

Systemic Factor: Gangs: What Draws People in and What Pushes Them to Leave?

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Themes: Gangs; Street Gangs; Colonialism; Incarceration; Masculinity; Social Capital; Economic Capital; Mental Health; Desistance; Reintegration; Release Planning

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Western Canadian Street Gangs

“Many Canadian Indigenous street gangs located in the Prairie Provinces are born out of marginalized spaces, where their communities face compounded systemic oppression that restricts most members from accruing economic capital.”ⁱ

Since the early 2000’s and the release of the Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs (2002), there has been little published on the statistics of gang membership in Canada. However, data between 2000 and 2009 revealed that, “In Canada, 22% of all gang members [were] Aboriginal. It [was] estimated that there [were] between 800 and 1000 active Aboriginal gang members in the Prairie provinces. The largest concentration of gang members in Canada (of all gangs) [was] in Saskatchewan with 1.34 members per 1,000 population, or approximately 1,315 members (CSC 2001, 2003; Totten 2008c; CISS 2005; Astwood Strategy Corporation 2004).”ⁱⁱ

While the current challenges at obtaining statistical data on gang membership remain, street gangs in the Prairie Provinces are still present.

Dr. Robert Henry, an expert on Indigenous street gangs in Canada writes:

“Indigenous street gangs were seen to form in the early part of the 1980s in Winnipeg, Manitoba’s core neighbourhoods, and spread through correctional institutions across the Prairie Provinces. The majority of Indigenous families living in core neighbourhoods have been negatively impacted through Residential Schools, have had few economic opportunities due to lower education and racism, face greater health risks as a result of poverty, and find themselves in entrenched poverty with single mothers often being the sole parent and provider. Researchers, policy-makers, and criminal justice officials have understood such factors as ideal for the formation and entrenchment of street gangs within communities. However, without contextualizing why and how a large number of Indigenous families came to occupy these spaces in urban settings, one runs the risk of relying on stereotypical deficiencies to theorize the Indigenous street gang experience... Many Indigenous youth find themselves in spaces that support strain, control and social disorganization (social learning theory) theories. The breakdown of family, entrenched poverty, and lack of opportunities are all regarded within these theories as the foundational factors that are conducive to street gang environments. Entrenched meritocratic ideologies help to support the blaming of parents and whole communities for the creation of street gangs, where the parents have not worked hard enough or instill the proper values for their children and other youth to make “good” educated decisions. Such thinking ignores the socio-political histories that have created local fields, presuming that everyone has equal opportunities, and therefore equal choice. This exclusion and the position of colonialism as a historical event, subjugates and blames Indigenous peoples for their poverty, which continues to support colonial ideologies of paternalism and the continued infantilization of Indigenous peoples. This is why a critical decolonial/antiracist framework is needed to understand issues relating to Indigenous street gangs. Such a framework will position colonization, not as a historical artifact, but rather as an ideological perspective that has influenced Indigenous identity and relationships with settler Canadians.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Henry goes on to say that within the context of a street gang:

“...[M]asculinity is used to increase one’s social and economic capitals within local street fields... Many Indigenous street gangs that have formed in Canada are seen to replicate American street gang cultures, in which they adopt particular behaviours and integrate them with the local Indigenous culture in an effort to connect to others in the community. Due to moral panics constructed through public media, the street gang label has become synonymous with young Indigenous males and the communities (urban and rural) in which they reside. Public media maintains a culture of fear around those presumed to live in

specific communities, which in turn focuses public attention to particular behaviours as criminal and deviant, even if others who are non-Indigenous commit these same behaviours. In turn, some young Indigenous males who live in communities rife with low-socio economic status may internalize their marginality and claim them as sites of resistance to the social label, resulting in individuals searching out the street gang as a place to enact their constructed notions of identity, in particular their constructs of hyper-violent masculinity.”^{iv}

“The process of one’s involvement in gangs is not one that happens quickly. Individuals are socialized by their parents, friends, schools, media, and the community and construct their social identities as Indigenous males in accordance to their social and cultural capitals within specific fields. This then leads some Indigenous male youth to create closer connection to the street and particular street cultures because this is where they believe that they belong. Therefore the street gang, for some Indigenous males becomes the social space where they can search out specific opportunities to increase their social and economic capitals through their involvement with street gangs.”^v

“The impacts of colonization and settler colonialism cannot be easily quantified within trauma assessment tools for individuals and it is this history that also places Indigenous peoples at greater risk to be labeled as potential street gang members or criminals because of their Indigeneity. The complexities of such histories are found in the overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples across the province as they are more readily removed from families and communities, disrupting identity and community well-being. In Saskatchewan, Indigenous children and youth are vastly overrepresented in child welfare settings and young offender facilities.¹ High involvement in both systems are proven to show an increased propensity for individuals to be involved in adult corrections, both provincial and federal.”^{vi}

What Entices Someone to Join a Gang?

“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.

¹ See: Government of Saskatchewan, “[Child Welfare Statistics](#),” 2023/2024 and Trotchie, “[The Prairie Province Epidemic: A Cry for the Meaningful Inclusion of the Indigenous Perspective into the Sentencing of Indigenous People and Gladue](#),” p. 40.

- 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).^{vii}

Family

Dr. Henry highlights that beyond a ‘substitute family,’ kinship and family ties also play a role in the potential decision to join a street gang:

“Kinship and familial relationships have a deep impact with Indigenous street gang membership and politics; however these relationships are rarely discussed outside of family dysfunction. The literature often maintains that due to familial breakdown the street gang becomes the ‘family’ for individuals, as it provides the rules, stability, and support found within traditional families. Comack et al. cautions against this taken-for-granted simplicity of the street gang becoming greater than one’s family as, ‘this analogy [of gang as family] makes intuitive sense in accounting for the attraction of street gangs, relying on its simplicity runs the risk of masking more worrisome dynamics that operate in both the contemporary family and street gangs.’ However, as Indigenous street gangs create stability and longevity in communities, membership has become intergenerational, where fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, and extended family members are all a part of a particular gang. The family as gang – gang as family connection helps to connect children to street gangs, and socialize individuals to particular cultural codes of conduct.”^{viii}

“The complexity of Indigenous kinship relationships makes it difficult to address who is and who is not in a gang, and when a group of family members becomes a gang? Justice officials have created policies to help identify gang members in the community. The problem with the policies is that they do not take into account the importance of extended relationships within Indigenous communities. As a result, some individuals may be labeled as gang members simply by being seen with their own relatives. Also, because of the connection of street gangs and Indigenous youth, members of a community may mislabel groups of relatives who hang out together as a gang. Ultimately this can lead to the misrepresentation of Indigenous males as gang members simply because of family connections. Thus individuals must disassociate from their families in order to not be viewed as a street gang member.”^{ix}

Masculinity, Social, and Economic Capital

As previously mentioned, gang membership might be viewed and used as a way to gain social status and economic security:

“Economic security and housing were viewed as two primary barriers for street gang involvement. Individuals who do not have access to legitimate economic capital will search out other avenues in order to support themselves or their families. Due to the availability and need of the underground economy, individuals slowly learn local street codes and it is during this interaction to escape poverty that some individuals look to street gangs as a viable option to survive. **It must also be noted that the majority of individuals who live in poverty do not commit crimes, nor do they become involved in street gangs, and that individuals who become involved in street gangs come from all economic spaces.** Research

has shown that as individuals become more engaged in a street lifestyle, masculinity becomes a factor in how individuals reengage or embrace violence as a way to build status and reputations.”^x

“Both street (e.g., Klein, Weerman, & Thornberry, 2006) and prison gang (Fleisher & Decker, 2001) members are more violent than nongang offenders, and both value status because an opportunity to gain respect and status is one of the main attractions of street gangs for youth (; Alleyne & Wood, 2010; Anderson, 1999; Klein & Maxson, 2006) and prison gangs for prisoners (e.g., Camp & Camp, 1985; Gaes et al., 2002; Wood et al., 2009).”^{xi}

“Evidence further shows that street (e.g., Alleyne & Wood, 2010) and prison gang members (Wood et al., 2009) set aside their moral standards to engage in inhumane behavior (i.e., they *morally disengage*; [Beare & Hogg, 2013; Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008]). Street (Alleyne & Wood, 2010) and prison gang members (Wood, 2006) also endorse *anti- authority attitudes* and *hypermasculine ideals* (ideals of toughness and ability to fight) have been found to thread through prison gangs (e.g., Wacquant, 2000) and to incite street gang violence as members protect their notions of honor (e.g., Short & Strodtbeck, 1965; Hughes & Short, 2005; Vigil, 1988) “^{xii}

Dr. Henry’s study with ex-gang members in Saskatchewan revealed that,

“[In] examining how Indigenous male ex-gang members constructed their notions of masculinity issues of mental health and trauma become apparent. To protect themselves, the men created a “mask” that supported hegemonic masculinity to gain power and respect through violence. It was through violence that the men were able to gain the power that they needed to gain respect and validate their position as a man. However, their adherence to the hegemonic male within local street fields has left the men physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually traumatized.

There are days like my face is marked up from gang battles in parking lots, home invasions, people rolling up on me and I have no weapon, even in front of my kids. That’s the sad life about it, there is so much dark days and you have some little bright days but there’s more dark nights in that life than there are bright days. (Baldhead, 24) ”^{xiii}

Dr. Henry finds that the fundamental context underlying these push and pull factors is colonization, and the creation of Indigenous street gangs are direct expressions of resistance to this colonization:

“Colonization shaped the socio-political histories of Indigenous peoples experiences resulting in a legacy of trauma that continues to impact Indigenous peoples today. As a result of colonial histories, violence for some Indigenous peoples is seen as a legitimate means to increase one’s social and economic capital within their particular fields... It is this space where we see the byproducts and continuation of colonial violence onto Indigenous peoples. To obtain the privileges found through hegemonic masculinity, Indigenous males do not have the social capital to challenge those who hold social power over them (white and economic capital). This results in Indigenous men having to claim a sense of authority over those who are in the same social spaces created through colonization, i.e. other Indigenous men of the same social class and Indigenous women. As seen through Fanon [*Black Skin, White Mask*, 1952], this process creates an image where the colonized see themselves as part of the colonizers, only when they hold power over others who are colonized. Therefore, it is a direct result of the trauma experienced through violent colonial histories that Indigenous street gangs become the byproduct of internalized violence as a way to protect one’s self from the real and potential violence of other Indigenous males searching to increase their social capital within limited street fields. The violence then perpetuated by [some] Indigenous males onto other Indigenous peoples supports the colonial enterprise, where violence onto Indigenous bodies continues as a way for colonial systems to control Indigenous people[.]”^{xiv}

Systemic and Societal Factors Impacting Indigenous Youth

“One population of interest is Indigenous youth, as 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). It is believed that membership in Indigenous youth gangs is increasing in Canada, particularly in the Prairie Provinces and in northern Canada (Preston, Carr-Stewart, & Bruno, 2012). Gang involvement has precursors that can be traced back to historical and cultural losses, social and political inequalities, and economic barriers faced by many Indigenous people for multiple generations.”^{xv}

“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 Indigenous youth (Goodwill, 2016). In addition, Indigenous 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). Further, involvement in the Indigenous 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 Indigenous children that can lead to vulnerability, abuse and harm, trust and attachment problems[.]”^{xvi}

The path from child welfare to gang involvement can also be intensified by “...an array of mental health issues.”^{xvii}

There is a correlation between mental health issues, “multiple foster placements [and] a diminished ability [for] some children to form healthy attachments. Citing the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*... Reactive Attachment Disorder [in children] is associated with,

grossly pathological care that may take the form of persistent disregard of the child’s basic needs for comfort, stimulation and affection; persistent disregard for the child’s basic physical needs; or repeated changes of primary caregivers that prevent formation of stable attachments (i.e., frequent placements in foster care or between foster care and the biological parent(s)). (CAO, 2009, p. 39)^{xviii}

“Consequently, psychologists who investigated foster homes in Saskatchewan found that a number of children exhibited signs of attachment disorder, including head banging, hoarding, eating nonstop, extreme apathy, developmental delay, speech delay, motor delay, increased aggression, decreased impulse control, and attention deficit disorder (Children’s Advocate Office, 2009, p. 40).”^{xix}

Societal and systemic discrimination also plays a role in youth involvement with gangs:

“Youth who belong to Aboriginal gangs, or who are perceived to belong to gangs, may experience increased systemic discrimination and other negative consequences. Gang membership is associated with lower school participation and lower levels of completed education, which negatively affects future employment, education and income. Youth who are perceived to belong to Aboriginal gangs may face increasingly aggressive ‘law and order’ initiatives from Canadian justice systems. Youth who belong to gangs may also experience increased exposure to criminal or illegal activities, as well as an increased risk of personal harm from other individuals, due to their membership or perceived membership.”^{xx}

Age: When do people Enter and Desist from Gangs?

In a review of literature by Toni Hemmati, for the Research and Statistics Division (Government of Canada), the author found that, “Several of the publications reviewed included individuals of different ages as part of the nature of the study (i.e., youth gang studies did not include older adults, and federal inmate studies excluded youth). The longitudinal study by Craig et al., (2002) involved 76 boys who became gang members by the age of 13 or 14. Two other studies included older individuals under the definition of "youth". Hamel et al. (1998) extended the age range in their sample of current and former street gang members, resulting in a mean age of 18 years (age range 14 to 25 years). Respondents from the Astwood (2004) Canadian police survey were asked to estimate the number of youth gang members within five age groups. Results from individual locations varied, yielding a national average of 10% below the age of 16 years; 39% between 16 and 18; 37% between 19 and 21, and 14% over 21. Not specific to youth, the Vancouver study by Gordon and Foley (1998) found that the mean age of the 35 street gang members in the sample was 18 years (age range was not reported).”^{xxi}

In her thesis, Rebecca Wallis concludes, “Several attempts have been made to explain why and how individuals are able to desist from the gang life. Within the literature, theories of age and maturation are predominant (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Hastings et al, 2011). Age and maturation focuses on the notion that gang membership is often temporary. Hastings and colleagues (2013) indicated that eventually individuals leave the gang and their exit is often associated with maturity and life course events that correspond with growing up such as marriage, employment, and parenthood.”^{xxii}

The average age that individuals decide leave gangs (desist) is not well established in the research, suggesting anywhere from mid-teens all the way into middle age. Additionally, studies on gang desistance have focused largely on youth entry/desistance, with less attention paid to Indigenous adult gang members within a Canadian context.

It would appear that more importantly, autonomy, self-determination, and maturation (life-course events) play the largest roles in an individual’s decision to leave gang life.^{xxiii} As people age, the factors that enticed them into gang life may change due to maturation (being that most gang members enter before the age of 21), and the ability to see the negative effects gang affiliation has played in their life. More information on factors of desistance can be found below under the subheading “Factors Associated with Leaving Gangs.”

There is a wide range of time that members may consider leaving a gang, one study with participating gang members in Winnipeg revealed they contemplated leaving anywhere from 6 months to 5 years.^{xxiv} Of course, this variable can be different for every individual based upon their own unique circumstances, resources, and networks of support. What this does demonstrate is that, again, autonomy and self-determination play a large role in an individual’s decision to leave a gang and when they choose to do so. Supporting the ability to self-determine and ensuring an individual feels in control of their decisions, may further empower an individual to leave gang life.

Integrated support networks outside of gang life and/or incarceration are most often, a necessary factor in and individual’s ability to sever their gang affiliation:

“Deane et al. (2007) concluded that for desistance to be successful, it was imperative to implement as many opportunities as possible to help participants move away from criminal activity. They attempted to give gang members the opportunities to make decisions that would facilitate desistance by providing them with the skills and opportunities to make a life change more feasible. They determined that of these opportunities, employment was of primary importance in the process of desistance. The opportunity of employment gave the participants a means to provide for themselves other than through the commission of

criminal activity. In addition, they found that employment helped to make connections to mainstream society and a prosocial support network. Furthermore, it was found that introduction to Aboriginal traditional culture played a critical role in cognitive change. This provided participants with a nonjudgemental and nondirective form of counselling which helped to develop a more positive perspective and depersonalize their anger regarding their personal situations. According to Deane et al. (2007), the combination of financial assistance based on employment, social networks, and cultural counselling appear to be a successful combination to facilitating desistance from crime^{xxv}

Psychology and Mental Health

“It is clear that the label “gang member” fails to capture the critical social justice and health issues that exact a force on Indigenous men and boys who become involved in violent criminal networks. For reasons not yet clear, the gang identity [label does not account for the health and historical contexts which have effectively shaped the socio-economic lives of gang members]. The sickness model within the mental health and addictions systems in Canada might inadvertently contribute to gravitation toward gang lifestyles rather than submitting to the view that one is disordered: Attention-deficit, fetal alcohol, alcoholic, posttraumatic stress, oppositional defiant, conduct, and personality disordered are some commonly levied labels in risk management psychology. Based on the evidence generated here with Indigenous former gang members, being viewed in the posture of resistance rather than [struggling with a disability] is more appealing for those managing the experiences of powerlessness in the face of the ongoing colonial process.”^{xxvi}

In 2018, Dr. Henry worked with Indigenous communities and their members, local organizations, and government representatives to develop recommendations for a Saskatchewan Prevention/Intervention Street Gang Strategy. In this research, he found that:

“It was acknowledged that with increased violence, there is an exposure to traumatic experiences. Traumatic experiences are associated to psychological, spiritual, physical, and emotional violence that alters one's ability to lead a healthy life. As individuals become more engaged in violent street spaces, they face increased traumatic experiences. However, because the street space is a space that embraces hyper or toxic masculinity- a specific performance that validates domination and violence over others who may challenge one's status- individuals are left with minimal opportunities to address trauma. [Without positive opportunities to address one's trauma, individuals may resort] to increase one's substance abuse [in an effort to resolve their untreated trauma]. Although individuals may gain power, respect and money as they move up the typology - which are forms of behavioural addiction - the psychological impact results in increased issues of substance use. However, specific illegal drugs are promoted within local street codes, but most individuals search out other 'dirty' drugs [for example, fentanyl, crystal methamphetamines, opioids, etc.] to mask the pain and reality that individuals find themselves in over time.”^{xxvii}

Through 500 survey respondents, government forums, and community consultations, Dr. Henry concluded, "It is through the increased usage of 'dirty' drugs that [some] individuals are removed from the street gang, most often in a violent manner, and are then left to try and survive without the support of their group.”^{xxviii}

Someone “...who is addicted to needles or other ‘dirty drugs’ [may be removed from a gang] because their focus is on the drug and not the gang,” which may destabilize the gang.^{xxix} While this will not be true for every individual, or every gang, it was identified as a potential consequence for individuals trying to cope with their trauma while affiliated with a gang.

“[Indigenous] Communities [in Saskatchewan] explained that violence, addictions, and trauma are intertwined and increase as one becomes more engrained in a violent street lifestyle. The histories and experiences that have shaped the pathways of individuals to join a street gang though are complex and must be acknowledged for an effective street gang strategy to take place. It is because of such complexities that the communities expressed the need for a community health approach to frame a provincial prevention and intervention street gang strategy.”^{xxx}

Gangs & Women

“Girls and women are particularly vulnerable to gang recruitment in part due to sexist and misogynist values and practices [found across Canadian society, that target Indigenous women and girls]. Psycho-social problems are linked to all of the above factors, including:

- Entrenched and severe poverty as well as overcrowded and substandard housing (Bittle et al. 2002; Dooley et al 2005).
- Ill-health and suicide: the suicide rate for [Indigenous Youth] in many communities is approximately six times higher than the rate for [non-Indigenous youth] (Shah 1990; York 1990; Statistics Canada 2001; Chandler et al. 2003).
- High rates of criminalization: [Indigenous Women] are significantly over- represented at all stages of the justice system (Statistics Canada 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b, 2008b);
- High rates of violence, especially male violence against girls and women: woman abuse, sexual assault, family violence, child witnessing of mother abuse, and homicide involving [Indigenous persons] as both perpetrators and victims are serious concerns. On-reserve violent crime rates are elevated for both youth and adults. Youth are accused of committing homicides on reserve at about eleven times the rate of youth elsewhere in Canada (Statistics Canada *ibid*).
- Sexual trafficking and exploitation: NWAC has documented 510 cases of murdered and missing girls and women in Canada (NWAC 2008) over the past thirty years. Twenty-five percent have been identified as missing and 67% have been identified as murdered. There are forty-three cases where the nature of the case remains unconfirmed, or where a situation of “wrongful death” has been identified (for example, a woman’s death may have been caused by negligence on the part of another person, rather than through a direct act). In addition, it is estimated that the majority of all sex workers in western Canada are [Indigenous]. For example, 60% of all sex workers in Vancouver are [Indigenous] (Farley and Lynne 2005; Lynne 2005; Farley, Lynne and Cotton 2005).
- Low educational attainment, and high rates of school drop-out and unemployment blocks conventional means of achieving success and bonding to broader Canadian society (RCAP 1996; Statistics Canada 2001).
- High numbers of [Indigenous youth] are placed into child welfare, mental health, and other institutions (Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson 2006; Trevethan et al. 2002; Blackstock et al. 2004).^{xxxii}

“Most females who are gang-involved have personal relationships with male gang members: they are sisters, nieces, daughters, grand-daughters, or girlfriends. Those who don’t have these prior relationships get recruited through violent intimidation. Most girls are sexually assaulted by multiple gang members as part of initiation into gangs. Suffering chronic and repeated sexual trauma throughout childhood is also a key driver into gang life for both girls and boys. These children are most often abused by male family members or men who know them. More girls are victims, although many male youth who participate in violent gang activities report having been sexually abused.”^{xxxii}

Factors Associated with Leaving Gangs (Desistance)

There are many factors that might influence someone's decision or desire to leave a gang, a study on youth gangs in Canada (2017) found that:

“[P]oor treatment within the gang, becoming tired 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.”^{xxxiii}

“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)... 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.”^{xxxiv}

“For Aboriginal youth, this [may involve] 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, & Morrisette, 2007).”^{xxxv}

Social Connection and Community

Additionally, factors that attract individuals into gangs may also be reasons that make it challenging to leave gangs, such as the social network, friendship, and camaraderie that gangs offer to their members. In a study with gang members in Winnipeg, “Participants were asked to discuss specific challenges they, or their friends, faced when they decided to leave the gang. It was further explained that [the researchers] were interested in any obstacles that may have stood in their way, whether those be financial, social, or physical. Upon clarification, social challenges were most frequently reported with over half of participants claiming to have lost friends. This loss of friends lead to the loss of protection, increased harassment, and the loss of their reputation.”^{xxxvi}

This demonstrates that community, social connection, friendship, and feelings of belonging are major contributing factors in both entering and leaving gangs. It also demonstrates how important it is for individuals to feel socially supported, welcomed, and included by prosocial community networks when they are considering/trying to leave a gang. Justice professionals (such as lawyers, judges, court workers, correctional staff, etc.) can also play a role in establishing a supportive prosocial environment that encourages gang desistance and rehabilitation. The fear of loss, isolation, and judgement is a great inhibitor to gang desistance, and one of the most influential ways to address this fear is through community support planning and empathy.

Employment

The same study conducted with Winnipeg gang members revealed that employment, namely, the financial security that a job brings, is one of the more prominent barriers to leaving a gang.

“Not only does employment ease the financial challenges of leaving a gang, it also alters the daily activities and routines of individuals (Savolainen, 2009). Gang members who obtain employment

must now modify the way they allocate their time; spending more time at work results in less time spent with the gang.

Participants who did not hold a job while leaving the gang stated that they felt having a source of steady, legitimate income would have made the transition easier for them. One participant articulated the income predicament very accurately:

*I've never had a job in my life. The only job I had is selling drugs (...) Its hard to leave a gang if you don't have employment too. 'Cause those drugs are your source of income. So what are you supposed to do? You're gonna sit there and wait for your welfare check every two friggin weeks. What the hell is a hundred bucks gonna do for you for two weeks? Obviously when you leave a crew you go on welfare. I bet you a majority of the people who leaves a gang who go on welfare still sell drugs on the side. I bet you they do, I bet you anything they do. 'Cause they need to get by. Like, I used to do it to survive. I didn't have my own home, I couldn't feed myself. **People think I did it because I thought it was cool. No. I had to do it to survive. I had to do what I had to do.***

A similar concern was voiced across all participants: there needs to be more supports available to individuals considering leaving the gang. Participants argued that many needed employment to make leaving the gang possible, but that the process of finding a job was intimidating one. More support is needed to help them through it.^{xxxvii}

Discrimination

In 2016, participants of an interdisciplinary community-based class at the University of Saskatchewan called “wāhkōhtowin,” worked with former gang members to identify and map their experiences of justice/injustice within Saskatoon. As part of this, former gang members identified challenges and experiences of discrimination they faced when leaving gang life, “Many of [the STR8 UP members in the class] spoke to the lack of respect and animosity police had towards them and their endeavors to leave gang life. Not only did they feel targeted because they are Indigenous, they also shared many experiences of police targeting them, and sometimes their families, because of past involvements.”^{xxxviii}

“The Manitoba Justice Inquiry of 1999 “explained that many police have come to view Indigenous people not as a community deserving protection, but a community from which the rest of society must be protected. This has led to a situation often described as one of Indigenous people being ‘over-policed’ but ‘under-protected’” (Amnesty International, 2004, p. 18).^{xxxix}

Experiences of animosity and exclusion from organizations/staff that are supposed to ‘protect and serve’ work to deter individuals from gang desistance, especially when earnest efforts are made to leave gang life. By feeling unwelcomed in the community and outcast from society, it is understandable that individuals turn/return to the social connections, community, and protection that a gang may offer. This example demonstrates that the criminal justice system, and systemic discrimination, may actually be pushing people into gang life. Negative experiences and victimization with the justice system need to be thoughtfully considered when understanding an individual’s *Gladue* factors, and why incarceration may not always be an appropriate sanction in sentencing.

Considerations for Support: Leaving a Gang

“Self-determination is one of the most important determinants of Indigenous health and well-being (Reading & Wien, 2013). It is considered essential for empowering and enabling communities to build capacity and gain control over the wide-ranging forces that affect health and well-being at individual and collective levels (Garces-Ozanne, Ikechi Kalu, & Audas, 2016)... To achieve equitable outcomes, Indigenous Peoples must be given full access to high-quality, responsive, comprehensive, culturally-relevant, and coordinated health and social services that target the diverse determinants of health, including individual and community self-determination (AFN, 2017; Greenwood, 2019; Jones et al., 2019).”^{xi}

“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 [i.e., the reduction of Indigenous peoples over-represented in the criminal justice system, the reduction of Indigenous children apprehended by child welfare services, addressing the intergenerational impacts of residential schools and the sixties scoop, etc.](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).”^{xii}

“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, & Morrissette, 2007).”^{xiii}

“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.’^{xliii}

Many of these principles can be utilized in the treatment and support of gang members of all genders. The provision of a nurturing and safe environment favourable to therapeutic change; treatment should be multi-disciplinary, comprehensive, holistic, and solutions focused; supports should work to promote positive self-esteem, healthy assertive behaviour and boundaries, respect for oneself and others, consent and physical autonomy, and mental health; utilize peer mentors and others with lived experience to assist and advise gang members trying to leave; and that individuals do have pathways to leave gang life, while outlining those supports.

Intervention programming should “focus on where people are at and not use an individual's trauma against them, i.e. documenting traumatic experiences as a risk factor[.]”^{xliiv} This is a common practice found in Pre-Sentence Report practices and actuarial assessments of risk.

When release planning, “There is a lack of communication between corrections and community organizations supporting individuals upon release and there needs to be stronger communication and organization in order to implement healthy reintegration programming. For example, it was stated at the Public Forum that STR8 UP has tried to work with corrections to develop exit plans, but there has been resistance to the sharing of one's exit plan, resulting in the duplication as well as lack of community services[.]”^{xlv}

Thus, Corrections need to more effectively communicate with community organizations and support workers as to the release plan of an individual. Integrating services and networks of support is an effective tool avoid individuals falling through gaps in the system, potentially causing further incarceration. Ideally, release plans should be built in tandem with the individual, community organizations, and networks of support, through a trauma-informed lens/approach. Organizations such as STR8 UP, John Howard Society, and Elizabeth Fry Society can assist with release and aftercare planning.

Locating Rehabilitative, Restorative, and Alternative Justice Programs and Sanctions

- 2019-2020 Rehabilitative Alternatives to Incarceration – A Handbook of Community & Government Programs in Saskatchewan - <https://indigenoulaw.usask.ca/publications/rehabilitative-alternatives-to-incarceration-handbook.php>
- Alternative Measures and Extrajudicial Sanctions Agencies in Saskatchewan - <https://gladue.usask.ca/node/6654>
- Community Justice Programs in Saskatchewan - <https://gladue.usask.ca/communityjusticeprograms>
- Wellness and Treatment Centres - <https://gladue.usask.ca/node/6688>
- Restorative Justice Directory – Government of Canada - <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/cj-jp/rj-jr/programs-programmes.aspx>

Gang-Exit Support Services & Organizations

These organizations and service-providers willingly work with gang members, former gang members, and youth-at-risk to assist in their rehabilitation, outreach, and networks of support. STR8 Up is currently leading the province's Community Intervention Model and plays a large role in the province's Gang Violence Intervention Strategy.

- **STR8 UP** - Provides integrated, robust services/programs for gang members trying to “drop their colours” (Community Intervention Model) - based in Saskatoon and Prince Albert: <https://www.str8-up.ca/>
- **Regina Treaty/Status Indian Services** – Service provider/connector in Regina and neighbouring rural communities: <https://fhqtc.com/rtsis/>
- **EGADZ** – Youth Support programs/services: <https://www.egadz.ca/>
- **John Howard Society of Saskatchewan** – ARC (Adults Re-Integrating into the Community) Program: <https://sk.johnhoward.ca/>
- **Prince Albert Indigenous Justice Coalition** – West Flats Citizen Group Inc.: <https://www.pauic.com/connect-with-us>
- **Prince Albert Outreach Program Inc** – Youth Service and Program Provider: <https://www.princealbertoutreach.com/>
- **Saskatoon Tribal Council** – Justice Program: <https://sktc.sk.ca/justice/>

Wellness, Family, and Interpersonal Conflict Resources

In Saskatchewan, there are numerous sentencing options and alternatives that promote the development of healthy individuals, families, parenting, relationships, and divert offenders away from traditional methods of incarceration. Promoting the development of healthy families and relationships has great potential to improve outcomes in immediate health, and support the wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities in the long-term. These are only some of the options available in Saskatchewan, more can be located through the 2019-2020 Rehabilitative Alternatives to Incarceration Handbook, Friendship Centres, Tribal-Councils and Wellness Centres, and SASK 211.

- **Programming Responses for Intimate Partner Violence in Saskatchewan, including Health Treatment Programs** (e.g., Kanawayimik Family Violence Treatment Program, Alternative to Violence program, Family Services Saskatoon, etc.): <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/jr/ipv-vpi/p13.html>
- **Domestic Violence Courts:** <https://sasklawcourts.ca/provincial-court/therapeutic-courts/domestic-violence-court/>
 - Domestic Violence Court Brochure: https://sasklawcourts.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/PC_BDVTO_Brochure_2023.pdf
- **Drug-Treatment Court:** <https://sasklawcourts.ca/provincial-court/therapeutic-courts/drug-treatment-court/>
- **Mental Health Court:** <https://sasklawcourts.ca/provincial-court/therapeutic-courts/mental-health-court/>
- **Central Urban Métis Federation Inc. – Wellness Centre:** <https://www.cumfi.org/wellness-centre>
- **FASD Network of Saskatchewan:** <https://www.saskfasdnetwork.ca/>
- **Elizabeth Fry Society of Saskatchewan – Release and Aftercare Support Planning for women and gender-diverse individuals:** <https://elizabethfrysask.org/what-we-do/after/>
- **Métis Addictions Council of Saskatchewan Inc. (MACSI) – Treatment Centres and Programs:** <https://macsi.ca/>
- **Mental Health and Addictions Program – Métis Nation of Saskatchewan:** <https://metisnationask.com/2020/06/15/mental-health-and-addictions-program/>
- **Substance Use Treatment Centres for First Nations and Inuit:** <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1576090254932/1576090371511>

- **Kanaweyimik Child & Family Services:** The mission of Kanaweyimik Child and Family Services is to protect children and to aid in their healing and the strengthening of families through the provision of holistic, culturally relevant services that respect the heritage, values, ceremonies, and traditions of our member communities. This program works with individuals who are currently involved in the criminal justice system, including those who with IPV, assault, or sexual related offences.
- <https://www.kanaweyimik.com/programs-and-services>
 - Child and Family Services Counselling Program: <https://www.kanaweyimik.com/programs/child-and-family-services-program>
 - Counselling Program: <https://www.kanaweyimik.com/programs/counselling-program>
 - Family Violence Program (uses the Circle Process and Smudging): <https://www.kanaweyimik.com/programs/family-violence-program>
 - Prevention Program: <https://www.kanaweyimik.com/programs/prevention-program-family-preservation-services>
- **Kanaweyimik Urban Services:** <https://www.kanaweyimik.com/programs/urban-services>
 - Intensive family support services in the home for families involved with Social Services.
 - Two Emergency foster homes available for emergency placements at all hours of the day or night.
 - Visitation services for children in care and parents to visit in a safe monitored environment.
 - Transportation services for children and families involved with Social Services.
 - Traditional and structured parenting sessions for parents involved with Social Services
 - Warrior Program - Intergenerational Trauma Recovery for parents involved with Social Services.
 - Domestic Violence/Family Violence treatment program for families experiencing domestic violence in their home.
 - TAPWE Youth Inter-generational Trauma Recovery program for youth in care.
 - Life skills for parents involved with Social Services and youth in care.
- **Other Supports Provided:**
 - Elder Monitoring can be provided
 - Parents and youth will be supported to attend cultural ceremonies if they wish to attend
 - Parent Aides and Youth Aides can be provided if required
 - Healing Circles

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