngo’s (2010) research on high risk and gang involved immigrant youth suggests a practical framework for supporting immigrant families, developed based on feedback from community stakeholders and gang-involved youth. The framework supports a collaborative approach to supporting immigrant families, ensuring the coordination of various agencies, sectors, and communities. It incorporates a set of principles that involve “a positive sense of identity, equity, multi-sectoral involvement, coordination and collaboration, multiple approaches on the part of youth services, addressing multiple needs with multiple interventions, and timeliness and responsiveness” (Ngo, 2010, p. 101). The framework promotes the development of a positive identity toward a *healthy* sense of belonging in the family, school, and community – considering issues specific to immigrant youth and their families. Ngo’s (2010) suggested framework considers the path that youth take to gang membership, exit, and community reintegration, and includes home, school, and community-based strategies.

The complexity of gang exit and the unique needs of different groups require a strategic approach to programming. Evans and Sawdon (2004), in their examination of a Toronto gang exit strategy, suggest three essential components to a comprehensive gang intervention strategy:

- (1) Assessment and intake: determining the interest and motivation of participants, level of gang activity, and family and social history;
- (2) Intensive training and personal development: addressing issues of anger, aggression, sexism, racism, homophobia, communication, and interpersonal skill development;
- (3) Case management process and follow-up: supporting participants’ goals and plans, providing mentorship on an ongoing basis, and supporting participants in dealing with everyday life challenges (e.g., housing, family relationships, criminal justice matters, addiction, etc.).

Further, given the closed nature of the criminal group or gang, and individual differences and needs, it is often difficult to engage members in an intervention. In addition to targeting the previously discussed critical periods when gang members consider disengagement, Hastings et al. (2011) suggest three main approaches to effectively engaging and sustaining gang members in interventions:

- (1) Single case management, involving thorough assessment, determining the level of risk and developing an intervention plan that is tailored to the needs of the individual. Ongoing case management monitors progress and needs, and modifies service delivery as required.

- (2) Targeted outreach, which involves outreach workers engaging youth directly in the community and providing necessary services.
- (3) Group programming, involving intensive workshops or mentoring to address behaviour patterns and life skills.

Further, Spergel's (1992) review of 9 different studies on youth gangs suggested that a purely justice oriented approach would not be effective, and that human services organizations must be engaged to provide outreach, counselling, and opportunities for education, training, and employment. Similarly, Hastings and colleagues (2011) as well Aldridge et al. (2011) stress that given the complexity of gang membership and exit, and the multiple systems involvement of many gang members, it is often most effective to offer multi-agency service delivery model so that all needs are addressed (Hastings et al., 2011). This may include law enforcement, justice agencies, housing, educational institutions, employers, social and child welfare, and other local grass roots organizations. Aldridge and colleagues' (2011) study of parent-focused interventions note that a uni-dimensional approach is often not effective.

4.3 Best Practice Programs

Though there are very few examples of gang exit programs that have been thoroughly evaluated, particularly in Canada, reviews of promising approaches in gang intervention (e.g., Hastings et al., 2011; Totten, 2008) suggest models that have shown positive outcomes. Some examples of the most promising interventions are discussed below: (1) OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model; (2) Regina Anti-Gang Services; (3) Breaking the Cycle Youth Ambassador Leadership Program; (4) Ojijiita Pimatiswin Kinamatwin Program; (5) Hobbema Community Cadet Corps Program.

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency's (OJJDP) Comprehensive Gang Model

The Comprehensive Gang Model developed from the work of Irving Spergel is a comprehensive, evidence based strategy incorporating prevention, intervention, and suppression components. This team-based model is based on premise that gang issues are the result of a lack of social opportunity and social disorganization in communities. The model addresses issues of poverty, racism, social policy, and social controls while supporting gang exit. The model involves a number of core components, including:

- (1) Community mobilization: strengthening communities, coordinating agencies, mobilizing community members;
- (2) Social intervention: using street outreach workers to engage youth, identify programs and services to which to refer youth;
- (3) Opportunities provision: facilitate access to training, education, employment targeted specifically at youth at risk;
- (4) Suppression: initiating formal and informal control to hold youth accountable and monitor youth at risk of reoffending; and
- (5) Organizational change and development: facilitating the development of a team-oriented approach to addressing issues in communities, maximizing available resources.

The Comprehensive Gang Model has been implemented in a number of communities across the United States. It has seen the greatest success in the Little Village Project, conducted in inner city Chicago. Results of the evaluation demonstrated a significant decrease in self-reported involvement in violent and property crimes (Spergel, 2007). Further, the program was shown to have a greater impact on older, highly involved, violent gang members than on younger members who were less violent. The program produced a decrease in active gang involvement, particularly among older participants. Education and employability among the participants was also improved, and resulted in a decrease in criminal activity. The evaluation also suggested that an outreach approach may be more effective with younger, less violent gang members, and that outreach with suppression activities may be more successful among older, more active and violent youth. Collaborative efforts among outreach workers – using a variety of services – were shown to be effective, as was a larger program dosage (Spergel, 2007).

RAGS: Regina Anti-Gang Services

RAGS works with gang-involved Aboriginal youth and young adults age 12-30 and their families, with the goal “to reduce criminal activities committed by young Aboriginal gang members” (NCPC, 2011b, p. 1). The program was started in a high risk Regina neighbourhood with a large Aboriginal population. The objectives of RAGS are to increase protective factors among gang members and their families while decreasing risk factors, to support clients through a range of therapeutic approaches, to increase services through outreach, to support geographic location and provide economic supports, to provide connections to employment, and finally, to reduce gang related criminal activity in the neighbourhood (Totten & Dunn, 2011).

The model involves partnerships among key community agencies (e.g, law enforcement, corrections, addiction services, outreach workers, educators) to offer an intensive case management model. RAGS was founded on proven best practice therapeutic approaches, including (NCPC, 2011b; Totten & Dunn, 2011):

- Wraparound, a comprehensive partnership approach for youth at risk and their families that builds on protective factors and addresses risk factors;
- Multi-systemic therapy, which focuses on the range of determinants for criminal behaviour;
- Youth engagement, which builds resilience against risk factors for gang involvement by providing opportunities for skill acquisition, experiential learning, and agency in choosing their treatment path; and
- Circle of Courage, which is based on Native philosophies of healing, resilience, and child rearing that involve values of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity.

RAGS offers 24 hour per day, 7 days per week programming with a number of components:

- (1) Intensive counselling, including the development of safety plans, crisis coping skills, and support;
- (2) Life skills/cognitive skills, to promote positive social behaviour;

- (3) 'Circle Keeper' Program, designed specifically for female youth in the sex trade and addressing safety, addiction, and sexuality;
- (4) Cultural/faith-based programming, including Aboriginal circles that focus on mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual health;
- (5) Gang exit strategy, which engages provincial and federal partners to develop safe and effective ways of exiting gangs;
- (6) Outreach program, working in schools and the community to raise awareness; and
- (7) Family programming.

The evaluation of RAGS conducted by Totten and Dunn (2011) revealed positive results. RAGS proved to be a very high dosage program, with primary clients receiving an average of 285 hours of programming and averaging 248 contacts with staff. The program was shown to have the greatest impact in the first six months of exposure, suggesting the importance of delivering high intensity programming as soon as possible in interventions. Of the 74 "primary" (program intensive) clients served during the evaluation, all but seven exited their gangs. The 41 clients who fully completed the program showed a number of positive outcomes, including acquiring full time employment and education, independent living, and completion of substance abuse treatment. Though the program showed significant changes in gang affiliation, substance abuse, aggressive and retaliatory beliefs, and criminal behaviour indicators, there were not significant changes in the employment, ethnic identity or gang involved peers index – suggesting the program still has to address gaps in certain areas. The evaluators stressed the importance of adequately developing and resourcing a women's program in order to ensure positive effects.

Breaking the Cycle Youth Gang Exit and Ambassador Leadership Program

The Breaking the Cycle Program is a comprehensive strategy that operates in the Rexdale and Scarborough areas of Toronto, which were labelled as priorities due to gang activity. The program targets male and female youth aged 15-30 who are unemployed, not attending school, have a history of gang involvement, and are open to attending to school. The objectives of the program are to end the cycle of gang violence by reducing gang membership, reduce risk factors for gang membership (particularly aggressive, antisocial, and criminal behaviour), increase labour force participation among participants, and increase positive community participation by participants (Chettleburgh, 2008; Hall & Sawdon, 2004; National Crime Prevention Centre, 2009). There are five main components to the 28-week program (Chettleburgh, 2008; Evans, 2006):

- (1) Intake and assessment: referral from multiple sources and intensive assessment using pre-developed instruments;
- (2) Intensive personal development: two weeks of intensive training that involves building trust, addressing violent behaviour, sexism, homophobia, and racism, raising awareness, and developing empathy. Participants also learn life skills, anger management, healthy relationships, and goal setting;
- (3) Job readiness and leadership development: involves personal development training, skills practice and integration, community outreach, and community presentations on violence, gang membership, and personal experiences;

- (4) Case management: one week of progress review, crisis management, problem solving, and connection to community resources; and
- (5) Youth Ambassador Leadership Employment Preparation Program: 25 weeks long program that increases self esteem, self efficacy, and skill development through community outreach and presentations by participants.

Though a full evaluation report is not yet available, preliminary examinations of the impact of the program have shown promising results. As Chettleburgh's (2008) evaluability assessment revealed, 75% of the 190 participants accepted into the program successfully graduated. The program is effective in engaging high risk gang involved youth. Many participants were reported to re-engage with education and employment. Further, the assessment revealed that compensation provided to those who participated regularly was viewed very positively and was key in attracting and engaging participants, particularly since they were not accustomed to receiving regular compensation. This also facilitated the building of life skills in financial management, increased self esteem, and facilitated discontinuing criminal activity for material gain. Chettleburgh (2008) reports that though financial compensation attracted participants, the program itself engaged them over the long-term, resulting in a low level of attrition. The assessment revealed positive perceptions of the in-depth training component, the intensity of the program, and the high skill of the workers. Areas of improvement identified by Chettleburgh (2008) included post-program follow-up and support and the age range of the program (ignoring youth aged 12-15). As with many programs, funding was identified as an ongoing challenge, particularly since there was more demand than could be accommodated.

Ogijiita Pimatiswin Kinamatwin (OPK) Program

Bracken and colleagues (2009) discuss the Ogijiita (OPK) Program in Winnipeg, which works with Aboriginal street gang members who were recently released from custody. A unique approach to addressing gang involvement, OPK requires participants to desist from crime, but not to leave their gang. However, OPK addresses social capital issues previously met by the gang (e.g., opportunities for education, employment) with holistic healing that addresses the generational effects of colonization and the residential school era, family and personal trauma, and discrimination. Bracken et al. (2009) argue that efforts to encourage gang members to desist from crime must be constructed not as conforming to society, but rather as "an Aboriginal person who is becoming consistent with his 'true' culture" (74). Therefore, teaching and reinforcing Aboriginal traditions is vital to desistance. The OPK Program has linked Aboriginal gang members with opportunities for employment and education, and supports those who are successful in these pursuits. OPK participants have had the opportunity to make positive impacts in the community through employment with various projects in the city, increasing feelings of self esteem and self worth (Comack, Deane, Morrissette, & Silver, 2009). The program is viewed very positively by street gang members due to the opportunities for skills development and "immersion in Aboriginal culture" (Comack et al., 2009, p. 11). One difficulty experienced is the development of trust with others in the social network (Bracken et al., 2009).

Hobbema Community Cadet Corps

The Hobbema Community Cadet Corps Program (HCCCP) was developed in response to social disorder in the community caused by gang activity. Hobbema, a largely Aboriginal community, was faced with the effects of colonization, the residential school era, and marginalization (Grekul & Sanderson, 2011). A total of six different gangs composed of 250 members were active in the community, increasing the level of crime on the reserves and facilitating the local drug trade. The Community Cadet Corps program was established in 2005 by local RCMP officers and incorporated the Crime Prevention Through Social Development approach – addressing crime by focusing on underlying social causes. HCCCP promotes internal and external skills development, encouraging family support, service to the community, leadership and positive role-modelling, positive choices, creative activities, and investment in school. Though the program does not specifically focus on gang involvement, it does target criminal activity and other gang related activities. The evaluation (Grekul & Sanderson, 2011) showed that the program increases self-esteem, discipline, develops listening skills, and provides opportunities to those who participated. However, a number of challenges were noted. The evaluation revealed difficulty in sustaining adult support for the program, perhaps due to a lack of trust in conventional institutions. Further, given the program is run by RCMP, the evaluators noted that there may be repercussions for community support for the program. This points to the need for cultural sensitivity and Aboriginal leadership in the program. Issues related to logistics also lead to sporadic attendance, given the difficulty for some to find transportation. Finally, the program is not funded, but rather, leaders volunteer their time.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The purpose of this review was to explore the available literature on gang exit processes and strategies. Specifically, the review addressed following research questions:

- (1) What factors lead to gang membership or affiliation?
- (2) What factors and conditions lead to a gang member to want to disengage from a gang?
- (3) What social and cognitive processes define disengagement?
- (4) What services and supports do gang members require to effectively exit a gang?
- (5) What are some examples of best practice models in supporting gang members' disengagement?

As Spergel (1992) observes, “gang behaviour is diverse, changing, complex, and requires a variety of data collected over time to adequately understand its genesis and development (p. 131). Chapter 2’s discussion of the theories and processes related to gang entry revealed a diverse range of explanations for gang membership. Not only to multiple individual, family, peer, school, and community factors characterize gang members, but these factors are also dependent on gender and ethnicity. Further, different processes lead to membership in different types of groups (Gordon, 2000). Interventions therefore must consider the population they are targeting to ensure proper supports and services are provided. Any discussion of best practice in gang interventions must be done in the context of a firm understanding of the problem. One of the greatest challenges Alberta will face as it moves forward with its Gang Reduction Strategy is the lack of systematic, comprehensive research on the “gang problem” in Alberta and the associated impact on the community. Thus, it is important for Alberta to continue exploring the complexion of gangs in the province to develop proper intervention and exit strategies.

The focus of this report was on gang exit, and the processes and strategies that are associated with disengagement from criminal groups. The review revealed a number of key points when individuals are vulnerable to gang exit and the associated social and cognitive process. Similar to gang entry, while there are number of common challenges for all individuals exiting gangs related to employment and education, support, fear of violence, housing, family, and other factors, there are certain barriers that vary by gender, ethnicity, and level of gang involvement. This reinforces the importance of conducting thorough assessments and offering comprehensive, “wraparound” supports for those disengaging from gangs.

While the literature stresses the importance of comprehensive community-based strategies that incorporate prevention, intervention, and suppression (Theriot & Parker, 2007; National Crime Prevention Centre, 2007), this review focused specifically on exit interventions. A number of best practice elements specific to exit strategies are evident, summarized as follows:

- Identify critical intervention opportunities, such as experiences of violence, parenthood, custody, etc, to introduce the program;
- Identify locations and opportunities when the gang member is separated from the gang, or away from the influence of the gang to introduce the intervention;
- Perform a thorough assessment upon entrance to the program to understand the full range of issues;
- Consider gender differences in risk and protective factors and gang exit processes;
- Develop gender-specific programming, including counselling and vocational opportunities;
- Importance of gender and cultural training for gang intervention personnel;
- Importance of role modelling – developing positive relationships to replace the sense of belonging achieved in the gang;
- Engaging families in the therapeutic process, particularly when family dysfunction or poor role modelling has occurred;
- Provision of immediate and intensive service to prevent the individual from falling back into gang life;
- Offering a stipend for gang members participating in intensive programs to ensure they do not return to the gang for material support;
- Importance of life skill development and social capital building activities;
- Provision of case management and wraparound approach services;
- Importance of front-line workers building long-term, trusting relationships and mentorship. Close ties should be formed in a safe environment;
- Value of training and hiring former gang members as staff to facilitate mentorship and relationship development with clients, as well as build skills and self confidence with ex-gang members;
- Importance of addressing the intergenerational foundation of gang involvement;
- Importance cultural competency and the use of culturally appropriate responses;
- Importance of considering the local gang context – developing community-appropriate responses;
- Addressing and acknowledging macro-level social problems that provide the foundation of micro-level gang issues (e.g., colonization). This may be addressed through therapeutic measures in the gang exit strategy, and more widely in primary prevention strategies;
- Removing the individual from the community to eliminate pressures by gang and keep the individual safe;
- Providing immediate access to substance abuse rehabilitation;
- Adopting a therapeutic approach that addresses self concept and identity;
- Offering a unique range of rehabilitative opportunities, including artistic and recreational programs;
- Ensuring that a substitute for the support and belonging lost when gang and peers are rejected is developed;

- Developing and implementing effective partnerships among relevant agencies – e.g., law enforcement, corrections, outreach, social services, housing, addictions, employment – to ensure an integrated approach;
- Situating gang exit programs in a broader range of holistic services in the community.

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