

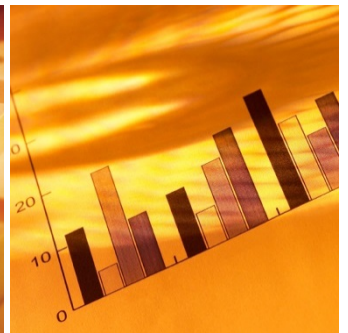
Youth Gangs in Canada: A Review of Current Topics and Issues

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Abstract

Youth gangs are not a new phenomenon in Canada. Theoretical and empirical research and evaluation efforts continue with the goal of better understanding and responding to this issue. Advances have been made in defining the nature of youth gangs and their activities, the motivations for joining, and the risk and protective factors that influence involvement in a gang lifestyle. While a precise measure of youth gang involvement and prevalence of their activities in Canada is not currently available, in the last number of years strides have been made in understanding affiliation among several key populations, namely Aboriginal youth, immigrant youth and young women. Greater insight into specific risk factors, pathways to involvement and desistance, and guidance for prevention and intervention efforts can assist in the future development of solutions to address youth gang involvement and gang-related activities in Canada. Public Safety Canada continues to support effective youth gang prevention and intervention strategies that are known to work based on empirical evidence and lessons learned from past implementation and evaluation experiences.

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Introduction

The first recorded work on gangs in Canada was a study of juveniles in street gangs in Toronto by Kenneth H. Rogers in 1945. Since that time, many research and evaluation studies have been added to this growing field. In the 1990s, gangs and their activities were given renewed attention when media organizations and many police departments began to increasingly attribute street shootings in many cities to youth gangs (Ezeonu, 2010). Over the past 25 years, this has led to increased efforts by researchers, evaluators and policymakers to better understand the issue and to develop solutions to address youth gang involvement and gang-related activities in Canada.

Public Safety Canada is committed to developing and disseminating knowledge to address the issue of youth gangs in Canada. To implement effective prevention and intervention strategies, we must start by understanding the nature and scope of the problem. This research report provides an overview of advances that have been made in defining youth gangs and their activities, motivations for joining, and risk and protective factors that influence involvement in a gang lifestyle. Further, in the last number of years strides have been made in understanding gang involvement among several key populations, namely Aboriginal youth, immigrant youth and young women. This publication also highlights information on specific risk factors, pathways to involvement and desistance, and guidance on prevention and intervention efforts for these groups. Finally, some key findings to date and recommendations for moving forward are provided based on empirical evidence and lessons learned from Public Safety Canada's past implementation and evaluation experiences with youth gang projects.

The majority of the theoretical knowledge and empirical work on youth gangs has come from the United States. Although there are advantages in learning from the American experience, there is a danger in assuming that the cause(s) and structure of gangs are the same in the United States and in Canada. The historical and demographic differences between the two countries as well as the differences in political culture suggest the importance of examining the gang issue in Canada from an independent standpoint (Ezeonu, 2014). To that end, this report uses Canadian research and resources as much as possible.

What is a Youth Gang?¹

Before discussing the issue of youth gang involvement in Canada, it is important to clarify what is meant by the term. Within and between academic, government and law enforcement communities there is a lack of a widely-agreed upon definition of 'youth gang'. Instead of providing a precise definition here, some general criteria that can be taken into consideration are offered (Mohammed, 2007; Sánchez-Jankowski, 2003; Wortley 2010):

- It is a group phenomenon with a minimum of three to five persons.
- It is a phenomenon related to youth/young adults.

¹ The gang classification is sometimes broadly extended to include prison gang, motorcycle gang, terrorist gang or criminal gang (as in organized crime). The focus of this research report is specifically on the 'street level' youth gang.

- It is a self-formed association of peers (often with a group name or group identity) who have mutual interests, and who may use symbols of belonging (e.g., tattoos, clothing, logos) and special modes of communication (e.g., hand signs).
- Organization is seen as a necessary, though not sufficient, defining feature; there tends to be a leadership structure that has more or less defined roles.
- There is control of, or claim to, a specific neighbourhood, territory or turf in which the group operates.

In the above respects, youth gangs are similar to other social groups. One widely used benchmark for assessing whether a given social group is a ‘youth gang’ is the engagement by group members in delinquent or criminal behaviour, some of which may involve violence (as well as fear and intimidation), on a regular basis (Wortley, 2010). In its most basic form, it is a group of young people who act out in antisocial or delinquent ways and/or is based on involvement in some form of criminal activity usually in an effort to gain from it as a group, whether financially, socially or territorially (Centre for Forensic Behavioural Science and Justice Studies, 2015).

While there are similarities in the basic causes and processes of gang formation that characterize gang membership across Canada, the specific form the group takes depends in part on the region of the country in which it is located (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008). No single definition can account for the diversity of the gang phenomenon in contemporary Canadian society. Gangs must be defined in the local context if policy and programming are to proceed effectively. Further, a clear, concise definition of ‘youth gang’ is needed in the context of the development, implementation and evaluation of prevention and intervention initiatives. This allows us to better focus our efforts by setting aside other criminal offenders and youth groups that infrequently participate in criminal activity (Klein & Maxson, 2006) and to properly tailor strategies targeting those at risk of and involved in youth gangs.

No matter what criteria are employed, caution should be taken when defining a youth gang and gang involvement. There are risks associated with classification, namely stereotyping and maltreatment that may occur once a youth is identified as a ‘gang member’ (Henry, 2009). So, while researchers, evaluators and practitioners in the area may need to define ‘youth gang’, it is also important to be aware of the possible consequences that a definition or label can have on the youth with whom they study or work.

Why Do Youth Become Involved in Gangs?

Much of the research literature suggests that gang affiliation often provides psychological, social and/or economic benefits, and that those who become involved with gangs do so to meet unfulfilled needs (Chettleburgh, 2007; Wortley & Tanner, 2006). Motivations for gang involvement may include any number of the following (as described in Dunbar, 2016):

- A gang can be seen as a source of protection; a way to address concerns about personal safety and security, whether as a result of personal experiences of violence or due to a fear or expectation of such violence.

- A gang can provide the means to acquire material goods and resources that may not be available through legitimate means. In many instances, joining a gang and a turn to illegal activities is a way for individuals to increase income and achieve financial goals.
- A gang can act as a social organization that provides its members with excitement, entertainment or the status associated with other groups. In many cases the gang is a primary social institution in the neighbourhood. It also provides members with an opportunity to meet others and can be a source of access to drugs and alcohol.
- A gang can be a source of empathy and emotional support to its members, and provide individuals with a sense of belonging. Membership can offer a source of self-esteem and identity, as well as companionship and support. In this way the gang can become a substitute family for its members, through which they can fulfill personal needs.
- A gang may be attractive to those facing difficult social and economic conditions including poverty, low educational performance, lack of job-related skills, and social disorganization. If young people perceive that a future of helplessness and hopelessness awaits them, the gang lifestyle may appear to offer them a better alternative.

It is important to highlight that individuals join gangs for a variety of reasons, and these are not exclusive of one another. The decision to join is often well thought out and the individual believes that this is best for their interests at the moment (Sánchez-Jankowski, 2003).

What Are the Consequences Associated with Youth Gangs?

In general, youth gang members account for a large amount of criminal behaviour and a variety of criminal offences have been consistently linked to gang membership including property offences, drug trafficking and importation, fraud, robberies, assaults with weapons, homicides, and the trafficking of women and girls (Boyce & Cotter, 2013; Gilman, Hill, Hawkins, Howell, & Kosterman, 2014).

An indication of the nature of the crime and violence perpetrated by youth in Canada, and youth gang members by extension, is reflected in recent national statistics. As a whole, youth aged 12 to 17 and young adults aged 18 to 24 accounted for over a third of individuals accused in police-reported criminal incidents in Canada in 2014. The majority of youth accused in some of the most serious offences were co-offenders. In particular, 75% of youth accused in robberies, 62% of youth accused in incidents of serious sexual assault and 57% of youth accused in incidents of aggravated assault were co-offenders.² Between 2005 and 2014, 10% of individuals accused of homicide were youth and 29% of those homicides were identified as gang related³, a much larger

² Given the limited data on the nature of criminal activities perpetrated by gang-involved individuals, these statistics refer to police-recorded incidents for all youth and young adults in Canada, not just those who are identified as gang members.

³ A homicide is classified as gang related when police confirm or suspect that the accused person and/or victim involved in the homicide was either a member, or a prospective member, of an organized crime group or street gang or was somehow associated with an organized crime group or street gang, and the homicide was carried out as a result of this association (Miladinovic & Mulligan, 2015).

proportion than was found among homicides involving an adult accused (14%) (Allen, 2016; Allen & Superle, 2016).

Beyond the immediate injuries to individuals, youth gangs and their activities are harmful to communities and society as a whole, although the impact is sometimes not well recognized. For example, members of gang-affected communities often live within a culture of violence and there are social costs in lost potential and fear of crime affecting the normal activities of citizens. The financial costs to the justice and health care systems are also considerable (Chatterjee, 2006).

Involvement in the gang lifestyle can also lead to problems for its members, including: dropping out of school; lack of employment success; exposure to and involvement with drug and alcohol use; and teenage parenthood. Participation reduces gang members' connections to other prosocial activities and they may cut ties to prosocial groups and organizations such as family, friends, schools and religious communities in order to focus more intensively on gang participation. The longer an individual is involved, the more severe the effect is likely to become. Contact with the criminal justice system may lead to community supervision or to placement in a custodial facility resulting in a criminal record that can further limit individual growth and progress in education and/or employment domains (Pyrooz, Sweeten, & Piquero, 2013).

Finally, while the link between gang membership and offending has been widely acknowledged, far less attention has been paid to the nature of the relationship between gang membership and exposure to violence, victimization and trauma. Youth gang members report high levels of exposure to violence and have been found to be at an increased risk of experiencing serious violent victimization relative to other community youth and non-gang members (Pyrooz, Moule, & Decker, 2014; Taylor, Peterson, Esbensen, & Freng, 2007). There are several possible reasons for the association, many of which suggest that the nature of a gang, its organizational structure, its culture, and its activities act as paths into violence and consequentially into victimization (Decker, Katz, & Webb, 2007). Youth gang members report not only high levels of exposure to violence but also experiences that meet the criteria for classification as traumatic events. Exposure to such traumatic forms of violence is associated with negative mental health outcomes among gang-involved youth, including posttraumatic stress, detachment and emotional numbing, which in turn are associated with an increased likelihood of delinquency (Kerig, Chaplo, Bennett, & Modrowski, 2016; Laurier & Guay, 2016).

As gang-involved youth may be considered the main perpetrators of violence as well as the main victims, with high costs for society, it is important to find opportunities to prevent at-risk youth from joining and to intervene in the lives of current youth gang members.

What Are the Risk and Protective Factors for Youth Gang Involvement?

There is continued support for the use of evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies to address youth gang involvement and gang-related violence. In order for these strategies to be successful, a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence gang involvement is

required. Knowledge of risk and protective factors, although not in and of themselves indicative of causal mechanisms, provide insight into the larger picture of youth gang participation and offer empirically-informed guidance for developing more focused efforts by identifying specific factors that may be more important than others (Peterson & Morgan, 2014).

The risk factors for youth gang involvement span all five social development domains (individual, peer, school, family and community). There are no risk factors that uniquely predict a high probability of gang membership; no one variable can account for such a complex phenomenon (Decker, Melde, & Pyrooz, 2013). Further, the same factors that predict gang membership have considerable overlap with other problem behaviours (e.g., delinquency and violence) (Esbensen, Peterson, Taylor, & Freng, 2010). Youth who become gang involved often possess a relatively high number of risk factors prior to gang membership and the accumulation of risk factors across domains is the best known way to identify those most likely to become gang involved (Decker, Melde, & Pyrooz, 2013).

Given that several studies have conducted systematic literature reviews and meta-analyses examining risk factors for gang involvement (e.g., Howell & Egley, 2005; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Raby & Jones, 2016) and the major risk factors for gang involvement were presented in a previous publication⁴, a detailed overview is not presented here.⁵ In general, some of the risk factors for gang involvement that are consistently supported across a number of studies include the following: experiencing negative life events (e.g., serious illness, school suspension, relationship disruption); displaying early problem behaviours (e.g., reactivity, aggression, impulsivity); having delinquent beliefs; being poorly supervised by parents; associating with delinquent peers; and commitment to those deviant peers (Peterson & Morgan, 2014).

Compared to risk factors, protective factors have received less attention in the research literature on youth gangs. This is largely the result of definitional issues and uncertainty regarding what a protective factor is and the way in which it operates (i.e., is it the opposite of a risk factor and/or does it moderate or mediate the effect of a risk factor; does it have direct and/or indirect effects on the reduction of behaviour). It is also unclear if a protective factor in one context operates as a risk factor in another context (e.g., strong attachment and bonds to parents may not be a protective factor if they are criminally oriented or gang affiliated) (Stoddard et al., 2013).

Only a few studies have been conducted to examine factors that may protect against gang involvement. Similar to the case of risk factors, a longitudinal research study found support for protective factors for gang involvement in each of the five major social development domains of youths' lives (Gilman et al., 2014). Listed below are potential protective factors against youth gang membership. It is important to keep in mind that although many characteristics have been proposed as possible protective factors that could discourage youth from gang activity, a list of completely reliable protective factors does not yet exist (Howell, 2010).

⁴ See National Crime Prevention Centre (2007). *Youth Gang Involvement: What Are the Risk Factors?* Ottawa, ON: Public Safety Canada. Available from <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/yth-gng-nvlvmnt/index-en.aspx>

⁵ For the most updated, comprehensive and age-graded overview of risk factors for gang involvement, see the United States National Gang Center website <https://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/SPT/Risk-Factors>

Possible Protective Factors for Youth Gang Involvement*	
Individual	Above average or high intelligence; resilient temperament; good social skills; positive coping skills; good decision-making skills; sense of self-efficacy; high self-esteem; positive values and attitudes
Peer	Interactions with prosocial peers; involvement in prosocial activities; positive peer group; positive social connections; peer support
School	Academic achievement; educational aspirations; sense of accomplishment and respect for education; strong school commitment and bonding to school; positive relationships with adults in a school setting
Family	Connectedness to family; building strong family bonds; family support; family cohesiveness; ability of parents and/or extended family members to spend time with youth; strong parental involvement; intensive supervision and monitoring; emotionally positive parent-child relationship (e.g., warm, accepting, supportive)
Community	Living in a good neighbourhood (e.g., low crime rate, high socioeconomic status); social cohesion among neighbours; trust among neighbours

*Sources: Krohn et al., 2014; McDaniel, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2013; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Shaffer, 2014

As discussed previously, it is well known that exposure to multiple risk factors increases the likelihood of gang involvement beyond that of an isolated risk factor. Similarly, there is also evidence that the accumulation of protective factors has an opposite effect on gang involvement (McDaniel, 2012). What is less clear is whether a build-up of protective factors can lessen the effects of multiple risk factors; specifically, the degree to which having protective factors across all five domains may reduce the likelihood of gang involvement or lessen the effects of multiple risk factors. Further research on the interaction between cumulative risk factors and cumulative protective factors is needed (Stoddard et al., 2013).

Who Joins Youth Gangs in Canada? Snapshot on Three Key Populations of Interest

It is important to note that a precise measure of youth gang involvement and the occurrence of youth gang activity⁶ in Canada is not currently available, namely as a result of a lack of national data collection processes and a general reluctance on the part of individuals to voluntarily reveal gang membership. As noted by Sinclair and Grekul (2012), a weakness in the literature on youth gangs is the information that we use to assess the rate of youth gang involvement in Canada. The majority of reports and academic papers cite one single source for youth gang statistics, the *Results of the 2002 Police Survey of Youth Gangs* (Chettleburgh, 2003). Findings from this

⁶ This refers to all youth gang activity, not just criminal incidents substantiated and reported by Canadian police services through the annual Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Survey.

national survey are based on police perceptions of gang and member numbers in some regional jurisdictions and stratified estimates in others. Now 15 years old, it is uncertain if the data continue to reflect the current youth gang situation in Canada. While some recent studies have attempted to provide a systematic assessment of the extent of the youth gang phenomenon at the provincial/territorial level, no other national survey on youth gang involvement has been completed to date. Further, relying on voluntary disclosure of involvement is problematic in some circumstances. Gang affiliation and membership are frequently hidden particularly if gang surveillance and suppression activities increase in communities or if confirmation of membership jeopardizes young people's safety. This can lead to a general reluctance on the part of youth to discuss their involvement in the presence of anyone with authority.

In general, research suggests that youth gang membership cuts across many ethnic, geographic, demographic and socioeconomic contexts. However, there tends to be a relationship between gender, race, ethnicity and class structure that factors into the formation of particular gangs. Three populations that are receiving increased interest by gang scholars and researchers in Canada over the last number of years are Aboriginal youth, immigrant youth, and young women. These three groups will be the focus of the rest of this section.

Aboriginal Youth⁷

Historically the topic of Aboriginal gangs has largely been absent from Canadian gang research, although the number of government-initiated studies and academic works have been increasing over the last 15 years. The presence of Aboriginal gangs in urban, reserve or rural, and prison settings is now well documented. While resources related specifically to Aboriginal youth are still relatively limited, we continue to work to build our knowledge and understanding of this population through theoretical and empirical research and evaluation studies.⁸

It is believed that membership in Aboriginal youth gangs is rapidly increasing in the Prairie Provinces and particularly within the cities of Winnipeg, Regina, Saskatoon and Edmonton (Preston, Carr-Stewart, & Bruno, 2012). Aboriginal youth gangs are also moving into northern Canada, namely in Iqaluit and Yellowknife. This is concerning given that the proportion of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples is continuing to increase rapidly compared to other groups in Canadian society, with an average age that is much younger than the rest of the population (Statistics Canada, 2011). Further, overrepresentation of this population in the criminal justice system has been well documented (Correctional Services Program, 2016; Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008), as have the high rates of violent offending and victimization within Aboriginal communities (Boyce, 2016; Brzozowski, Taylor-Butts, & Johnson, 2006).

Although Aboriginal gangs have existed for decades, in general they have not reached the level of sophistication characteristic of other organized crime groups. Despite their number and their noticeable presence in prison populations, Aboriginal gangs are still often given the status of

⁷ The information in this section is largely based on research and evaluation studies involving Aboriginal male youth as there are very few resources that explicitly address gang involvement among Aboriginal female youth.

⁸ A handful of research studies have explicitly explored Aboriginal youth in gangs in the Canadian context (see for example Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008; Hautala, Sittner, & Whitbeck, 2016; Preston, Carr-Stewart, & Bruno, 2012; Sinclair & Grekul, 2012; Totten, 2009, 2013). Since 2007, Public Safety Canada has developed and disseminated practical knowledge on Aboriginal youth gang involvement through the implementation and evaluation of gang prevention and intervention projects funded through the National Crime Prevention Strategy (NCPS).

street gangs and ‘wannabe’ groups, known for their violence, their structure based on African-American gangs (e.g., tattoos, hand symbols, chains of command), and their conflict with other groups. They are relatively fluid, gaining or declining in strength and number as membership changes and in response to enforcement strategies (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008). Members are typically individuals who are on the margins of the legitimate and illegitimate opportunity structures in Canadian society. They tend to be less educated and more economically disadvantaged in comparison to other criminal organization members (Deane, Bracken, & Morrissette, 2007; Goodwill, 2016). Aboriginal gangs tend to be intergenerational and although there is some indication that most individuals in gangs are over the age of 18, participants in Canadian research studies and program evaluations reported their engagement in gang activities as early as age eight (Badger & Albright, 2003; Comack, Deane, Morrissette, & Silver, 2013; Prairie Research Associates, 2011; Totten & Dunn, 2012).

Some studies (e.g., Kelly & Caputo, 2005) indicate that Aboriginal gangs are used by more organized criminal business organizations to carry out ‘street work’. Aboriginal youth are assigned to the more disorganized, less profitable criminal opportunities including drug trafficking, assaults, and break-and-enters. Finally, Aboriginal gang violence is different than that exhibited by other youth gangs in Canada. Rates of internalized violence, including suicide, drug overdose, and self-injurious behaviours are far higher than externalized forms of criminal violence. Many acts of physical violence in Aboriginal gangs are motivated by revenge, retaliation and reputation, and the result is that young Aboriginal men are harming other young Aboriginal men (Totten, 2009, 2013).

Population Specific Risk Factors

Canadian research has examined specific risk factors for Aboriginal youth gang members. First and foremost gang involvement has precursors that can be traced back to the historical and cultural losses, social and political inequalities, and economic barriers faced by many Aboriginal people for multiple generations (e.g., racism, marginalization, colonialization, loss of culture, loss of land, poverty, intergenerational violence, unemployment, and issues of poor health). These multiple levels of marginality create social and geographic conditions favourable to gang formation and involvement among Aboriginal youth. As a whole these youth are more prone to youth gang involvement than their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Preston, Carr-Stewart, & Bruno, 2012; Sinclair & Grekul, 2012).

Individual risk factors such as stressful experiences, early life hardships and negative emotions coming from marginality in other life domains have been shown to increase the odds of gang involvement for Aboriginal youth (Goodwill, 2016). Further, anger has been associated with gang initiation, while depressive symptoms and hyperactivity/impulsivity have been associated with gang membership (Hautala, Sittner, & Whitbeck, 2016). In addition, several studies have found delinquency to be a significant factor for gang membership among Aboriginal youth (Freng, Davis, McCord, & Roussell, 2012). Moreover, Aboriginal adolescents tend to begin substance use at earlier ages than other racial and ethnic groups, and substance use has been found to be a significant factor for gang involvement among this group (Hautala, Sittner, & Whitbeck, 2016).

Peer influences are one of the most consistent and robust predictors of gang involvement. Associating with peers who are gang involved (including hanging around, delinquency, looking up to other gang members, proving one’s worth to the gang) has been found to be a precursor to later gang membership among Aboriginal youth (Goodwill, 2016; Hautala, Sittner, & Whitbeck, 2016). School is another key domain which may aggravate the risk of gang involvement.

Research has shown that Aboriginal youth who join gangs have little connection to school. Weak school attachment and low school bonding have been found to be correlates of gang initiation and early conduct problems in grade school can increase the odds of later gang membership (Hautala, Sittner, & Whitbeck, 2016).

Finally, the family is a key risk domain with family gang involvement providing a strong pull factor and other family problems including poor parental monitoring and parental neglect/abuse providing important push factors that increase the appeal of gangs (Grant & Feimer, 2007; Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008). Further, involvement in the Aboriginal child welfare system is a risk factor for gang involvement and criminality that is quite firmly established in the literature. The path from child welfare to gang involvement is intensified through the displacement of Aboriginal children that can lead to vulnerability, abuse and harm, trust and attachment problems, as well as an array of mental health issues. Gang members themselves state that their peers who have been raised in care make good targets for recruitment because gangs promise to act as family substitutes (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008; Sinclair & Grekul, 2012).

Pathways to Gang Involvement and Desistance

For Aboriginal youth, the risk factors for gang involvement are compounded by the wider historical, structural and cultural issues noted previously. Aboriginal youth may be among the most marginalized in a subpopulation of marginalization (i.e., at-risk youth and gang-involved youth more generally). With few options available to address these concerns, the strong motivational factor leading into gang life is survival and the opportunity it provides for protection, identity, belonging, financial support and access to alcohol and drugs (Goodwill, 2016; Goodwill & Ishiyama, 2015; Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008).

Totten (2009, 2013) suggests that a pathways approach, supported by evidence from several Canadian studies, is useful in identifying the primary mechanisms through which Aboriginal youth find themselves involved in gang activity. There are five main pathways which can overlap to form compounding challenges for some Aboriginal youth:

- The process of cyclical violence through which survivors of child maltreatment and neglect become perpetrators and victims in adolescence. When Aboriginal children suffer these forms of harm, they are at high risk for involvement in delinquency, crime, violence and gangs during their adolescent years.
- Experiencing multiple out-of-home placements in child welfare and correctional facilities. These facilities are prime recruiting grounds for gang members, and a significant number of gang members report that they only became gang involved following placement in such facilities.
- The lifelong impact of brain and mental health disorders that result from prolonged childhood trauma, and of the accompanying developmental impairments and emotional vulnerability. Many Aboriginal gang members who engage in violence have a state of 'terminal' thinking that leads them to focus on survival only; their sense of security, safety and trust never properly develop.
- Social exclusion and devaluation related to social class, race, sexual orientation and gender. The loss of cultural identity, combined with social and economic marginalization, fuels gang violence.
- Development of hyper-masculinities and sexualized femininities. Violence is used to construct masculinity, and sexuality to construct femininity.

Research on leaving the gang has shown that Aboriginal gang members may place considerable weight on their own decision-making processes and abilities with respect to leaving the gang and, while the decision might be related to a variety of factors, specific life events have not been identified. So, poor treatment within the gang, tiring of the gang life and wanting to avoid incarceration, as well as the positive influence of parents, partners or children, building social bonds particularly within one's Aboriginal culture, avoiding alcohol and drugs, and a period of contemplation away from crime may be associated with gang leaving, but these factors do not always guarantee a decision to exit. Further, stable employment is often a factor, as the ability to support oneself is considered a key to successfully leaving the gang (Goodwill & Ishiyama, 2015; Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008).

For Aboriginal youth coming from marginalized backgrounds whose lives are characterized by social isolation and disadvantage, the presence of stereotypes may complicate the process of desistance. Partly desistance involves moving away from one's former identity as a gang member and beginning to form a new identity. For Aboriginal youth, this involves the further change of seeing oneself as no longer conforming to a negative stereotype. It involves moving from a position of being excluded from social opportunities to seeing oneself as deserving to be included. Building associations and developing trust with prosocial others are major challenges (Deane, Bracken, & Morrissette, 2007).

Guidance for Prevention and Intervention

Many of the risk factors for gang involvement among Aboriginal youth are similar to those found in the general youth gang population, which suggests that pre-existing gang prevention and intervention strategies can work with these youth. Yet the conditions which shape risk among Aboriginal youth likely come from different social, political and historical processes, making the risk factors identified similar in function, but different in context (Whitbeck, Sittner Hartshorn, & Walls, 2014). This has important implications for how we design and implement gang prevention and intervention programs for Aboriginal youth, and particularly for those residing in rural and/or remote areas (Hautala, Sittner, & Whitbeck, 2016).

The presence of structural inequality and collective trauma require continuous understanding and form an important component when working with Aboriginal youth involved in gangs (Goodwill, 2016). Gang prevention and intervention practices should include the ability to assess the intergenerational effects of gangs and institutions that typically over represent Aboriginal peoples, and be inclusive of the goals of Aboriginal collectives working to reverse this (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008). Further, the task is to limit the exclusion of Aboriginal families from timely, relevant and accessible services to continuously and effectively address what has already happened and prevent the transmission of trauma trans-generationally (Goodwill & Ishiyama, 2015). Gang issues should be regarded in the context of family experiences and treated in a multi-systematic therapeutic framework. Professionals skilled in trauma repair, addiction treatment, and assisting troubled families have important roles within coordinated and sustained healing resources within communities affected by gangs (Hautala, Sittner, & Whitbeck, 2016; Preston, Carr-Stewart, & Bruno, 2012).

Prevention and intervention programs that focus on Aboriginal youth are limited in number, but several promising programs exist that are premised upon cultural appropriateness and relevance, and these appear to be relatively successful in helping at-risk and gang-involved youth (Sinclair

& Grekul, 2012).⁹ Any effort must be culturally adapted to fit the developmental context in which Aboriginal youth are involved to embrace their unique world view and to benefit from local community and cultural strengths (Whitbeck, Sittner Hartshorn, & Walls, 2014). This also limits the possibility of accepting what Klein and Maxson (2006) refer to as ‘conventional wisdoms’ and assuming that what we learn about successful gang programming in one location can be applied to other locations.

New strategies and approaches, as well as collaboration and problem-solving partnerships must be culturally competent; this goes beyond ‘cultural awareness’ (knowledge about a group) and ‘cultural sensitivity’ (some level of experience with a group). For example, the Medicine Wheel is an important symbol in Aboriginal teachings; it is a circular, holistic approach as opposed to the linear approach used in many Western settings (Totten, 2009, 2013). Further, in Aboriginal cultures, the concept of healing is a central theme which has broad application. It generally refers to an ongoing process, the practice and journey of ‘living well’ or of seeking ‘the good life’ (Hart, 1999). A powerful means of healing used throughout the Aboriginal community is the recovery of cultural and spiritual traditions. The practice of pipe ceremonies, sweat lodges, the sun dance and naming ceremonies, all provide a personal encounter with one’s cultural ancestry (Deane, Bracken, & Morrisette, 2007).

Immigrant Youth¹⁰

There has been growing public concern expressed over the ‘immigrant youth gang’ in the last number of years. Wortley and Tanner (2006) noted that an assumption is often made that youth gang activity in Canada may be increasing because of recent immigration from certain ‘gang-prone’ nations, meaning that serious youth gang activity is being imported from other countries into Canada. However, given that there is a lack of statistical information on crime with respect to immigrant status, race and ethnicity, it is not possible to establish the prevalence and patterns of changes in criminal gang involvement of youth from immigrant families (Ngo, 2010). To date, a limited number of Canadian studies have examined the issue of immigrant youth and gangs.¹¹ Continued dialogue on the connections between immigration, crime and gang involvement are needed in Canada in order to guide the development of responsive policies, programs and services for this population.¹²

Some newcomers can face a number of barriers to integration into Canadian society. First generation immigrant youth can experience linguistic, acculturative, psychological and economic challenges. They may experience barriers to equitable opportunities in Canada, and encounter a wide range of obstacles and challenges in accessing services and support in the social services, education, health and justice arenas. Although second generation Canadian youth born into immigrant families, as a group, tend to do well economically, those from a visible minority background may experience significant inequalities in their educational attainment and

⁹ See also evaluation summaries showing process and outcome results for gang prevention and intervention projects funded through the NCPS. Available from www.publicsafety.gc.ca/ent/rsracs/pblctns/index-en.aspx?t=crm-prvntn

¹⁰ This includes first and second generation immigrant youth as well as refugee youth.

¹¹ See for example Gordon, 2000; Ngo, 2010; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Wortley & Tanner, 2008.

¹² Public Safety Canada is currently funding several initiatives that work to prevent and/or reduce the involvement of immigrant youth in gangs. Identity-Based Intervention: Preventing Criminal Gang Involvement of Youth from Immigrant Families is one example. It is a project in Calgary, Alberta that is based on the Wraparound approach and also seeks to support service partners and community groups to achieve cultural competence and sustained coordination of services.

participation in the labour market. Second generation Canadian youth may also experience sociocultural challenges with respect to competing cultural expectations, cultural identity and intercultural interactions (Ngo, 2010; Sersli, Salazar, & Lozano, 2010).

Gangs typically form in communities where an accumulation of different forms of disadvantage (e.g., economic disadvantage, lack of opportunities, family disruption, racial discrimination) come together. Both the emergence and sustainability of gangs and gang membership rely on the extent to which these disadvantages are more prevalent in communities (Pyrooz, Fox, & Decker, 2010). These groups experience what Vigil (2002) called ‘multiple marginality’, where breakdowns of social and economic factors lead to a ‘street socialization’ takeover. Multiple marginality acts and reacts within populations to drive youth into the streets and immigration or migration adaptation is a central part of this process. As youth undergo street socialization they may form a street subculture, namely a gang.

Commonly these gangs are organized with the specific intent of committing criminal activity for the purpose of financial gain. They are hierarchally structured with an established leadership and chain of command, and are selectively open to expanding their membership. Most gangs have initiation rituals based on violence and subject new members to screening and personal testing to confirm their solidness and loyalty. Most immigrant youth are involved in either an ethnically-based gang, or in a multicultural gang. Those associated with the latter have indicated that while their criminal gang was open to individuals of diverse ethnic backgrounds, only those from certain ethnic groups would be given a leadership role (Ngo, 2010). It should be noted however that when we assume that all ethnic gangs are alike, we lose sight of the uniqueness of groups that, while sharing criminal involvement, arise out of different contexts and conditions, are often organized differently, and vary in function and form (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008).

Population Specific Risk Factors

The findings of several Canadian qualitative studies¹³ demonstrate that the individual, school, family and community risk factors for gang involvement that appear to have a negative influence on immigrant youth are often interrelated, leaving some youth with what seem to be insurmountable challenges. At the individual level, 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 comes from poverty, extreme violence, and brutality in their home countries. Once in Canada, the vulnerability of individual youth may be further aggravated by mental health issues and psychological damage resulting from instances of discrimination and victimization (Ngo, 2010). At the school level, lack of engagement has been identified as a risk factor for gang involvement (Chettleburgh, 2007), and there may be multiple underlying issues. Immigrant youth may struggle in educational pursuits, including lack of English proficiency, learning disabilities, and disrupted school experiences. Further challenges enhancing these barriers may include lack of academic support at home, fear of authority figures, and inappropriate grade placement (Kanu, 2008). At the family level, different rates of acculturation and conflict between home culture and dominant culture contributes to a growing detachment from parents and can lead to additional family stress and sustained family conflict due to different cultural expectations (Kanu, 2008; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009). Further, low parental supervision and lack of parental modeling due to the physical or emotional absence of one or both parents (e.g., as a result of concern with economic survival) is

¹³ See Anisef & Kilbride, 2003; Ngo, 2010; Ngo & Schleifer, 2005; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Taylor, 2005.

common (Wortley & Tanner, 2006). Other risk factors include familial substance abuse or mental health issues, negative influences from older siblings, and familial criminality (Ngo, 2010). Finally at the community level, living in impoverished, high-crime neighbourhoods which experience violence and drug dealing as a regular part of daily life presents particular risks to immigrant youth. A lack of integration means that immigrant youth who live in these neighbourhoods may not have access to the same resources and programming as youth in other neighbourhoods (Sersli, Salazar, & Lozano, 2010).

Many of the risk factors for gang involvement are indicative of the sustained marginalization often faced by newcomer youth and their families (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009). Although immigration status is not a direct cause of gang involvement, association with gangs may provide social support, acceptance and a sense of social status and respect that youth do not receive at home, at school or in their community. Youth who feel particularly stigmatized, isolated or excluded from mainstream society may come to believe that they are systematically excluded from legitimate opportunities. Social alienation and perceptions of social injustice may be important factors in explaining why some youth reject conventional social activities and decide to join gangs. Furthermore, these youth may see gang involvement as an expression of resistance to their perceptions of social inequality and oppression (Wortley & Tanner, 2006).

Pathways to Gang Involvement and Desistance

The breakdown of identities and the lack of a sense of belonging for immigrant youth may occur when their negative experiences at home, school and in the community outweigh their corresponding positive experiences. This happens when young people are confronted with both a wide range and severity of negative life experiences over an extended period, and can be aggravated by pre-migration vulnerabilities, as well as by socioeconomic conditions at home and in the community. The breakdown of identities can result in negative self-concept, as well as in disempowering views of ethnic and Canadian identities. As individuals, the youth may internalize identities of the victim, the deprived, the unwanted, the incapable, the follower, the frustrated and/or the delinquent. As citizens they may struggle with their identity as Canadians and may refer to themselves as immigrants or ethnic minorities regardless of their length of time in Canada. They may feel pressure to distance or abandon their cultural practices and may struggle with internalized racism. There may also be a discrepancy between the longing of youth to belong, and the difficult realities of their social isolation and exclusion. Youth may express a need to belong to supportive social networks, yet they may not feel strong connections with others at home, school or in the community (Ngo, 2010).

The breakdown of identities and the lack of a sense of belonging can create a void in social identity and connections, which can push immigrant youth to seek or be open to membership in alternative social networks. They can develop friendships with other socially disconnected individuals, who can introduce them to alternative groups, such as an established social clique, or together with other youth form their own social clique. Through these high-risk groups, immigrant youth can receive social validation and support, and participate in delinquent behaviours. Over time, these social cliques can evolve into more entrenched criminal gangs. In a few cases, the youth can be introduced to established gangs by their family members. Through group interactions and activities, youth can enjoy human bonding, group identity, protection, social status, thrills and financial rewards (Ngo, 2010).

For immigrant youth, the decision to leave the gang may involve a traumatic turning point, such as the death of bystanders or close friends and peer betrayal, as well as the tipping points of

cognitive maturity and religious awakening. With self-determination and strong support from family members, immigrant youth may gradually distance and disconnect themselves from other gang members, and start a new life. In order to reintegrate into their family and communities, they may rely on family and social support. They can put effort into continuing their education and obtaining/maintaining legitimate employment. They can reconnect with the community through participation in community activities and services. In their ethnic communities, they may find spiritual grounding in religion and community mentorship (Ngo, 2010).

Guidance for Prevention and Intervention

In order to support high-risk and gang-involved youth from immigrant families, a shared vision of collaboration among stakeholders from diverse sectors is needed to promote the development of positive identities and to achieve a healthy sense of belonging at home, at school and in the community. Ngo (2010) recommends certain principles to guide the development of programs and services for this population:

- Integration of empowering identity development – initiatives should outline clear strategies to promote positive self-concept, Canadian identity and ethnic identity.
- Promote equity – stakeholders should address equity in resource allocation and availability of services, support and opportunities that in turn ensure equitable outcomes of wellbeing and success of youth from immigrant families.
- Multi-stakeholder involvement, coordination and collaboration – multiple individuals and organizations working together can increase resource and professional expertise, and ensure both specialized support for specific needs and development of the youth.
- Multiple approaches to youth services – in response to the complex life experiences and needs of high-risk and gang-involved youth from immigrant families, stakeholders should be attentive to the multiple layers of needs and corresponding initiatives required to address the complex issue.
- Timelines and responsiveness – initiatives should be swift and respond to the needs of at-risk and gang-involved youth who are dealing with competing social pressures, demands and influences.

With respect to prevention, strategies for family-based support should address issues related to resettlement, academic and literacy capacity, family interaction, wellbeing and the influence of parents and siblings, family outreach and mentorship, and socioeconomic support. School-based strategies should deal with academic programming, social opportunities and programs, character building and identity development, mentorship, school transitions, outreach to and psychosocial support for socially alienated students, preventive education and support, and effective school practices. In addition, community-based strategies should promote culturally specific programming for immigrant youth, access for youth from immigrant families to general youth services, mentorship, community education and support, community and neighbourhood development, social action to address neighbourhood inequities, cultural competence, and organizational capacity to work with behaviourally challenging youth (Ngo, 2010; Sersli, Salazar, & Lozano, 2010; Wortley & Tanner, 2006).

With respect to gang exit and reintegration of gang-involved youth into the community, strategies for family-based support should ensure family safety, involvement of family members, and support to strengthen families. School-based strategies should deal with school safety, psychosocial, academic and financial support, and educational opportunities for returning youth.

Community-based strategies should focus on outreach, support with separation from gangs, availability of post-gang support, community connection and participation, and leadership opportunities for formerly gang-involved youth to make positive contributions to the community (Ngo, 2010; Sersli, Salazar, & Lozano, 2010; Wortley & Tanner, 2006).

Young Women

Historically, young women have remained relatively ‘invisible’ in the gang literature for a variety of reasons, including: a primary research focus on male gang activity; offending, violence and gang membership being regarded as male behaviour; and limited police attention paid to female gang membership (Khan, Brice, Saunders, & Plumtree, 2013; O’Neal, Decker, Moule, & Pyrooz, 2016; Scott & Ruddell, 2011). Further, given the limited amount of research conducted on gangs in Canada in general, a specific focus on females and their experiences in gangs is even less frequent.¹⁴ However, in recent years, advances have been made in examining this population.

Unlike in the United States, where an increasing number of young women are joining and forming gangs, Canada is thought to have relatively few female gang members, and most of them are assumed to remain in the exterior circle (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009). The rate of female gang involvement is assumed to be approximately 10 times lower in Canada than it is in the United States. In 2002, it was estimated that 6% of gang members were thought to be female, ranging from a low of 3% in Ontario to a high of 12% in British Columbia (Chettleburgh, 2003). However, because women are less likely to be arrested by police, it is possible that these figures are underestimated. According to Chettleburgh (2003), the true number may be closer to a third of all gang members. Further, Totten (2008) suggests that the number of female gang members is higher now, as sources indicate that female gang involvement in Canada has been on the rise.

Early research studies described young women as adopting fairly stereotypical gender-specific marginal roles in the gang (e.g., sex objects, girlfriends, groupies, gun/drug holders, alibis, bait) rather than adopting equal responsibilities to male gang members (Lauderdale & Burman, 2009). On occasion, alternative descriptions developed of ‘tomboys’ (females who demonstrated their physical abilities and proved they could hang out and fight alongside males) or ‘gang girls’ (loud, crude groups of young women who not only cursed and were sexually active, but who took no pride in how they dressed) (Archer & Grascia, 2006; Tobin, 2008). However, over the last number of years, research studies have observed variety in the positions young women adopt, and this is illustrated by how female gang members have more recently begun to develop more central and independent roles within the gang including drug dealing, recruiting and enforcing (e.g., calling in drug debts) (Nimmo, 2001). Some young women are respected as being tough individuals and are seen as an asset to the gang.

Just as the research available indicates that there is no one type of female gang member, there are multiple types of gangs involving females. The ‘auxiliary gang’ is a support system for a main male gang. This female auxiliary gang has its own leadership structure and takes on a feminine version of a male gang (i.e., ‘Kings’ and ‘Queens’) and such groups are actively involved in gang activities for their own gain and potentially in relation with their male counterparts. The ‘co-ed

¹⁴ Only a handful of research studies have explicitly explored young women in gangs in the Canadian context (see for example Aulakh, 2008; Chatterjee, 2006; Dorais & Corriveau, 2009; Grekul & LaRocque, 2011; Kelly, 2015; Mackenzie & Johnson, 2003; Nimmo, 2001; Scott & Ruddell, 2011).

gang' has both male and female gang members, there is no gender separation within the organization, and status within the gang is based on respect gained by the individual. Finally, there is the rare 'independent gang', a completely female gang that is not connected to any male or co-ed gang. It is the least common type of female gang although research is beginning to show that some auxiliary gangs may evolve into independent gangs (Tobin, 2008). Further, there may be some variation in the treatment of female gang members based on the type of gang in which they are involved. Nimmo (2001) for example, observed that less organized gangs offered more power and status to women associates or members. Lauderdale and Burman (2009) observed that a woman's position within a gang is flexible and usually determined by gang leaders.

Population Specific Risk Factors

Although there is growing understanding of risk factors for gang membership, our knowledge on gender-specific risk factors is still limited, as not much youth gang research has thoroughly compared young women and young men. Keeping this limitation in mind, some tentative conclusions can be drawn from research to date. Many risk factors appear to be shared by males and females, including: early problem behaviour; beliefs supporting deviance; lack of prosocial bonds; association and commitment to delinquent peers; low social support; low supervision and parental social control; perceptions of school disorder; poor academic achievement; living in poverty; and high levels of gang activity and/or drug dealing in the community (see Bell, 2009; Esbensen et al., 2010; Peterson & Morgan, 2014).

There are also several risk factors for gang involvement which appear to have a different impact on youth based on gender. Young women are more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds, have experiences of marginalization, and have multiple family problems, including a history of physical, sexual and emotional abuse in the home, witness physical violence and substance abuse in the home, and have a family member who is gang involved or who has been incarcerated (Grekul & LaRoque, 2011; Nimmo, 2001). Further, in the school domain, school commitment, attachment or expectations, and limited educational opportunities are more influential for females' than males' gang involvement (Esbensen et al., 2010; Peterson, 2012).

Pathways to Gang Involvement and Desistance

There is no one reason why young women join gangs and not all individuals join for the same reasons. Similar to the general motivations discussed previously, there are various push and pull factors that may influence the decision to become involved with a gang. Young women have described their gang joining in terms of finding respect and identity during an already difficult adolescent period, and pushing back against societally prescribed roles and stereotypes. Through their gang membership, they may reject such values as passivity and subordination to males (Peterson, 2012).

Bell (2009) and Miller (2001) have drawn attention to the relationship between exposure to violence and victimization as factors that enhance the appeal of gangs. Some young women are pushed into gangs as a result of a history of physical, sexual abuse and/or emotional abuse. A desire for the protection and sense of belonging offered by gangs may be a consequence of growing up in dysfunctional and abusive families, and low levels of parental involvement or attachment, as well as family disadvantage and poverty. Young women are likely to describe experiences of membership in terms of providing an alternative family structure (Archer & Grascia, 2006; Nimmo, 2001; Totten, 2008).

Peer relationships are also often linked to female gang involvement. Young women have reported becoming involved through peer pressure; either being intimidated or 'beat in' to gang membership or sexually 'groomed' by more sophisticated members (Archer & Grascia, 2006), often by boyfriends and male relatives (Tobin, 2008). Young women may also join gangs because they are looking for a social life, for fun and excitement (Eghigian & Kirby, 2006). Like their male counterparts, some seek excitement through crime and substance abuse (Archer & Grascia, 2006; Totten, 2008). Female gang members have also described their neighbourhoods as lacking resources and activities, and so the gang provides an important 'social outlet', addressing boredom and frustration (Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995).

Regardless of the increasing presence of women in gangs and the shift in their roles, there is still overwhelming evidence suggesting the exploitation, vulnerability and victimization of women affiliated with gangs (Archer & Grascia, 2006). These young women often have personal histories of victimization and multiple sites of oppression, including those based on gender, race, social class and systemic discrimination, and once they become affiliated with gangs their situations actually get worse (Grekul & LaRocque, 2011). Rather than being a safe haven, a source of protection, and a substitute family, as it usually promises to be, the gang becomes abuser, pimp and crime boss (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009) where gang-involved women are more likely than other women to be involved in sexually risky or harmful behaviour, including gang fighting, drug use and sales, and weapons carrying (Khan et al., 2013).

Victimization in gangs at the hands of fellow gang members is not uncommon (Abbottsford Youth Commission, 2010). Researchers report widespread sexual and physical victimization by boyfriends, and also by other male gang members in the context of the gang (Valdez, 2007). Female forms of victimization also differ from that of males. Totten (2009, 2013) describes the gendered nature of the processes surrounding gang involvement and revolving around hyper-masculinities and sexualized femininities. A gendered hierarchy enables the success of the gang and sexual exploitation is used as a means to achieve monetary success, by providing a service in high demand, while preserving male power and control (Petersen & Howell, 2013).

Further, as a result of constantly being under scrutiny by males, females may act more aggressively to demonstrate courage and/or to gain male respect. A young woman's main 'capital' on the streets is her measure of control and her reputation for handling herself, and those with a strong need for social acceptance by male gang members will do 'whatever it takes' to maintain close ties with male gang members (Petersen & Howell, 2013). This may account for the elevated delinquent activity of young women in the more mixed-gender gangs and some studies have recorded increasing equality in the prevalence of male and female acts of violence (Wang, 2000).

The experiences of young women within the gang and the potential long-term consequences highlight the fact that gang membership represents not just an opportunity for escaping or attempting to reduce various social injuries, but also a mechanism for additional injury (Peterson, 2012). Gang membership increases the odds of women experiencing domestic violence, having and caring for children at a young age, marrying a gang-affiliated partner, and unstable employment (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003). Moreover, if young women continue gang affiliation into adulthood, they are at a higher risk of becoming incarcerated and reoffending than non gang-involved women (Scott & Ruddell, 2011).

Although research on gang disengagement has advanced in the last decade, little attention has been given to whether, and to what extent, gender may affect the disengagement process (O’Neal et al., 2016). Studies examining why and how females disengage from gangs have generally focused on three areas: motherhood; criminal justice system involvement; and/or experiences of victimization. Each of these may act as a ‘hook for change’ (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002), assisting in the process of leaving the gang.

In general, empirical work examining the impact of motherhood is mixed, leaving questions about its impact on desistance (O’Neal et al., 2016). However, several Canadian studies have found that pregnancy influenced young women’s decisions to get out and stay out of the gang. The latter indicated that they did not want their child to be affected or influenced by the gang’s ‘negative lifestyle’ and that they wanted to make their lives better in order to protect them (Aulakh, 2008; Kelly, 2015; Nimmo, 2001).

Coming into contact with the criminal justice system, through incarceration and other sanctions, can also act as a turning point for young women (Nimmo, 2001). The physical separation of the institution can be beneficial for gang-involved women because it can result in an opportunity to contemplate the future, and the gang is no longer the primary support structure (at least temporarily). Overall, research on the effect of incarceration on gang leaving has resulted in mixed findings (Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule, 2014; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). It is possible that incarceration could result in disengagement from gangs; yet research on this topic is limited and examination of incarcerated female gang members is even less common.

Finally, because of the victimization of females in gangs relative to males, there may be more ‘crisis moments’ or opportunities for ‘hooks for change’ to occur (Grekul & LaRocque, 2011). Young women may recognize themselves to be victims of escalating violence and start to identify the negative consequences related to harm due to violence. These concerns can act as one of the reasons they decide to end their affiliations with their gangs and to move on with their lives. Key to this is often either personal experiences as direct victims of violent acts or the witnessing of violent attacks on fellow gang members (Aulakh, 2008; Kelly, 2015; Nimmo, 2001).

Guidance for Prevention and Intervention

While many risk factors and reasons motivating young women to join gangs overlap with those of their male counterparts, there are also key differences. For this reason, prevention and intervention initiatives should include both gender-neutral (with a proven record of improving female as well as male outcomes) and gender-specific approaches and programs. Recent studies have outlined some key elements for effective gender-informed initiatives for young women (Khan et al., 2013; Peterson, 2012; Peterson & Morgan, 2014; Wolf & Gutierrez, 2012):

- They should be provided in a safe and nurturing environment (including single-sex space) favourable to therapeutic change.
- They should include content which reflects both the risk factors and the realities of their daily lives: multi-disciplinary, comprehensive, holistic and solutions-focused approach to addressing the multiplicity of young women’s risks, strengths and experiences (including physical and sexual health, practical difficulties, life skills, parenting support, experiences of victimization, aspirations, mental health/trauma, educational opportunities, preparation for work, substance reliance).

- They should promote self-esteem, healthy assertive behaviour and self-reliance to build resilience against future victimization and provide opportunities for empowerment, growth and explorations of identity.
- They should foster respectful and positive relationships as an important device for promoting change: facilitating association with alternative peer groups; and utilizing mentors, particularly women with similar experiences who can identify with and advise them.
- They should include work with families (especially the mother-daughter relationship) and engagement of other adults supporting the longer term resilience of these young women with attention to improving interaction and communication, providing structure and accountability, and facilitating opportunities.
- They should continue to combat the ‘gang lore’ spreading the ideas that the gang is a safe haven and that one cannot leave without serious consequences to self, family and/or friends.

What Are We Doing to Address Youth Gang Involvement?

Since 2007, Public Safety Canada’s National Crime Prevention Strategy (NCPS) has undertaken deliberate efforts to develop the Canadian knowledge base on effective crime prevention programming focused on addressing known criminogenic factors among specific groups of persons including youth at risk of or involved in gangs. Funding has been and continues to be provided to community-based organizations for youth gang prevention and intervention projects in communities across Canada through the Youth Gang Prevention Fund (YGPF). These projects aim to reduce the number of at-risk and gang-involved youth in communities with a known or emerging gang problem.

Public Safety Canada continues to support effective youth gang prevention and intervention strategies that are known to work based on empirical evidence and lessons learned from past implementation and evaluation experiences. Some key findings to date and recommendations for moving forward include the following (NCPC, 2012; Smith-Moncrieffe, 2013):

- An assessment of the local gang problem is a critical first step for planning strategies, programs and activities. Failure to adequately assess the nature, characteristics and size of the issue may lead to not focusing on the right youth, not choosing the appropriate initiatives, and not employing the proper level of resources.
- The best results in addressing the youth gang problem come from the community working together. To collaborate fully with partners, organizations must form alliances and adopt an approach that brings together various stakeholders based on shared goals and through the establishment of infrastructure and multi-disciplinary teams that support program elements.
- Programming must meet or exceed the options or incentives offered by the gang while eliminating the negative consequences attached to gang membership. A comprehensive response is required and it must offer a variety of strategies, elements and activities that can address the multiple risks and needs of at-risk and gang-involved youth.

- Identifying and recruiting appropriate youth for gang prevention and intervention programming is difficult. The clientele needs to be well defined (age, gender, cultural identity, degree of gang involvement, overall risk level) and programming must consider the clientele being targeted to ensure that appropriate supports and resources are being provided (e.g., gender-specific, culturally-based).
- Establishing relationships with families and engaging them in programming is important. More often than not, parents of high-risk or gang-involved youth present with similar risk factors (e.g., coping with substance abuse and other mental health issues). In addition, siblings with a criminal and/or gang involvement history often ‘transmit’ their patterns of behaviour to other youth in the family.
- Programming must be implemented with fidelity. The amount and type of service that is provided to participants are important factors that contribute to changes in the outcomes being measured. To determine the appropriate level of programming and to identify the level and domains of risk and protective factors specific to each participant, validated assessment tool(s) should be used.
- Implementing a rigorous performance monitoring and evaluation process (including process, impact and cost analyses) from the beginning of the prevention or intervention initiative is important. This is vital for the assessment of implementation and program effectiveness as well as to improve program practices and to promote long-term sustainability.

The insights gained throughout the literature review process and the key findings and recommendations highlighted above have been and will continue to be incorporated into the development and implementation of future initiatives to address youth gangs. Building the Canadian knowledge base of effective youth gang prevention and intervention strategies and working to ensure the dissemination of good practice and lessons learned are essential components of an approach that will allow community stakeholders and provincial and territorial partners to choose the most appropriate programming for their local realities and make the best use of crime prevention resources.

Conclusion

Youth gangs continue to be a widespread problem in contemporary Canadian society. Gang members account for a large amount of criminal behaviour and gangs are characterized as harmful to individuals, communities, and society as well as causing problems for their members. The extent of the negative consequences associated with youth gang involvement demonstrates the necessity of continuing to examine the issue by conducting research and evaluation activities that provide, both theoretically and empirically, a greater understanding of the factors and processes surrounding it. The work conducted to date demonstrates the importance of developing a comprehensive approach to prevention and intervention that captures the complex nature of youth gang involvement and addresses the specific dimensions of the problem for key populations of interest. This means adopting a multi-dimensional approach that targets individual, peer, school, family and community conditions, and involves collaboration between a network of agencies and organizations with a vested interest in addressing youth gang involvement in Canada.

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