EXITING GANGS: EXAMINING PROCESSES AND BEST PRACTICE WITHIN AN ALBERTA CONTEXT

Leslie MacRae-Krisa

Abstract: Gangs and gang-related crime have been an increasing concern in Alberta in recent decades. Gang exit strategies have been identified in the *Alberta Gang Reduction Strategy* (Government of Alberta, 2010) as a key activity in reducing gang-related violent crime and violence in the province. The purpose of this article is to explore available academic and gray literature on gang exit to support the development of gang exit interventions in the province. Findings from the review point to the diversity and complexity of gang involvement and membership, and the consequent need for multi-dimensional approaches to gang exit. Exit programs must address the root causes of membership, and identify and address barriers to pro-social activities. The complexity of gang membership also requires a strategic approach to programming that includes single case management, intensive training, and targeted outreach, as well as multiple systems involvement. Importantly, as Alberta moves forward with its Gang Reduction Strategy, systematic, comprehensive research studies on the "gang problem" in Alberta and its associated impact on the community are vital for the development of effective intervention strategies.

Keywords: gangs, Alberta, gang exit, gang exit processes, gang exit strategies

Leslie MacRae-Krisa, M.A. is coordinator of Alberta-based research projects for the Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family. Contact details: 226 Cimarron Blvd, Okotoks, Alberta, Canada, T1S 2E5. E-mail: ldmacrae@ucalgary.ca

Gangs and gang-related crime have been an increasing concern in Alberta in recent decades. Though there are few recent and comprehensive studies of gangs in Alberta, intermittent statistics made available in the past decade point to the increasing presence of a variety of criminal groups engaging in a range of criminal activities. 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 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 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). Statistics Canada (2008) reported that in 2008, Calgary had the highest *per capita* rate of gang-related homicides among the 10 largest metropolitan areas in Canada.

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 strategies for individuals wishing to exit gangs. It recognizes that few intervention programs to support gang disengagement exist in Alberta communities, 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, it recommends the development of intervention strategies in Aboriginal communities to provide alternatives to gang membership for Aboriginal people (Government of Alberta, 2010).

Gang exit strategies have been identified in 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 paper is to explore the available academic and gray literature on gang exit. First, the factors that lead to gang membership will be briefly explored. Second, the factors and conditions that prompt the decision to leave a gang will be examined, as well as the social and cognitive processes that define disengagement. Finally, the services and supports required by gang members to effectively exit will be studied, and best practices for disengagement will be proposed.

Defining Gangs and Gang Intervention

A discussion of gangs and gang intervention first requires definitional clarification. The term "gang" presents ongoing issues given the range of definitions that have been used by academics, government, law enforcement, and corrections, indicated by considerable discussion in the literature (e.g., Aldridge, Shute, Ralphs, & Medina, 2011; Goodwill, 2009; Gordon, 2000; Schram & Gaines, 2007; Spergel, 1992). As Gordon (2000) observed, 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 a "criminal organization" as a group that 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 a *Report on Organized Crime* by the Criminal Intelligence Service of Canada (2010), perceptions of criminal organizations by law enforcement have 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.

Gangs and gang intervention must be understood in the context of this diversity. 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) notes that leadership, common colours, territory, and title are 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.

A number of approaches are used to reduce gang involvement and activity. As discussed by the Government of Canada's 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, p 2). 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 typically 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 (2008) 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" (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 but point out that 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" (p. 11).

For the purpose of this paper, a "gang" will be considered generally to include criminal groups and organizations, street gangs, and youth gangs. The discussion regarding intervention will focus on tertiary prevention, or strategies that focus on supporting gang members in their decision to exit gangs.

Understanding Gang Entry

To determine effective strategies for supporting gang disengagement requires an understanding of why individuals join gangs. A range of theoretical perspectives from sociology, criminology, and psychology (e.g., Heath, 2000; Herrmann, McWhirter, & Sispas-Herrmann, 1997; Howell & Egley, 2005; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Spergel, 1992) have been proposed. 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 the availability of legitimate employment and opportunities and the appeal of the economic opportunities that criminal groups may provide. 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 of 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 the gang phenomenon it its entirety.

Forms of Hirschi's social control theory have also been used to explain gang membership. Social control theory posits that, "abnormal or defective relationships can lead to a lack of emotional attachment to both family and society" (Heath, 2000, p. 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.

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, findings suggested that low self-concept does not completely explain gang membership. Scott and Ruddell (2011), in their examination of female gang membership, offer a more complex psychological theory, 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. Klein and Maxson (2006) adopt a social-cultural approach, demonstrating that an "oppositional culture" may form among collectively marginalized or victimized gang members, which proves very difficult for intervention strategies.

Howell and Egley (2005) examine gang involvement from a developmental perspective, offering that certain risk factors present at particular stages of development create pathways to gang involvement. This perspective, developed from Thornberry and Krohn's (2001) interaction theory, incorporates both structural variables and more discrete process-related variables – social, familial, and community factors (e.g., poverty, discrimination, family violence, exposure to violent crime in the community) – that 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.

Existing theoretical perspectives offer diverse explanations for gang entry. Arguably, an integrated approach that incorporates structural, social, and individual processes is most likely to be 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.

Risk Factors for Gang Entry

The study of gang entry has also considered a number of risk factors. As observed by Howell and 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 been shown to span all five risk factor domains, have a cumulative effect, and enhance the likelihood of gang membership if present in multiple developmental stages (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 mental health issues, particularly depression and low or delinquent self-concept (e.g., self-esteem, competence), are significantly related to gang involvement, particularly among youth (Herrmann et al., 1997; Maxson et al., 1998; Totten & Dunn, 2011). Gangs also fulfill a need for respect not found in pro-social circles (Ward & Bakhuis, 2010). 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. A 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, with gang members being more likely to be involved in serious and violent crime and to have longer criminal careers (Scott & Ruddell, 2011; Totten & Dunn, 2011).

There is a complex relationship between gang membership and substance abuse. Individuals may be lured to the gang by the economic opportunities associated with the drug trade and ultimately become addicted themselves (Katz, Webb, & Decker, 2005), while others may join the gang as a way to support their existing addiction (Ward & Bakhuis, 2010). Either way, addiction and substance abuse issues often begin and/or are reinforced by gang membership (Katz et al., 2005; Scott & Ruddell, 2011; Totten & Dunn, 2011).

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). In addition, inconsistent monitoring and supervision have 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. 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 and supportive nature of a gang 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 they are a collective solution to shared issues. Substance abuse is often a source of cohesion among the group (Scott & Ruddell, 2011; Spergel, 1992). 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. Badger and Albright's (2003) study of Aboriginal youth suggested a lack of attachment to school was 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, youth were shown to have multiple barriers to employment, including low educational attainment, negative perceptions by the 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 structural inequalities resulting from the apartheid may be at the root of gang involvement. In Canada, colonization and the residential schools legacy have been discussed as a precursor to Aboriginal gang involvement (Bracken et al., 2009; Grekul & LaRocque, 2011).

Variations in Gang Entry

A general discussion of gang entry must be qualified by acknowledging 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 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 such as a sense of belonging, a need for family, etc. Gordon (2000) distinguishes "wanna-be" groups from street gangs, the members of which tend to be older, feel more marginalized due to poverty, discrimination, and unpleasant family lives, and be involved primarily due to peer group attraction. 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, with the organization providing economic opportunities. Loss of income is a barrier for disengagement (Gordon, 2000).

Gender is an additional factor that must be considered. Totten's (2008) examination of youth gangs suggests that a majority are male; 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). 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 & LaRocque, 2011; Hoang, 2007; Scott & Ruddell, 2011). Female gang members have often experienced victimization, including sexual abuse (Hoang, 2007).

Ethnic Diversity in Gang Membership

Canadian research has examined 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, with the legacy of colonization as the foundation (Bracken et al., 2009; Goodwill, 2009; Grekul & LaRocque, 2011). Goodwill's (2009) study of Aboriginal ex-gang members identified a

number of "critical incidents" related to gang entry among Aboriginal men, including the following:

- Engaging in violence and association with delinquent activities;
- Family members involved in gangs;
- Viewing gangs as a family or support system;
- Going to prison;
- Admiring the gang lifestyle;
- Depending on the gang;
- Gaining respect; and
- Reacting to authority.

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 LaRocque (2011), in their study of gang-involved Aboriginal women, argue for a social injury perspective of gang entry by Aboriginal women, rather than the liberation perspective that has been posed by some. Interviews with front line professionals and a small sample of 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 (Grekul & LaRocque, 2011).

Ngo (2010), in his thorough examination of criminal gang involvement among immigrant youth in Canada, reveals risk factors for gang entry unique to new Canadians. 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 "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, as many are either strict or neglectful parents, familial substance abuse or mental health issues, negative influences from older siblings, or familial criminality. Gang-involved immigrant youth 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.

Gang Exit: Theories and Processes

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.

Researchers have attempted to explain why and how 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) comprehensive review of the gang exit literature suggests that gang membership is usually temporary, that most members leave eventually, and that exit is associated with maturity and life course events – marriage, employment, parenthood, etc. However, as Decker and Lauritsen (2002) note, the role of maturation may depend on how entrenched the member is in the gang.

Hastings et al. (2011) also observe that gang members often have a strong motivation to escape violence, with a number of studies suggesting that gang exit is associated with the experience of violent incidents (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Hastings et al., 2011; Ngo, 2010; Totten & Dunn, 2011). Totten and 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. 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 too 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 barriers 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. Studies have suggested that women are more likely to cite parenthood as a reason to exit the gang than male gang members, though findings are mixed (Fleisher & Krienert, 2004; Hoang, 2007; Varriale, 2006).

Grekul and LaRocque'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). Grekul and LaRocque (2011) further suggest that intervention efforts "should capitalize on the dire straits that many gang-involved girls find themselves" (p.153). According to the authors, these situations may include childbirth, jail sentences, or involvement of child welfare.

Goodwill's (2009) study of perspectives of Aboriginal ex-gang members in the western provinces of Canada examined key "critical incidents" related to gang exit for Aboriginal men. Among these critical incidents were:

- The opportunity for legitimate employment;
- Accepting support from a partner or family;
- The opportunity to help others exit and desist from gang life;
- The desire to stay out of jail and accept responsibility for family;
- Avoiding alcohol;
- Participating in Aboriginal traditions;
- Experiencing Native brotherhood;
- Accepting offers of guidance and protection;
- Acknowledgement of the consequences of gang membership; and
- Learning self-control.

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.

Notably, gang members who have disengaged 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).

On an individual psychological level, general theories of criminal desistance may offer some insight into gang exit. Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002) suggest a theory of cognitive transformation, stressing 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 LaRocque (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 – "hooks for change" leading to cognitive transformation. Bovenkerk (2011) adds that the process of disengagement involves attitudes *and* behaviour.

Goodwill's (2009) study of Aboriginal gang members suggests that members experience a number of positive outcomes that reinforce the process of gang exit. These include:

- Accountability – particularly to family and children;
- Resistance to gang life – including crime, violence, and substance abuse;
- Living a new life – experiencing a shift in the way they live their day-to-day lives;

- Independence – no longer being dependent on the gang financially, mentally, emotionally, and socially;
- Healing – mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically; and
- Maturity – acknowledging that gang life is temporary.

Ngo (2010) suggests that self-determination and family support often facilitate gang exit for immigrant youth. Immigrant youth invest heavily in education and maintaining employment as they exit criminal groups, and re-engage in the 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 separation from other 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 from within the gang. As Decker and Lauritsen (2002) 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 (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 a gang exit has been noted as a challenge to gang exit (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Totten & Dunn, 2011).

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 previous 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 or she decides to leave. This in turn may result in the benefits of staying in the gang outweighing the consequences of being a gang member.

Studies have attempted to determine key points at which gang members may be open to intervention (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Hastings et al., 2011). A critical point for early intervention is when a youth is affiliated with a gang, but not a gang member (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002). Intervention has also been suggested to be effective when a youth is involved with a gang, but early in their criminal career – first arrest, or when charges are for minor

offences (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Hastings et al., 2011). Hastings and colleagues (2011) also suggest that a youth's first custodial sentence may also be a critical point for intervention.

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 be possible exit points for women. This suggests the need for formal institutions to be prepared as potential points for intervention. However, Decker and Lauritsen (2002) and Hastings and colleagues (2011) suggest that interventions may be effective prior to formal contact with these systems, that is, when individuals are involved or affiliated, but have not had justice or social system contact. This suggests that grassroots community agencies, such as shelters or youth centres, may serve as important entry points. For women, given the interpersonal violence they experience, women's emergency shelters may also be engaged.

Best Practice in Gang Exit Programs

Knowledge of the processes of gang entry and exit provide a foundation for determining best practice in gang exit strategies. As previously discussed, the needs and processes associated with gang exit vary by level of involvement in the gang, as well as the type of gang an individual belongs to (Bovenkerk, 2011; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002). Bovenkerk (2011) suggests that those involved in criminal youth gangs or street gangs are often impoverished and lack ties to conventional institutions; interventions must therefore focus on building social capital. However, for those involved with organized crime, the members' issues are related less to social capital and more to a lack of positive relationships and changing criminal values. 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 exit strategy. There may also be implications for the level of protection required by an individual, given the 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 males and females must be considered when developing any intervention. 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. Scott and Ruddell's study of Canadian female gang inmates suggests that the number of women in prison with gang affiliations has doubled between 1997 and 2000, outpacing male gang members. Therefore, there is a demonstrable need for gang intervention, both in prison where gang membership tends to undermine rehabilitative efforts and also in 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 formulating gang intervention strategies, as the literature suggests such differences engender 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 & LaRocque, 2011; National Crime Prevention Centre, 2011b; Theriot & Parker, 2007). Badger

and Albright's (2003) study of 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, the development of parenting skills and parental support, employment opportunities, and having basic life needs met.

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 LaRocque's (2011) examination of female Aboriginal gang members suggests a number of structural issues that must be addressed, particularly including a lack of long-term housing for 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, given low levels of education, Grekul and LaRocque argue that empowering Aboriginal women with education may reduce dependence on the gang lifestyle. Finally, the notable lack of programming aimed at Aboriginal women (e.g., detoxification and rehabilitation services, affordable housing) poses a significant threat to positive outcomes for Aboriginal women attempting to exit gangs. Grekul and LaRocque (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 the 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, finally, sharing circles – healing through restoration (e.g., community support, empowerment through sharing, etc.).

Ngo's (2010) research on immigrant youth at high risk for gang involvement 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 suggested framework considers the path that youth take to gang membership, exit, and community reintegration, and includes home, school, and community-based strategies.

Overall, Hastings and colleagues (2011), in their comprehensive examination of gang exit, argue that just as gang entry is a multi-dimensional process, so too 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 well as the absence of supportive relationships, challenging activities, and sense of belonging provided by the gang. Overall, these authors suggest a number of critical elements for 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.

The complexity of gang exit and the unique needs of different groups require a strategic approach to programming. Studies and evaluations (e.g., Hastings et al., 2011; Evans & Sawdon, 2004) suggest a number of critical elements for a comprehensive gang intervention strategy. First, essential to interventions is single case management, involving thorough intake and assessment to determine level of risk and develop an intervention plan that is tailored to the needs of the individual. Ongoing case management is also important to monitor progress and modify service delivery as required. Second, intensive life skills training and personal development, involving group programming, workshops, and mentoring, are important to address behaviour patterns and develop skills that allow one to function away from the gang. Finally, targeted outreach involving outreach workers engaging gang members in the community, providing referrals and resources, is an approach that has been effective in disengaging gang members from the lifestyle.

A number of authors (Aldridge et al., 2011; Spergel, 1992) stress that unidimensional strategies are not effective, particularly those that are purely justice oriented. Multiple sectors must be engaged to provide outreach, counselling, and opportunities for education, training, and employment. Hastings and colleagues (2011) as well Aldridge et al. (2011) observe 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 a 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 grassroots organizations.

Conclusion

Given the growing concern with gang-related activity in Alberta, it is important to develop effective strategies to support gang disengagement. Thus, the purpose of this article was to explore the available literature on gang exit processes and strategies. 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). Complex individual,

family, peer, school, and community factors influence gang members and their ability to disengage. Further, different processes lead to membership in different types of groups (Gordon, 2000). Interventions must therefore 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 that Alberta continue to explore the complexion of gangs in the province as a necessary precondition to the development of proper intervention and exit strategies.

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