

**Unknowingly Saving Lives:
An Enhanced Critical Incident Technique
Analysis of Gang Entry Prevention**

by

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B.Ed., Simon Fraser University, 2009
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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

in the
Counselling Psychology Program
Faculty of Education

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

Spring 2015

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Abstract

There is a limited understanding of protective factors that act on adolescent boys and preventative measures that can be applied to help these adolescent boys reject gang lifestyle. This qualitative study explored the lives of young men, who as adolescent boys were interested and beginning to engage in gang-like activities. They were asked to recall their experiences in rejecting gang lifestyle. An Enhanced Critical Incident Technique was used in this exploration as the participants were asked to respond to questions guided by the inquiry: “What helped and what hindered adolescent males to choose not to join gangs when they were at the verge of falling into a gang?” The responses of the participants produced many examples of turning points that helped them. Analysis of these turning points show that both protective factors and experiential gang deterrence factors play a role in the process of rejecting gang lifestyle by at-risk adolescent boys.

Keywords: adolescent boys; at-risk youth; gang; prevention; protective factors; experiential gang deterrence factors

This thesis is dedicated to the young men who took part in this project hoping that their own experiences might make a difference for adolescent boys by keeping them away from gang lifestyle.

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Glossary

Gang	A street gang (or troublesome youth group corresponding to a street gang elsewhere) is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity (Weerman et al., 2009, p. 20).
Protective Factors	Characteristics or processes that counteract risk (Klein & Maxson, 2006, p. 140).
Experiential Gang Deterrence Factors	A term introduced by this research that refers to experiences that resemble gang-exit factors, and which affected non-gang youth to reject gang lifestyle.

Chapter 1.

Introduction

1.1. At-Risk Youth and Me

Is there a way to prevent the senseless deaths of mostly young males connected to gangs? This question sparks the urgent desire for me to find an answer. I want to explore and then focus my efforts, on the successful keys to locking the doors of the gang lifestyle before an adolescent boy can even walk through them. I need to know how to intervene when I see adolescent boys beginning to show interest in going through those doors. This goal is essential to me, so that I will never have to, yet again, sit across from a 17 year old boy, cautioning him against becoming involved in drug dealing, just to find out six months later he was killed. Experiencing the loss of not only life, but a life that was just beginning, a life full of dreams, hopes, and promises must have been devastating for the family of the killed youth. For myself, the adult who saw that the adolescent boy was engaging in gang-like activities, it was the frustration of not knowing what would have worked to prevent his senseless death.

In 2012, there were 95 gang-related homicides in Canada; this rate has remained stable over the last three years (Boyce & Cotter, 2013). According to a comprehensive Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2004), males comprise 94% of youth gangs, and close to half (48%) of them are under the age of 18. More specifically, 39% are between the ages of 16 to 18 (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2004), the age during which the youth still attend high school, making the issue of gangs my personal concern. As someone who has worked with and continues to work closely with at-risk youth, I am in a unique position of possibly influencing and shaping some of the youth who I know may end up in a gang. As a result, I am left with many questions: What can I do to prevent adolescent males from falling into a gang lifestyle and from

becoming one of the previously mentioned statistics? What tools, be it internal or external, can I offer my students so that in the future I will not have to visit them in a jail or attend their funerals before their lives fully begin?

The one encouraging lesson I learned so far from young people at risk of becoming involved in drugs or other delinquent behaviour is that they tend to ask questions. They want to know how to refuse when their peers are getting involved in using drugs. They want to compare what is better – a life of education and employment, or a life of crime. They also want to know what happened to other boys like themselves, who were drawn into crime or gangs at a young age. While these questions are being asked, I am left with a few possibilities for prevention and support. For example, I have the option of listening and providing the students with the facts from recent gang findings. I can also arrange for a speaker, an ex-gang member or a police officer to come to school and address the youth. I can take a different approach and bring their attention to their own life goals and their family expectations. Still, I can even make them feel guilty or scared by asking them if they really want to have a shooting at their family home. The question of an effective prevention strategy remains – which of these options really helps in deterring a young adolescent boy from falling into a gang life? Do any of these options really make a difference? Is the preventative aspect of joining a gang based on something completely different outside of my ability to influence (e.g., his own values, positive peer pressure, religious beliefs, sports, other extracurricular activities)?

With all these unknowns swirling in my mind, I am aware of a Jewish saying: “Whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world,” which encourages me to explore the preventative measures that stop young males from joining gangs. It is possible that through the preventative approaches that worked for some young men, we can truly make the difference between life and death for others.

1.2. Background and Rationale

Short (2001) points out that there is a range of street gangs and that they continue to evolve as their members change. Many studies have captured at least a few key elements which are important to highlight. Be it studies conducted in Canada, United States of America (U.S.A.), or overseas, all of them strongly indicate gangs are comprised primarily of males (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2004; Esbensen & Weerman, 2005; Esbensen, Winfree, He, & Taylor, 2001; Hill, Howell, Hawkins & Battin-Pearson, 1999; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). The studies also often indicate a high prevalence of racial or ethnic minorities in gangs (Esbensen et al., 2001; Hill et al., 1999; Klein & Maxson 2006; National Gang Center, 2010; Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Even though Klein (2002) argues that, “it is not a particular nationality, ethnicity, or race that makes up the street gang problem, but rather the disadvantaged, marginalized, and alienated status of youth segments that gravitate to the gang world” (p. 244), he still acknowledges the fact that marginalized immigrant groups populated and still populate gangs. Klein (2002) reminds us that though the classic period of gangs with “German, Scandinavian, Italian, Polish, Irish, Jewish, and other European immigrant populations [which] fueled the inner-city gangs” (p. 244) is over, the modern street gangs continue to be dominated by immigrant groups, including “blacks, Hispanics, and to a lesser extent various Asian groups” (p. 244). Klein also recognizes that although Canadian gangs include “Caucasian, Aborigine, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Haitian” (p 237) members, for gangs located in Vancouver, Toronto, Winnipeg, and Montreal, general similarities to street gangs in the U.S.A. still exist. Lastly, research shows gangs are often mainly populated by youth (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2004; Esbensen, Huizinga and Weiher, 1993; Hill et al., 1999; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Snyder and Sickmund, 2006; Thornberry, Krohn, Lisotte, Smith & Tobin, 2003).

As adolescent boys join gangs, they enter a world that is far more dangerous than the world outside of the gang. Thornberry et al. (2003) warns us that “perhaps the most robust and consistent observation in criminological research” (p. 1) is the observation of gang youth being significantly more involved in serious and violent delinquency. There is also victimization, as youth gang members are at risk of being victims themselves (Decker et al., 2008; Taylor, Freng, Esbensen, & Peterson, 2008)

and victimization is not limited on the time spent within the gang (Pyrooz, Decker & Webb, 2014). Pyrooz et al. (2014) argues victimization continues once youth gang members leave gangs as they “remain enmeshed in a series of ties to their former network of gang members,” (p. 509) and he suggests higher levels of victimization are experienced by individuals who continue to have more ties to the gang.

The need for prevention becomes crucial when we consider the available research that indicates those adolescent youth who join gangs are not only engaged in delinquent behaviour and suffer victimization, but also some youth, as Wyrick (2006) put it, “die young, some go to prison, and some continue on a ruinous path into adulthood” (p. 60). Unfortunately, the literature on gangs, according to Decker, Melde and Pyrooz (2013), has mostly been focused on aspects of gang behaviour. Prevention remains an aspect of gang research that requires further study. In summarizing the existing literature on prevention, Klein and Maxson (2006) have noted that “genuine protective factors are few and far between” (p. 232). Others studies report a shortage of prevention and intervention programs, which have been shown to significantly reduce gang membership (Howell, 2009; Pyrooz, 2013). Lastly, the gang preventative programs which do exist, according to McDaniel (2012), are not focused on prevention strategies aimed at youth prior to being recruited into gangs.

One Canadian study (Craig, Vitaro, Gagnon & Tremblay, 2002) found behaviours, which are associated with youth joining gangs, already appear before the age of 10 years old. According to Klein and Maxson (2006), prevention and intervention efforts are more useful if they are structured on known risk factors. In the light of the research providing insights into behaviours and risk factors contributing to youth being more at risk for joining gangs, it is crucial to continue to uncover protective factors that can counter these risks. Exploration and identification of these factors could allow individuals working with at-risk adolescent boys to implement early prevention. The early prevention could focus on building up in youth existing protective factors or introduce new protective factors to prevent the youth from the risk of joining a gang. Either way, the goal is to allow the confirmed knowledge on preventative measures to be the force that steers away at-risk adolescent boys from gang life and a possible premature death.

1.3. Significance of the Research

My research study will contribute to the limited body of existing knowledge focused on preventative measures that are meaningful and successful from the point of view of adolescent male youth. The significance of gang prevention aimed before or during adolescence is particularly significant; Jang (1999) emphasized this stage of life as the time of the highest temptation and engagement in frequent delinquent activities. Klein and Maxson (2006) confirmed that the risk to join gangs is "highest among youths from 13 to 15 years and decreases thereafter," (p. 41) and as such, their finding supports the notion that adolescent youth are vulnerable for joining gangs.

The important focus of this project aimed at exploring preventative approaches for male youth during their adolescence is the subsequent significant benefit to educators, counsellors, and other support staff in the education system who work with at-risk male youth. This benefit is more clearly understood when we take into consideration the School Act (1996), which states, "a person who is resident in British Columbia must (a) enroll in an educational program" and, "(b) participate in an educational program ... until he or she reaches the age of 16 years" (p. C-18). Therefore, youth during the years of the highest vulnerability for joining gangs are also required to attend an educational setting. Snyder and Sickmund (2006) have confirmed the existence of youth gang members in the American public schools in a survey of school principals. Principals reported gang activity in 31% of middle schools and 37% of secondary schools. What is also important to note is that gang activity was found to be significantly more prevalent in schools with populations of one thousand or more students. In fact, gang activity was four times higher than in schools with less than 500 students. When taking into consideration higher rates of gang presence in schools in the U.S.A. with over one thousand students and the size of high schools in our communities in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia (B.C.), we can see that there may be a need for informed and effective gang prevention. In B.C., the two largest school districts, Surrey School District and Vancouver School District (British Columbia. Ministry of Education, 2014), include high schools with populations exceeding one thousand students per school. In the Surrey School District, the population of the 19 high schools was reported ranging from 1,245 to 1,944 students (Surrey School District,

2012). In the Vancouver School District, with an enrolment of 26,000 secondary students across 18 secondary schools, the average ratio of students per school is 1444¹ (Vancouver School Board, n.d.). Even though research suggests that the likelihood there are youth in these schools who are either at risk of getting into gangs or are currently involved in gangs is four times higher (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006), research by Craig et al. (2002) also finds teachers and parents are in general not aware of boys' involvement in gangs and struggle to identify these youth. Due to these statistics, and the lack of similar Canadian studies, I need to assume that adolescent boys in B.C. high schools are also the most probable to be vulnerable to gang entry in high schools with populations that exceed one thousand students. My research may offer knowledge to confront this status quo by identifying preventative measures, and thus allowing adults in the education system to administer more successful preventative tools while working with male youth. This, in turn, might prevent some of these adolescents from joining gangs.

1.4. Research Question

My goal, using the method of Enhanced Critical Incident Technique, is to answer the question: What helped and what hindered adolescent males to choose not to join gangs when they were at the verge of falling into a gang?

The question of my research is open-ended to allow for the experiences of the participants to inform this exploration. I also do not presume that there is one specific answer or strategy that can be applied to help prevent at-risk adolescent males from joining gangs. The over simplified idea of a single solution of gang prevention was stressed by Hill, Lui, and Hawkins (2001) when they stated that there is “no ‘magic bullet’ that will prevent youth from joining gangs” (p. 4), but instead, they suggest, different areas of the youth’s life need to be addressed. Additionally, I keep in mind what Klein and Maxson (2006) noted after they reviewed 19 studies about gangs – most male youth

¹ 1444 students per school were derived as an average of 26,000 students divided among 18 schools.

do not choose to join gangs. That is why, in this project, I anticipate identifying factors that specifically prevent at-risk youth from joining gangs.

Chapter 2.

Literature Review

2.1. It All Started in Chicago

To study gangs means to reach for Frederick Thrasher's study from 1927 where he examines in depth 1313 gangs in Chicago. Thrasher's study, which focused on youth gangs and their activity in an urban area, was the empirical beginning of gang research (Matsuda & Esbensen, 2012) and has continued to be referenced for close to ninety years since it was originally conducted and published. In the years following Thrasher's work, more information about gangs became available from subsequent research studies, both cross-sectional (e.g., Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Esbensen & Weerman, 2005; Esbensen et al., 2001; Maxson & Whitlock, 2002) and longitudinal (e.g., Craig et al., 2002; Esbensen et al., 1993; Gatti, Tremblay, Vitaro & McDuff, 2005; Hill et al., 1999; Thornberry et al., 2003). The body of knowledge continues to be expanded by various national agencies in Canada and in the U.S.A. In Canada, gang prevention and awareness is supported through Youth Gang Prevention Fund (YGPF) with Public Safety Canada's National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC) (Public Safety Canada, 2014b). In the U.S.A., the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) with the U.S. Department of Justice has a mandate to support efforts to improve juvenile justice issues by funding various research and programs (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, n.d.). Ultimately, from this diverse assembly of research comes an assortment of knowledge that is succinctly characterized by the single concept – *gang*.

2.2. Gang

“No two gangs are just alike. . . . This fact of individuality must be recognized both by the student who attempts to classify it as a form of collective behavior and by the social worker who deals with it as a practical problem” (Thrasher, 1927, p. 45). This observation made by Thrasher (1927) at the onset of research into gangs, continued to be evident in the subsequent research, as the variances in gangs impeded the formation of a standard, unified definition. This challenge has been a real problem in researching gangs. For example, according to Esbensen et al. (2001) the ability for researchers to replicate, assess, and expand research findings depends on researchers coming to a consensus on a definition. They point out that such a consensus was still not present in the U.S.A. in 2001, and as a result, it was difficult for policy makers and researchers to provide accurate guidelines and research findings. One such challenge can come from overestimating or underestimating the number of gangs and the number of members in a gang (Esbensen et al., 2001). For example, a change in the variables included in the definition of a gang (e.g., durability, criminal activity) helped the National Youth Gang Center (NYGC) recognize that they were overestimating the number of gangs by 26% (Klein & Maxson, 2006). This correction was added in their third national survey conducted in 1997. Before the correction was made, the 1996 NYGC survey summary (National Youth Gang Center, 1999) included groups such as taggers, satanic groups, “posses” and “crews,” stoners, and terrorist groups (Klein & Maxson, 2006, p. 5). In order to accurately assess gang activity and the success of interventions, careful attention to defining gang membership is crucial. Thus, in the following section I will provide an overview of the history of gang definitions, arriving at the definition I will use for this study.

2.3. History of the Definition of Gang

It is impossible to list every definition attempting to capture the essence of the concept of a gang. Definitions range from those derived by researchers (e.g., Klein, 1971; Miller, 1980; Short, 1996; Thrasher, 1927) to those created for the purpose of policy makers (e.g., Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act) and even law

enforcement (e.g., Montréal Police Service, 2005 as cited in Public Safety Canada, 2007).

The earliest definition of gang comes from Thrasher (1927) where he formulated that, “the gang is an interstitial group originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict” (p. 57). He expanded the definition to indicate certain types of behaviour exhibited by gang members, such as getting together periodically, movement through space, conflict, and planning. As a result, he argued that all such behaviour eventually led to the establishment of common traditions and solidarity within the group including awareness of the group, the group’s internal structure and morale, and attachment to a territory. In his observations and descriptions of individual gangs, Thrasher (1927) provided more details as to what some gang activities looked like. He pointed out that the gang members engaged in fun activities (e.g., parties, drinking), as well as criminal activities (e.g., breaking into train cars, joy-riding). Thrasher also stated that for gang members “satisfaction was clearly obtained not only in the committing of the delinquency and through the enjoyment of the booty but also in the recounting of their adventures in delinquency” (1927, p. 61). Thrasher observed that gangs committing crimes “often [drifted] into habitual crime and [became] completely delinquent” (1927, p. 66). Even though Thrasher recognized the existence of delinquent behaviour, Kinnear (2009) emphasizes that delinquency was not included in the definition of a gang until Malcolm Klein (1971) redefined a gang as:

any denotable adolescent group of youngsters who (a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in their neighborhood; (b) recognize themselves as a denotable group (almost invariably with a group name); and (c) have been involved in a sufficient number of delinquent incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighborhood residents and / or enforcement agencies. (p. 13)

Throughout the years, other researchers have tried to capture the variables that define a gang (e.g., Klein, 1971; Miller, 1980; Short, 1996). For example, Miller (1980) approached defining a gang based on a survey he conducted in 26 major cities in the U.S.A., with over 300 respondents, such as police officers, judges, educators and gang members, to define a gang. Through the interviews he arrived at the following definition:

A youth gang is a self-formed association of peers, bound together by mutual interest, with identifiable leadership, well-developed lined of authority, and other organizational features, who act in concert to achieve a specific purpose or purposes which generally include the conduct of illegal activity and control over a particular territory, facility, or type of enterprise. (p. 121)

According to Klein and Maxson (2006), even though the definition by Miller showed many of the same identifiable elements of a gang, it also indicated that the gang was a well organized entity. These authors pointed out that such emphasis placed on the organizational component caused most scholars to question it. They suggested, “the question of how well organized street gangs are has become one of the more contentious issues between scholars and practitioners” (p. 7).

There have been other attempts at defining a gang. A notable definition was passed by the state of California in 1988 as part of the Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act (STEP Act). In this legislation, as stated in the California Penal Code (2008), the state of California found itself in a “state of crisis” and aimed to protect its citizens from almost 600 criminal street gangs and a rate of gang homicide which in 1987 increased 80 percent over the previous year. In order to diminish gang presence and violence, legislation was passed “to seek the eradication of criminal activity by street gangs by focusing upon patterns of criminal gang activity and upon the organized nature of street gangs, which together, are the chief source of terror created by street gangs” (Cal. Pen. Code §186.21). In order to achieve such significant impact as the “eradication of criminal activity” by gangs, the policy makers provided a new definition. As pointed out by Klein and Maxson (2006), the definition drew very lightly on the vast research but instead was aimed at creating a legal definition to aid prosecutors with suppressing and persecuting gang members. This definition moved away from terms and definitions of *youth gang* and *street gang* and instead used the term *criminal street gang*. The definition according to California Penal Code states that:

. . . "criminal street gang" means any ongoing organization, association, or group of three or more persons, whether formal or informal, having as one of its primary activities the commission of one or more of the criminal acts . . . having a common name or common identifying sign or symbol, and whose members individually or collectively engage in or have engaged in a pattern of criminal gang activity. (Cal. Pen. Code §186.22)

This type of definition, although widely accepted by the media, had little to do with the reality as it did not capture the true state of youth gangs, but instead changed the representation of a gang (Klein & Maxson, 2006). The depiction created by the STEP Act only focused on the needs of law enforcement. The cost to youth was being labeled as gang members, having their activities defined as gang activities, and eventually the California Penal system as having the power to incarcerate youth (Van Hofwegen, 2009).

This short review of the history of the attempts aimed at defining the gang concept can be summarized by Esbensen et al. (2001) who observed that, “there is little, if any, consensus as to what constitutes a gang and who is a gang member” (p. 106). The definition of a gang continues to vary in different jurisdictions (Kinnear, 2009) and, “youth groups known as gangs are certainly not inventions of twentieth-century American society” (Shelden, Tracy & Brown, 2004, p. 1). The term gang is also at times substituted by terms like youth gang (Miller, 1980), juvenile street gang (Thornberry et al., 2003), or street gang/troublesome youth group (Weerman et al., 2009). Finally, in some literature the terms gang and street gang are used interchangeably (Short, 1996) as are street gang and youth gang (Howell, 2009). This sense of confusion was addressed specifically by Ball and Curry (1995) who noted that, “it is important that researchers and theorists become increasingly aware of the differences among their implicit methodological approaches to definition so as to avoid at least the more obvious sources of confusion” (p. 241). In order to bring a sense of cohesion and comparability of research findings within the academic community, the sheer number of terms, definitions and research methods into youth gangs was examined and discussed at length by researchers from the U.S.A. and Europe in a series of meetings, workshops, and presentations referred to as the Eurogang Research Program (Weerman et al., 2009).

2.4. Eurogang

As reported by Weerman et al. (2009), starting in 1997 at the initiation of Malcolm Klein, a small group of scholars gathered to look at how to study gangs in Europe. A year later, forty people from thirteen nations gathered to attend the first workshop called

Eurogang I. As a consequence of this meeting, researchers from the U.S.A. and Europe were able to start discussions about gang definitions and research methods. As described by Weerman et al. (2009), through the next few meetings, work was done on developing five research instruments to help researchers conduct gang studies of various purposes (i.e., the City-Level Instrument, the Expert Survey, the Prevention and Intervention Inventory, the Youth Survey, and the Ethnography Guidelines). In 2000, during the fourth meeting in the Netherlands, a first attempt was made to define gang/troublesome youth. Finally, at their fifth meeting in 2002, participants arrived at a definition calling it the Eurogang definition (Weerman et al., 2009).

It is through the work of the Eurogang Research Project's researchers from both Europe and the U.S.A., that an agreement in the definition could finally address what Ball and Curry (1995) were advocating for when they stated, "gang research and theory might make more consistent progress through greater attention to the logic of definition" (p. 241). Klein and Maxson (2006) asserted that the Eurogang definition provided such consensus without becoming complicated by the detailed variances found throughout specific gang descriptors. They specified that the defining elements, which were eventually chosen and combined to form the Eurogang definition, included: durable, street-oriented, youth, and illegal. Klein and Maxson concluded that the Eurogang definition is "largely acceptable to research scholars and working practitioners alike" (2006, p. 9).

The Eurogang definition states: "a street gang (or troublesome youth group corresponding to a street gang elsewhere) is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity" (Weerman et al., 2009, p. 20). Weerman et al. (2009) defined the operational terms of this definition in the following way:

- Durable represents a period of existence of at least several months, during which time the group continues to exist regardless of the entry of new members and the exit of former members.
- Street-oriented implies spending long periods of time in a group, "outside home, work, and school. It is not necessary that the group always be found on a street location. Street-oriented groups may also meet in malls, in parks, in cars, and so on" (p. 20). Street-oriented also implies that there is no adult supervision.

- Youth means that the participants' age falls into teens or early twenties.
- Illegal means, "delinquent or criminal, not just bothersome" (p. 20).
- Identity is defined with respect to the accepted behaviour of the whole group not just an individual.

With respect to the additional variables, Klein and Maxson (2006) proposed that, "leadership, cohesiveness, ethnicity, gender, and distinctive argot, clothing, tattoos, or hand signs . . . are variables that help us to capture variations across gangs, but they are not necessary definers of a street gang" (p. 4).

Canada does not have a universal definition of youth gang, as Smith-Moncricieffe, (2013) stated in her report for the National Crime Prevention Centre. She also points out that law enforcement agencies, such as the Montréal Police Service and the RCMP, or universities, such as the University of Toronto, each use their own youth gang definitions that while similar are not the same. She adds that these definitional differences make it difficult to fully assess the size of gang problem in Canada.

2.5. Gang Population

Thrasher (1927) found that boys organized themselves into groups where their need for adventure and shared interest was not met by adult societal organizations. This sense of joy and adventure, as he observed, was met for boys in a gang through the opportunities offered within conflicts with other gangs. Since the days of Thrasher, other researchers (e.g., Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Esbensen et al., 1993; Thornberry et al., 2003; Snyder & Sickmund, 2006) attempted to gain a better understanding of gang's composition, including gender prevalence.

The prevalence of gang membership varies depending on the type of study, the definition used, and the study's demographic sample (Klein & Maxson, 2006). According to the 2002 Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2004), the estimated number of youth gang members in Canada was 7,071 members. When this number was expressed on a per capita basis, it then represented 0.24 gang members per 1,000 members of the Canadian population. In B.C., there were 1,027

gang members in total, which represented 0.26 gang members per 1000 members of the population. Statistics Canada in partnership with Human Resources and Skills Development Canada in the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) also found that there was not a high proportion of youth who belonged to gangs. The NLSCY study consisted of eight cycles during the years of 1994 to 2009. During the course of the study children and adolescents from across Canada were asked to respond on their social, emotional, and behavioural development (Statistics Canada, n.d.). During Cycle five of the NLSCY, 6% of youth aged 14 and 15 years belonged to a gang in the past 12 months (Dupéré, Lacourse, Willms, Vitaro & Tremblay, 2007).

When gang members' gender was taken into account, researchers (Dukes, Martinez & Stein 1997; Esbensen & Weerman, 2005; Snyder & Sickmund, 2006) found that males join gangs more often than females. As well, self-reported studies clearly show that male youth join gangs more often than female youth (Klein and Maxson, 2006). The Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2006 National Report (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006) provided data on the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, which on annual basis interviewed a representative sample of nearly 9,000 U.S. adolescents between the years of 1997 and 2001. Based on the interviews, it found that by the age of 17, 11% of males while 6% of females reported that they had once belonged to a gang. Difference in gender was also reported by Dukes et al. (1997) in a study of 11,023 students in Colorado, where 8% of males and 3% of females indicated being a current member of a gang. Similar findings were reported in Europe, specifically the Netherlands. Esbensen and Weerman (2005) compared 12 to 16 year old youth in both the U.S.A. and the Netherlands. They found that out of the 5,935 American youth, 8% reported belonging to a gang, and out of the 1,978 Dutch youth, 6% reported belonging to a gang. More specifically, 10.2% of males and 5.6% of females of the American youth sample and 6.4% of males and 5.3% of females of the Dutch youth sample classified themselves as gang members (Klein and Maxson, 2006). Finally, the Canadian police survey reported that 94% of youth gang members in Canada were males (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2004).

Although Thrasher (1927) distinctly identified boys as the backbone of gangs, and the mentioned research appears to confirm that, some longitudinal studies arrived with data, which contradicts Thrasher's observations. One such study (Esbensen et al., 1993) was conducted in Denver, Colorado with youth who came from high-risk neighbourhoods. These neighbourhoods were specifically chosen for the study based on census data and the Denver Police Department's information identifying these areas as having high rates of crime. The findings from the study showed that 20% of gang members were females, although the female members of gangs were found to be less involved in high levels of delinquent activity. This high proportion of females represented in gangs was supported by another longitudinal study, the Rochester Youth Development Study (Thornberry et al., 2003). This study was also conducted in a neighbourhood with high number of active offenders; specifically, it sampled "urban adolescents that overrepresents youth at high risk for serious delinquency, violence, and gang membership" (p. 31). The researchers found that 30.9% of the youth surveyed (in interviews up to Wave nine) belonged or currently belong to a gang. More specifically, 29.3% females and 32.4% males reported belonging to a gang. In previous findings from the Rochester Youth Development Study, Bjerregaard and Smith (1993) found that following Wave two and three of the interviews, 22% of female respondents reported being in a gang, a higher rate than that for males, of whom 18% reported belonging to a gang. The findings of the Rochester Youth Development Study conducted by Thornberry et al. (2003) advised caution; the authors highlighted a concern with the limitations of their own study, as well as, similar longitudinal studies. They stated, "virtually all longitudinal data sets that have measured gang membership have been conducted in newer or 'emergent' gang cities" (p. 9). They specifically cited their own study, which was conducted in Rochester, New York, but also the study conducted in Denver, Colorado (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993) amongst others. As a result of the studies' populations, the authors questioned the generalizability of the findings.

When explaining the differences in gang membership findings, particularly in the number of females reported as gang members, Klein (2009) argued that police databases on gangs suffer from reliability and validity problems, citing that the police report female membership as being between 0% and 5%. He continued by saying that the value of those databases is very limited for research purposes as database numbers

disagree with the findings of other research, which report female membership as between 10% to 40%. Klein and Maxson (2006) summarized the discrepancies in the data by stating that “gang and police activity, police gang recording policies and practices, and study samples and methods all contribute to the murky brew of information available on street gang patterns and proliferation” (p. 42). They also indicated that using data that was collected through a self-report method was superior to that collected by police databases.

2.6. Age of Gang Involvement

As both the definition of a gang and the proliferation of gang membership varies across studies, the age of gang members is “remarkably consistent across self-report studies, regardless of the risk level of the sample, the restrictiveness of the gang definition, and the location of the study” (Klein & Maxson, 2006, p. 41). Klein and Maxson indicated that adolescents participate in gangs most commonly at the age of 14 or 15 years. Hill et al. (1999) also reported the highest rate of involvement at the age of 15 years. These findings were further supported by Esbensen et al. (1993), who concluded that membership in gangs appeared to be related to age, with highest membership during the mid teen years. Thornberry et al. (2003) reported a wider age bracket for gang involvement, as he defined “the peak ages of gang involvement” (p. 9) between 13 and 22 years.

The age of gang membership is shown to be consistent between the U.S.A. population and the populations of other countries in further studies. For example, Esbensen and Weerman (2005) found that the peak of gang membership occurred during the mid teen years in both the U.S.A. (60% of American youth reported most gang members at the age of 14 years) and in the Netherlands (30% of Dutch youth reported most gang members at the age of 15 years). Similarly, in Canada, 39% of gang members were between the ages of 16 and 18 years, with almost half (48%) of gang involved youth under the age of 18 years (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2004).

Finally, the aspect of the age of gang members has also been captured in the definitions themselves. Thrasher (1927) in his study emphasised, “the gang is largely an

adolescent phenomenon” (p.36). Since then, other researchers, like Klein (1971), used the term *adolescent*, or as Miller (1980) and most recently Weerman et al. (2009), the term *youth* to describe this population.

2.7. Reasons for Joining a Gang

When examining risk factors, be it for antisocial and delinquent behaviour or for joining gangs, the researchers tend to present their findings as falling within five different developmental domains: individual, family, school, peer group, and community (Day & Wanklyn, 2012; Hill et al., 1999; Howell & Egley, 2005; Klein & Maxson, 2006). Not only were risk factors present across these five developmental domains, but researchers showed that there is a specific relationship between these domains and referred to it as the *cumulative effect* (Day & Wanklyn, 2012; Howell & Egley, 2005; Klein & Maxson, 2006). As indicated by these researchers, the cumulative effect suggests that the likelihood of joining a gang increases as the individual risk factors cumulate. In other words, the more risk factors experienced by the youth, the greater the chance of the youth joining a gang. Thornberry et al. (2003) found that 43.5% of male youth and 21.9% of female youth were gang members who experienced 21 risk factors out of a possible 40. The rates of gang affiliation for these particular youth was much higher compared to the averages of 19.7% for males and 11.9% for females.

2.7.1. Individual Domain

Based on the studies reviewed by Howell and Egley (2005), the individual domain has shown the most risk factors for gang membership than any other domain. Studies have shown consistent risk factors for joining gangs in the areas of “nondelinquent problem behaviors, such as reactivity, aggressiveness, and impulsivity (also referred to as externalizing behaviors)” (Klein & Maxson, 2006, p. 148). Another significant risk factor noted is the experience of a series of negative life events (Maxson & Whitlock, 2002; Thornberry et al., 2003). Thornberry et al. (2003) found that the experience of negative life events, such as breaking up with a girlfriend or a boyfriend, being suspended from school, or being seriously ill increases the likelihood of joining a gang threefold. Mental health problems (e.g., depression) (Thornberry et al., 2003) and

hyperactivity (Craig et al., 2002; Hill et al., 1999) also increase the risk of gang involvement. Reflecting on mental health problems as a risk factor for joining gangs, Dupéré et al. (2007) tried to explain the connection of youth with psychopathic tendencies to gang membership. They proposed that there may be three explanations of this connection: (a) the possible increase in the attraction of gang lifestyle for such youth, (b) the desire of gangs to have youth with psychopathic tendencies be their members, and (c) the difficulty with parental control over such youth, leading to increased unsupervised time and in turn providing more opportunity to join a gang.

Another risk factor to joining a gang is youths' favourable attitudes toward delinquent behaviour (Hill et al., 1999; Thornberry et al., 2003). Self-esteem, on the other hand, has not been found to be significantly related to gang membership (Thornberry et al., 2003), or as Klein and Maxson (2006) found, "there is no firm evidence either supporting or not supporting" (p. 148) self-esteem as a risk factor.

2.7.2. Peer Domain

The peer domain has been consistently supported in the literature as having risk factors for gang membership (Klein & Maxson, 2006). One of the strong risk factors is association with youth who engage in delinquent and antisocial activities (Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Esbensen et al., 2001; Hill et al., 1999; Thornberry et al., 2003), as well as, an association with aggressive peers (Bell, 2009; Craig et al., 2002). Klein and Maxson (2006) stressed that these negative peer influences and networks are stable predictors for youth to join gangs, as according to developmental researchers, "adolescent peer influences exert a strong proximal effect on youth attitudes and behavior during this stage of life" (p. 147). Support for the strong influence of delinquent peers came from Esbensen and Huizinga (1993), who found that within the two years preceding a youth joining a gang an increased delinquent behaviour with peers had been noted. The risks associated with participation in delinquent behaviour extend past the risk of joining a gang and can influence the length of gang membership. According to Gatti et al. (2005) youth who were previously involved in increased delinquency could be expected to remain in a gang for at least two consecutive years.

2.7.3. Family Domain

The family domain includes risk factors for joining gangs in several areas, yet the findings appear to be inconclusive most of the time. One of such risk factors predicting gang involvement is the parents' involvement in criminal activity and gangs (Vigil, 1988), especially in the case of male youth (Maxson & Whitlock, 2002). Klein and Maxson (2006) after an analysis of 20 gang related studies since 1990, questioned such a finding as they argued that there is inconclusive evidence that family deviance is a contributing factor to gang membership. The authors also added that the parenting style in general provides inconclusive evidence. Another predictor of gang membership that receives mixed support is living in a family with only one parent. According to Esbensen et al. (2001) and Hill et al. (1999), having one parent is a predictor of gang membership, but according to Bell (2009), that is only the case for male youth. In this case, yet again, Klein and Maxson (2006) found that most studies do not find evidence that having a single parent is a gang risk factor. The one indicator, which shows evidence to be a risk factor, is lower levels of parental monitoring of youth's activities (Esbensen et al., 2001; Esbensen & Weerman, 2005; Maxson & Whitlock, 2002; Thornberry et al., 2003). Overall, Klein and Maxson (2006) concluded that, "the immediate effects of peer networks might overwhelm perceived family risk factors" (p. 148), as they referred to findings obtained from longitudinal studies.

2.7.4. Community/Neighbourhood Domain

The community/neighbourhood domain is a domain that shows the weakest evidence of gang risk factors (Klein & Maxson, 2006). Klein and Maxson indicate that there is only a moderate number of studies which evaluated this domain; therefore, it remains the least studied domain. This fact though, according to the authors, should not imply that the community domain does not present risk factors, which may influence gang membership. Community risk factors were evaluated by Dupéré et al. (2007) in a longitudinal study of 3,522 Canadian youth selected from across the country. Dupéré et al. (2007) found that only residential instability was determined as a risk factor for joining gangs, yet the economic disadvantage of the neighbourhood was not attributed to be a

risk factor. The study concluded that not all aspects of a community's disadvantages influence youth with respect to joining gangs.

2.7.5. School Domain

The school domain, similar to the community/neighbourhood domain, has not been covered as extensively in research as the other domains (Kline & Maxson, 2006). Although Klein and Maxson stated that the available research in this domain has produced mixed results with respect to commitment to school and academic achievement as risks for joining gangs, some research supports the existence of risk factors related to academic performance. Thornberry et al. (2003) found that youth who perform poorly in school are more likely to join gangs. In the Seattle Social Development Project study, Hill et al. (1999) witnessed a similar observation that low academic aspirations and low attachment and commitment to school at the ages of 10 to 12 years are found to be risk factors for later gang membership. Another risk factor was found in a survey of American schools by Gottfredson and Gottfredson (2001); they reported that students who have the perception that their school is unsafe are more likely to join a gang.

2.7.6. One More Sobering Look at Risk Factors

Thornberry et al. (2003) suggest that poor performance at school, social disadvantage, prior delinquency, or externalizing behaviour can predict gang membership. They also caution that, "although accumulated disadvantage in these areas increases the chances of later gang membership, it does not guarantee it" (p. 76). They specifically point out that many youth who find themselves within the highest level of risk for joining gangs are not gang members. Similar observations were shared by researchers who reviewed existing gang literature. Decker et al. (2013) found that there are no known risk factors that would distinctively predict future gang involvement. Klein and Maxson (2006) also declared that, "most 'gang' risk factors are not particularly strong predictors of gang involvement" (p. 150), as more than half of the youth with high risk factors ultimately are not gang members.

2.8. Criminal Activity

Once youth have fallen into gangs, the gang lifestyle carries a substantial price. Youth in gangs are reported to be at a higher risk of committing crimes and committing those crimes with higher frequency (Craig et al., 2002; Curry, Decker, & Egley, 2002; Esbensen et al., 2001; Esbensen, & Huizinga, 1993; Esbensen et al., 1993; Esbensen, & Weerman, 2005; Gatti et al., 2005; Hill et al., 2001; Snyder, & Sickmund, 2006; Thornberry et al., 2003). Youth who are gang members are also found to commit more serious and violent crimes (Craig et al., 2002; Esbensen, & Huizinga, 1993; Esbensen, & Weerman, 2005; Thornberry et al., 2003). For example, these crimes include drive-by shootings, as reported by 61% of gang members, and killing of people, as reported by 51% of gang members in a study of adolescent arrestees in Arizona (Decker, Katz, & Webb, 2008). The increase in the commitment of delinquent acts subsequently increases the youths' chances of police arrests and being involved with the courts (Gatti et al., 2005). Gatti et al. found that Montreal youth involved in gangs were four times more frequently arrested by the police, four times more likely to appear in Juvenile Courts by the age of 15 years, and seven times more likely by the age of 16 years as compared to non-gang involved youth (p.1187).

Youth who belong to gangs not only commit more violent crimes, they themselves are at risk of being victims of serious violence (Decker et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2008). The act of belonging to a gang also increases the odds of carrying a gun (Snyder, & Sickmund, 2006; Thornberry et al. 2003). Thornberry et al. (2003), following the study of Rochester youth, found that gang youth were 10 times more likely to carry a gun than youth who were not gang members. Male youth who belong to a gang and carry a gun are also found to exhibit higher levels of delinquent behaviour. The increased level of violence seems to be supported by Curry et al. (2002) who found gang involved youth are six times more likely to be shot at and four times more likely to actually be shot. Decker et al. (2008) found that 75% of gang members have been threatened with a gun, 74% have been shot at, and 14% have been shot. The risks of involvement with gangs also include higher rates of drug sales (Decker et al., 2008; Gatti et al., 2005; Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). In one case, drug sales were up to 22 times higher for gang youth than for non-gang youth (Esbensen et al., 2001).

The risks associated with being involved in a gang are not just limited to the time when the young person is active in a gang, but these risks continue even after the youth leaves the gang (Gatti et al., 2005; Krohn, Ward, Thornberry, Lizotte & Chu, 2011; Thornberry et al., 2003). In the Rochester study, Thornberry et al. (2003) found that gang involved male youth who ended up staying in a gang for over one year were more likely to “be high school dropouts, to impregnate a girl at an early age, to be teen fathers, to cohabit, to have unstable employment patterns” (p.186). These gang involved youth were also found to have a higher chance of being arrested in their early twenties (Thornberry et al., 2003). The effects of street gang involvement during adolescence were also examined and confirmed by Krohn et al. (2011), who looked at the family relations, economic well-being, and opportunities for adult success. The researchers found that gang involved youth continue to experience more problematic home lives, have a financial disadvantage, and have more involvement with crime and the criminal justice system during their adulthood. Similar to the Rochester study, Krohn et al., (2011) found that even though the negative outcomes of being involved in a gang increased with the duration of engagement in the gang, most of the participants of the study belonged to a gang for less than two years. They hypothesized that the negative effects of gang membership during adolescence have substantial long-term consequences, because gang affiliation disrupts and creates problems during a critical developmental time in the young person’s life. This greater risk of deviant behaviour correlates to more stable and longer gang membership, which could be minimized by preventing youth from entering gangs and by reducing the time of participation in a gang (Gatti et al., 2005).

2.9. Duration of Involvement in a Gang

According to the three longitudinal studies on gang involved youth in the U.S.A., the duration of gang involvement for youth was short, with the majority of gang youth reporting their involvement at one year or even less (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Hill et al., 2001; Thornberry et al., 2003). Researchers in the Denver Youth Study (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993) found that out of the youth who joined a gang 67% remained in it for one year or less and 33% remained for more than one year. The Rochester Youth

Development Study (Thornberry et al., 2003) reported 53% of youth remained in the gang for one year or less and 47% remained for longer than one year. Finally, the Seattle Social Development Project (Hill et al., 2001) produced data very similar to the Rochester study indicating 69% of gang involved youth remained in a gang for one year or less and 31% for longer than one year. All of these longitudinal studies also found that those youth who remained in a gang for a period longer than one year, did not stay in the gang much past four years. Only a small percentage of youth even remained for that long; specifically, 3%, (Denver Youth Study and Seattle Social Development Project) to 7.3% of male youth and 0% of female youth (the Rochester Youth Development study) remained in a gang for four or more years.

In Canada, Gatti et al. (2005) studied Montreal's gang youth and found they remained in a gang for "relatively short periods of time" (p. 1187). Another study of Canadian preadolescent and adolescent youth (Craig et al., 2002) reported a significant relationship between the age of the youth and the stability of the youth's gang membership. They found that starting at the age of 13 years, youth who belonged to a gang for one year would belong to the gang in the following year; thus, concluding that gang stability occurs at the age of 13 years (p. 65).

2.10. Gang Prevention

Prevention of gang membership is related to the prevention of delinquent behaviour in general. Esbensen, Peterson, Taylor and Osgood (2012) argue that there are similarities between not only delinquency and gang involvement but also between the risk factors, which lead to both delinquency and gang involvement. These authors indicate that it is important to consider the progression of behaviour in planning for preventative strategies. To better aid this progression, steps to prevent youth from joining gangs should also be taken at a young age. Hill et al. (2001) proposes that prevention should start before fifth grade. Additionally, Klein and Maxson (2006), recommend that in order for gang prevention programs to be successful, they cannot be based on "the conventional wisdom of generic applicability of findings from analyses of crime patterns" (p. 140) but, instead, on factors that predict gang membership, such as those derived from quality research. These researchers propose that once the gang

prevention programs are finally established, they need to be evaluated for effectiveness because numerous programs that are currently in place are, for the most part, not evaluated. In some cases, when prevention programs are evaluated, they have demonstrated a minimal benefit, no benefit, or even increased gang membership (Klein, 2009).

2.10.1. Challenges of Known Prevention Approaches

Howell (2009) stressed that suppression has been and continues to be the main gang prevention approach. In reference to U.S. President Clinton's declaration of a "war on gangs," Howell concluded that, "legislators and policy makers in the United States have a tendency to 'declare war' on social problems, and their 'solutions' often are characterized by aggression" (p. 155). Effective gang prevention, intervention strategies, and programs targeting gang-involved youth still need to be developed and identified (Maxson, 2013). The lack of effective evidence-based programs was emphasized during the 10th Eurogang workshop in Germany, where Thornberry presented a blank slide to indicate the lack of prevention and intervention programs that met rigorous criteria or had any significant success (Pyrooz, 2013). Howell (2009) points out that many of the existing approaches to prevention and reduction of delinquency are not working and calls for the ineffective programs and practices to be abandoned. On his list of ineffective approaches and programs, he includes detention for punishment purposes (comprised of boot camps) and zero tolerance policies, which he states, "often make zero sense" (p. 313). In some cases, the consequence of such policies, he cautions, could actually place a youth at a greater risk of joining a gang. Additionally, he also believes large juvenile corrections facilities also constitute an ineffective approach to gang prevention and reduction.

2.10.2. Gang Prevention in Schools

In a national review of gang prevention programs in the U.S.A. by Gottfredson and Gottfredson (2001), the researchers estimated that there were 781,800 gang prevention and 159,700 gang intervention activities present in U.S.A. schools, which translated to one program for 63 students or roughly eight programs per school. The

first group of programs that focused on either prevention or reduction of gang involvement most often included prevention curriculum, instruction or training (15%), creating a school culture for “interpersonal exchanges” (11%), inclusion of recreation, enrichment or leisure activities (8%), and the use of approaches such as conflict resolution or mediation (3%). The second group of programs that focused on gang intervention most often included interventions by a counsellor, social worker, psychologist or therapist (over 20%), prevention curriculum, instruction or training (13%), services and programs for family members (12%), behavioural interventions (10%), influencing school culture (10%), and improving relations between school and the community (10%).

In general, Gottfredson and Gottfredson (2001) concluded that the quality of the programs aimed at prevention and intervention of gang involvement need to be improved, because they do not meet the characteristics of effective programs. The researchers identified one exception, wherein classroom organization and management interventions (e.g., establishment and enforcement of classroom rules or use of rewards and punishment) are focused on gang members; however, the researchers added, this type of intervention is not frequently implemented. Gottfredson and Gottfredson (2001) also note that one of the challenges of gang prevention or intervention programming is the fact that the gang involved youth are less likely to be exposed or involved in these programs. They found only 39% of males and 37% of females who were in a gang participated in gang intervention related programming. Even though the participation in formal programming was low for both genders, Gottfredson and Gottfredson (2001) emphasize that when receiving support from a school counsellor, social worker or psychologist, the gang involved girls were more likely than non-gang involved girls to be advised about drugs and violence; this was not the case for boys. Finally, in schools where principals reported gang problems, these researchers observed how the schools had programs that focused on gang members’ needs and, thus, were of better quality, were used by staff for a longer period of time, and were used more often. These schools were also more likely to target the actual gang members as opposed to the general population.

The Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) program is one of the prevention programs, which is offered in U.S.A. schools. In 2011, out of all the law enforcement agencies that reported dealing with a gang problem, the G.R.E.A.T. program was chosen and offered in classrooms by 17% of these law enforcement agencies (Egley & Howell, 2013). The G.R.E.A.T. program was originally developed in 1991 and was presented by uniform law officers as nine in-school lessons. Since then, the program has been revised to 13 lessons in a new format that includes the risk factors developed by prevention specialists and researchers. The program's purpose continues to be gang and violence prevention with the following goals: prevention of gang membership, prevention of violence and criminal activity, and development of positive relationship with law enforcement (Esbensen et al., 2012). Researchers were reporting mixed results since the G.R.E.A.T. program's implementation. For example, Esbensen (2004) reported modest effects on attitudes and delinquency risk factors in youth and no effect on delinquent behaviour and involvement in gangs. Klein and Maxson (2006) agree that G.R.E.A.T. had no effect on delinquency and gang membership; it was a "failed program" (p. 101), as it was not based on empirical evidence about gangs but on unproven conventional wisdom. They observed that the program was not targeting youth at risk of joining gangs, but rather the general population. In a more recent study, Esbensen et al. (2012) found the G.R.E.A.T. program did meet the objective of preventing gang membership because of a "39% reduction in the odds of gang joining one year post-program" (p. 143). With these findings showing that the G.R.E.A.T. program may prevent youth from joining gangs, Maxson (2013) wondered if providing the program to all youth to prevent the "relatively few" from joining gangs was "reasonable" (p. 425). Pyrooz (2013) emphasized the importance of knowing the "mechanisms" of the G.R.E.A.T. program that actually make the difference between the program working or not working.

2.10.3. Gang Prevention in Canada

In Canada, the National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC) with Public Safety Canada has a mandate to help prevent crime and to promote knowledge about crime prevention (Public Safety Canada, 2014a). Since 2007, the NCPC has taken steps towards crime prevention programming, and, as part of that effort, the NCPC has

provided funding of over 30 million dollars through the Youth Gang Prevention Fund (YGPF) to 17 community-based organizations across Canada for gang intervention projects (Smith-Moncricieffe, 2013). In the five years being reviewed (2007 to 2012), Smith-Moncricieffe listed 73% of the programs' participants as male and 32% to 43% were identified as current gang members. In the "first deliberate and systematic attempt in Canada to develop knowledge of what works to prevent youth gang membership and offending related to youth gang activities" (p. 19), Smith-Moncricieffe highlights findings in relationship to knowledge, attitudes, risk factors, protective factors, and youth behaviours. The findings show favourable changes with respect to knowledge of crime-associated risks and gang-associated risks. Favourable changes are also reported in youth attitudes, which include more positive attitudes towards law enforcement and an increase in pro-social attitudes. When evaluating risk factors and behaviours, favourable changes are reported for risk factors related to self-esteem, positive attachment to the workforce, and reduction in risk-taking behaviour. Changes in behaviours include a reduction in gang membership, police contact, and non-violent offending. Outcomes that Smith-Moncricieffe's reported indicate some unfavourable changes; for example, 70% of evaluated studies show no change in reduction of substance abuse. Areas less likely to show favourable outcomes also include: healthy family relationships, attachment to school, and violent offending (Smith-Moncricieffe, 2013).

2.11. Protective Factors

Researchers tend to consider the absence of known gang risk factors or a diminished influence of gang risk factors as protective factors (Klein & Maxson, 2006). As Klein and Maxson point out, this approach to protective factors does not lead to the identification of new factors, but even can cause the finding to become unclear. Klein and Maxson propose that protective factors should be factors such "as characteristics or processes that counteract risk" (p. 140). Howell and Egley (2005) agree that the gang literature is inconsistent when it comes to the use of the term protective factors. They also highlight that there is no consensus in the literature on what evidence-based protective factors may be, as they conclude, such research is "yet in its infancy" (p. 335). Howell (2010) also supports the notion that research, which can list any protective

factors, is very limited. Researchers, nevertheless, recognize the existence of protective factors as Thornberry et al. (2003) asserts that such protective “processes” appear, because something prevents some youth from joining gangs who are at the highest risk level.

Even though very limited, the literature hints at some protective factors. Maxson, Whitlock and Klein (1998) note that religious activities are found to be effective in gang prevention. These authors found it is “striking that participation in religious activities, but not in other community or school-based groups,” distinguishes gang from non-gang involved youth. Maxson et al. (1998) found that youth who reported higher self-concept (i.e., self-esteem derived from home environment) were prevented from belonging to gangs. McDaniel (2012) reported protective factors such as youths’ confidence in their coping skills and being monitored by their parents. Finally, Esbensen et al. (1993) found that youth who do not belong to a gang show less commitment to delinquent peers, less tolerance for deviance, and more commitment to positive peers.

2.12. Summary

The literature on street gangs suggests that there are very few areas where researchers can completely agree on gang findings. The challenges start with the definition of a gang and continue with identification of the prevalence of gangs, composition of gangs, and the risk factors that lead youth to join gangs. Regardless of the lack of unified consensus, researchers agree that gangs are mostly populated by adolescent boys who join gangs during their mid teen years. The literature also suggests that not every boy who is at high risk of joining a gang will join one, yet the risks associated with being a gang member remain substantial. The research shows that even though youth do not remain in a gang for a long period of time, as often the time spend in a gang may be only a year, the risks associated with being in a gang can last well into adulthood. The literature strongly suggests that prevention and intervention are key approaches used to protect youth from joining gangs; however, the literature also strongly stresses that research into protective factors is quite limited.

Klein and Maxson, in their review of gang literature, point that, “the effect of a risk factor on gang joining might be diminished by some other circumstance in an individual’s life” (p. 140); my research set to explore what these “circumstances” are. My research asked what helped and what hindered adolescent males to choose not to join gangs when they were at the verge of falling into a gang. By answering this question, I learned from young men what were these circumstances that influenced them to not join gangs. With the help of the Enhanced Critical Incident Technique method I explored “protective processes,” which as Thornberry et al. (2003) speculated exist, and anticipated that identifying them “could be particularly helpful to intervention efforts” (p. 76).

Chapter 3.

Methodology

3.1. Enhanced Critical Incident Technique

The Enhanced Critical Incident Technique (ECIT) is a qualitative research method which was derived as an improvement of the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) (Butterfield, Borgen, Maglio, & Amundson, 2009) described by John C. Flanagan in 1954. The enhancements introduced to CIT improved the credibility and trustworthiness of the CIT research method and advanced this method beyond its original purpose of task analysis into a psychological investigative tool (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005). CIT, also a qualitative research method (Butterfield et al., 2005; Butterfield et al., 2009; Woolsey, 1986), was described by Flanagan (1954) as a technique capable of “solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles” (p. 327) when applied to human behaviour, and thus appropriate for the field of counselling and psychotherapy.

Flanagan (1954) developed and used CIT as a tool during the analysis of pilots' performance in studies through the Aviation Psychology Program of the United States Army Air Forces during World War II. Initially, Flanagan (1954) observed that one of the studies provided reports of pilot candidates, which included “clichés and stereotypes . . . along with . . . a number of specific observations of particular behaviours” (p.328). As subsequent studies were conducted, greater importance was therefore placed on the factual descriptions and proper procedures for obtaining these observations. The recognition and implementation of these procedural changes provided a formulated approach to the studies conducted through the Aviation Psychology Program and eventually in 1947 CIT was formally developed and given its name (Flanagan, 1954).

Due to its qualitative approach, CIT was not at first a significant research method in the counselling field, because during the 1950s there was a push for research methods that instead focused on quantification approaches (Woolsey, 1986). Notwithstanding the neglect of CIT, Woolsey (1986) stated that CIT has a place in counselling psychology as an investigative approach, especially in emergent research, because it provides opportunities to highlight future research possibilities. More recently, Butterfield et al. (2005) reviewed 125 published articles within 50 years prior to the review and observed that CIT has evolved over the years as a research method that can be effectively used in counselling psychology.

ECIT owes its current form to the originally developed CIT method and to the work of researchers who introduced enhancements to the original CIT method (Butterfield et al., 2009). These enhancements allow ECIT to be a more credible and sound research method (Butterfield et al., 2005). The enhancements did not change the original steps of the CIT method described by Flanagan in 1954, but improved it through the incorporation of a few substantial components that now form the current ECIT method. One of the enhancements is the addition of the contextual question aimed to provide the researcher with background information prior to the collection of the critical incidents. Another enhancement is the addition of a question inquiring about wish list items aimed to provide additional information to the helping or hindering incidents. Lastly, nine credibility checks were added to improve the trustworthiness of the study's results (Butterfield et al., 2009). As a result of these enhancements the methodology is now referred to as the ECIT methodology (Butterfield et al., 2009). For the purpose of this study all the references pertaining to the original CIT method apply and are integrated into the ECIT method.

3.2. Appropriateness of ECIT for the Study

There are a few aspects that support ECIT as the preferred research method for this study. By employing the ECIT method, I was able to use a qualitative approach proven to be appropriate for new fields of study, in this case, the emerging fields of gang preventative measures and protective factors. Also, through the ECIT method, I was able to conduct personal interviews to fully capture the individuals' unique life events. I

was interested in a qualitative approach to my research question and ECIT was confirmed on numerous times as an appropriate qualitative study method by Flanagan (1954), Woolsey (1986), Butterfield et al. (2005), and Butterfield et al. (2009). ECIT was also found to be an appropriate research method to explore an emerging new field of study (Butterfield et al., 2005; Butterfield et al., 2009; Flanagan 1954; Woolsey, 1986). According to the Astwood Strategy Corporation (2004), the gang prevention field I intended to research is still an emerging and developing field of study because “there does not exist a comprehensive range of proven youth gang prevention programs in Canada” (p. 4).

Additionally, it is also not just the field of study that is emerging, but also the approach of this study, which employed participant in-person interviews. Decker et al. (2013) stated that frequently “self-report survey data with community- and school-based samples has been a staple of panel studies of gang youth” (p. 378). Although ECIT is regarded as a research method that uses a “retrospective self-report” (Butterfield et al., 2005, p. 480), it is still based on in-person interviews. This allows the researcher an opportunity to use counselling field’s strategies (e.g., building rapport, using probes and questions), which “yield rich data that would likely not be obtained if other methods were used” (Butterfield et al., 2009, p. 269). Thus, through the use of ECIT, in this study I was able to step away from self-reported surveys used in other gang-focused research (e.g., 2002 Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs, National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth) in favour of in-person interviews to obtain a more comprehensive set of data.

Finally, ECIT was a preferred research method for this study because, on one hand, it follows a set of clear interview steps that help to obtain consistent data from each interview; while on the other hand, ECIT is a “highly flexible” technique (Flanagan, 1954; Woolsey, 1986). This flexibility was essential during interviews to allow each of the participant’s unique stories to be captured in detail. Since personal stories were shared, the pacing of the interviews was important. Thus, I ensured that I attended to participants’ well being and I offered an opportunity for participants to have a break when needed.

There are two more distinct reasons for the use of ECIT in this study. First, I

aimed to explore critical incidents that happened in the lives of adolescent males that prevented them from becoming gang members when they were interested in joining a gang and when they were beginning to engage in gang-like activities. Woolsey (1986) refers to critical incidents as “turning points” (p. 251). Through the ECIT method, asking young males to reflect on a point or points when they chose to make a significant change in the path of their lives, helps to identify such turning points. Consequently, the ECIT method supports the possibility of having a greater understanding of critical turning points when it comes to gang membership. Second, the ECIT method, since its beginning, was used to aid the fields of counselling and education amongst others (Flanagan, 1954). Using ECIT to explore turning points in this study, I continue to uphold the practice of supporting the fields of counselling and education by studying new preventative approaches for youth at-risk of joining gangs.

3.3. Study Procedures

In this section, the steps taken to conduct this research study are described, including the process of planning and conducting research and analyzing the collected data. While the steps are described in detail, one limitation is used; location names of where the interviews have taken place are not used in order to protect the anonymity of the participants who agreed to participate in this study. This section also presents the steps taken to ensure reliability and validity of the study. Before the study was initiated and any participants were recruited, the study was reviewed and approved by the Simon Fraser University Office of Research Ethics.

3.3.1. Steps in Conducting ECIT

ECIT follows five steps that are necessary to conduct a qualitative study. These steps, first described by Flanagan (1954) as the Critical Incident Technique research method and later modified and enhanced by Butterfield et al. (2005) and Butterfield et al. (2009), were renamed as the Enhanced Critical Incident Technique. The following steps outline the ECIT procedure with all the enhancements, as described by Butterfield et al. (2005) and Butterfield et al. (2009), that were followed in this study.

Step 1: Ascertaining the general aims of the activity being studied.

In order to know the general aim of the activity being studied, Butterfield et al. (2005) point out that the researcher needs to answer two questions: “(1) what is the objective of the activity; and (2) what is the person expected to accomplish who engages in the activity?” (p. 478). Using these questions as a guide, this study aimed to explore the factors that occurred, were experienced, or influenced adolescent males to turn away from the gang lifestyle when they were contemplating or beginning to engage in a gang lifestyle. The participants were prompted to recollect specific critical incidents that helped them or hindered them as they turned away from a possible gang lifestyle. The participants were also asked to speak to incidents they wished they had experienced, or to resources they wished were available to them during their decision-making period.

Step 2: Making plans and setting specifications.

As described by Butterfield et al. (2009), I used an interview guide (Appendix A) with all participants as a means of being consistent in all interviews. This guide worked as a way of keeping focus during interviews and as a resource to make sure that all questions were asked and answered. The interview guide consisted of a set of questions, including an invitation to participants to recollect experiences during the time when they were contemplating or beginning to engage in a gang lifestyle. Once participants recalled that time, there were questions to inquire about critical incidents occurring around the time when participants decided that entering a gang lifestyle was no longer their desired option. I explored in detail all aspects related to what these incidents may have been or what they looked like to participants.

Step 3: Collecting the data.

According to Butterfield et al. (2009), in-person interviews are the most effective approach for research using the ECIT method in the field of counselling psychology. Even though for the first interview I considered the use of technology (i.e., phone or internet), anticipating that some of the participants might declare that this is the only way they would be willing to participate in the study, none of the participants expressed such a request. The follow up interviews were conducted through the use of a phone for efficiency and accessibility, to make sure that participants had a chance to validate the

data. The use of cell phones or internet for research relating to gangs has been previously supported by Decker et al. (2013) who observed that, “fortunately, technological advancements affecting the manner in which we can collect . . . and analyze data are sure to improve our understanding of gang membership in the life course” (p. 379).

During the interviews, I followed the steps as outlined by Butterfield et al. (2009), including obtaining participants’ understanding and agreement to participate in the study. During each of the interviews, I addressed these stages as set out in my interview guide:

- a) Allow the participant to tell his story and feel heard and understood.
- b) Provide the background information against which the critical incidents (CIs) and wish list (WL) items can be understood.
- c) Elicit the ECIT data.
- d) Gather the demographic data that describe the sample.

While conducting the interviews I asked open-ended and clarifying questions (e.g., asking for specific examples). These inquiries helped to elicit more detailed, clearer and thus richer data out of the critical incidents recounted by the participants. This was an important part of the interview as Butterfield et al. (2005) cautioned that, “if the reports are general and less specific, then the information may not be useful” (p. 481). While Butterfield et al. (2009) added that the use of counselling skills, including empathy and active listening, “greatly facilitates” (p. 270) the interview.

Step 4: Analyzing the data.

Once the interviews were completed and transcribed verbatim, the transcripts became the main source of data. I analyzed them using the following steps (as outlined by Flanagan (1954), Woolsey (1986), Butterfield et al. (2005), and Butterfield et al. (2009)):

Determining the frame of reference.

The data was processed with the intention of providing clarification and guidance to counselling and education practitioners on preventing at-risk male youth from joining gangs, and possibly to enhance parenting and community support for these at-risk

youth. I explored the data to derive effective prevention and intervention strategies that were informed by the experiences of gang-prone at-risk males during their adolescence. I sought to identify preventative turning points in the form of social, emotional, and psychological interventions and supports.

Formulating the categories derived from grouping similar incidents.

The process of formulating categories followed three distinctive parts. First, I organized the raw data by colour coding the transcripts following a previously established reference guide that assigned a unique colour scheme to each component of the interview. Different set of colour schemes represented: contextual data, critical incidents (CIs), both helping and hindering, wish list (WL) items, and any examples that supported the CIs. Next, I identified CIs and WL items as I extracted them from the interviews and sorted them into three groupings: helpful CIs, hindering CIs and WL items. Finally, I created categories, keeping in mind that, “the purpose for which the data [were] being collected influences the formation of the categories and their level of specificity” (Butterfield et al., 2009, p. 272). With each interview, I separated first helping CIs, then hindering CIs, and finally WL items into their own set of categories reflecting the incidents’ similarities, patterns, or themes. During the process of assigning the CIs and WL items derived from each transcript into the existing categories, some categories, due to their overt similarities, were merged together to form one category. When all the interviews were processed and the categories finalized, I created an operational definition for the each category.

Determining the level of specificity or generality to be used in reporting the data.

The level of specificity or generality was determined based on the categories I developed. For this purpose I considered the specific CIs and WL items that clearly identified what turning points could be established and reported while still “maximizing richness and distinctiveness of categories” (Woolsey, 1986, p. 250).

Step 5: Interpreting the data and reporting the results.

Once I established the categories, I tested them through a set of nine credibility checks described by Butterfield et al. (2005) and Butterfield et al. (2009). Following

successful completion of the credibility checks, I reported the results of my findings in the Results and Discussion chapters of this thesis. My hope is that the findings of my research will serve to provide new information to the gang research field's emerging knowledge base for effective gang preventative approaches.

3.3.2. ECIT Credibility and Quality Checks

According to Creswell (2012), the accuracy and credibility of the findings in a qualitative study is very important because the research is interpretive and consequently subject to the researcher's own experience that then influences how the data is interpreted. Further, Butterfield et al. (2009) warn that in situations when the study involves "perception regarding an experience" (p. 274), it is advantageous to conduct credibility checks. In order to address the credibility of the findings, and thus the results that I reported, I subjected the data to nine credibility and quality checks as suggested by Butterfield et al. (2009; 2005).

Independent extraction of the critical incidents.

To conduct this check, I asked an independent person, a colleague with 15 years of experience in the field of education and supporting at-risk children and youth, to extract CIs and WL items from randomly selected 25% of the transcripts, as per Butterfield et al. (2005) recommendation. The CIs and WL items extracted by the individual were then compared against the CIs and WL items which I previously extracted. At first, the CIs and WL items matched in 66% of cases. After a discussion about the possible nuances in the types of experiences described by the participants and therefore the variety of critical incidents embedded in the interviews, the independent person and I matched in 89% of the cases.

Participant cross-checking.

Following the initial analysis of data, I contacted each participant by phone, as suggested by Butterfield et al. (2009), for what is referred to as a second interview. The participants were asked to review the CIs and WL items and their placement in the operationalized categories. Each participant was given the opportunity to comment on the correctness of the coding. All of the participants reported that they confirm and

agree with the critical incidents that were extracted from their interviews and their placement in the appropriate categories.

Independent judges placing incidents into categories.

For this check, I asked an independent person, a colleague with 15 years of experience in the field of education and supporting at-risk children and youth, to place 25% of the previously extracted CIs and WL items into the previously created categories. The aim of this test, between my placement and that of the independent person's, is a rate of credibility of 80% (Butterfield et al. 2005). After the independent person placed the CIs and WL items into existing categories, they were compared to how I previously placed them and the match rate was calculated at 83%; therefore, above the ECIT requirement.

Exhaustiveness.

Exhaustiveness of the research was met when no new categories were identified following the placement of the extracted CIs and WL items from a subsequent interview. To facilitate this process, I kept a log (Appendix B) detailing and dating the placement of CIs and WL items into existing categories and the emergence of new categories. After four interviews, no new categories were created. I continued to interview four more participants anticipating that new categories might be created. Because no new categories emerged from the additional interviews, I became aware that the study reached its exhaustiveness, and I stopped seeking new participants after eight interviews.

Eliciting expert opinions.

Once the categories were created and defined, I shared them through an email with two experts with experience in the fields of gang and delinquent youth. The experts were asked to review the categories created through this research, evaluate the findings according to their knowledge and current literature on gangs, and comment on any results that they found noteworthy or concerning. Both experts agreed that the findings of my research project align with the current literature, albeit, as one expert noted, limited literature especially in the context of Western Canada. Both of the experts were

also pleased to see that the findings recognized the sense of morality/values subcategory. One of the experts stated that the aspect of morality sometimes is overlooked when referring to gang members and he found that in his own work with offenders, a sense of morality could be still recognized. Another subcategory that stood out for one of the experts was involvement in a purposeful activity (e.g., sports, volunteering, full time school attendance). The expert stated that it was fascinating for him to see that the participants explicitly recognized the importance of a source of purpose in helping them reject a gang lifestyle. One expert shared a concern about the coding of acts of violence by seemingly two separate subcategories. After reviewing his concern with the coding, I was able to more clearly validate the differentiation between those two subcategories. Another expert commented on the fact that families might act as both a protective factor but also as a risk factor, especially if family members are gang involved. Because my research project did not aim to explore risk factors, the role of a family as a risk factor is not explored. The family stability subcategory instead highlights the participants' reflections of a possible protective factor. Both experts found the categories and subcategories of my research project as reflective of the literature, their experience, and knowledge.

Participation rate.

The participation rate for each category was established to calculate the percentage of participants who identified the specific incident out of the total number of participants who took part in the research. Butterfield et al. (2005) cited, following other researchers, that participation rate of 25% validates a category. Two of the hindering critical incidents' categories did not meet this rate, because each of these categories was validated by only 13% of the participants. After a consideration, I decided to include these categories in the results, because they represented additional hindering factors not reflected in other categories.

Theoretical validity.

I compared the findings of my study against the existing literature on gangs, specifically on protective factors and gang desistance, to see if my findings are supported by the existing academic knowledge. I describe in detail the similarities further in Chapter 5. My research study also highlighted some discrepancies between

my findings and existing literature. These discrepancies do not necessarily discount my findings, but rather, as Butterfield et al. (2005) noted, “the exploratory nature of the CIT may mean the study has uncovered something new that is not yet known to researchers” (p. 488); therefore, I reported such findings as new in Chapter 5.

Descriptive validity.

The interviews were audiotaped to make sure that both the transcripts and then the examples quoted in Chapter 4 used to support the findings were accurate and reflected participants’ recounts. The participants’ own check of the findings during participant cross-checking also contributed to the descriptive validity check.

Interview fidelity.

To establish interview fidelity to help to maintain consistency throughout all of the interviews, I created and followed the interview guide (Appendix A). This interview guide was approved by my senior supervisor and was used during the interviews with the participants to ensure that the style of the interview was consistent with the ECIT method and that the participants were not being asked leading questions.

3.3.3. Participant Selection Criteria

This research sought to explore preventative approaches that acted on adolescent boys who were considering joining gangs and were beginning to engage in gang-like activities and that deterred the boys from joining a gang. My criteria for the selection of participants included a number of participant characteristics including: gender, age, and self-nomination as a potential gang member during adolescence.

The participants, apart from being males, also had to be of the age of majority, which is 19 years in British Columbia (B.C.) (British Columbia, 1996). Preferably, I was also seeking participants who were no older than 30 years. The lower and upper limit on the age of the participants was set for a number of reasons. Firstly, by not accepting minors for this study, it guaranteed that no sensitive information would have to be shared with the parents or guardians of the participants, because all participants were able to legally provide informed consent to participate. Secondly, as the 2002 Canadian Police

Survey on Youth Gangs (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2004) indicated, the age of gang members ranges from below 16 years to above 22 years, with only 14% of gang population being 22 years or older. In B.C. the age group of the gang population who is 22 years or older is significantly smaller and reported at 6%, while 62% of B.C. gang members are under the age of 18 years. Considering that the majority of gang members enter gangs before the age of 18 years, there was a greater probability that the individuals over the age of 19 years have already had the chance to be in the position of wanting to join a gang and also have already decided not to. Thirdly, the upper limit is placed, as Butterfield (2005) stated, “the criterion for accuracy of retrospective self-report is based on the quality of the incidents recounted” (p.481), and as such, it was important that the participants were of an age that placed them within a few years since the turning points occurred, allowing them to accurately recount these events. Finally, as Esbensen et al. (2001) highlighted, there is no agreement on what defines a gang and a gang member. At the same time, a group of researchers came up with a definition “largely acceptable to research scholars and working practitioners alike” (Klein & Maxson, 2006, p. 9) called the Eurogang (Weerman et al., 2009). This definition was the guiding definition for this research as it clarifies that, “a street gang (or troublesome youth group corresponding to a street gang elsewhere) is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity” (Weerman et al., 2009, p. 20). Although my expectation was that participants did not belong to a gang in the past, this final qualifying inclusion criterion ensured that participants were drawn to and/or considered belonging to a gang or troublesome youth group consistent with the Eurogang definition.

In order to validate this last criterion, the method of *self-nomination* was applied. Self-nomination implies that participants self identify as wanting to belong to a gang, in this case a street gang, as defined by the Eurogang definition. It was up to the participants themselves to indicate that their interests and activities during adolescence, although similar to gang-like behaviours, only reflected their interest in gangs, but not an actual membership.

No known research specifically asks the same question as this; thus, the method of self-nomination for possibly joining a gang has not yet been tested and validated.

Instead, numerous gang researchers through their struggles with the question of participant inclusion have validated the self-nomination method (e.g., Esbensen et al., 2001; Thornberry et al., 2003). Sullivan (2005) observed that, “recent researchers have tended to let research participants themselves decide what gang phenomena are, without imposing definitions on them” (p. 173-174). He made this statement after Curry (2000), through his assessment of the self-nomination method, validated it. Esbensen et al. (2001) stated that self-nomination is a “robust measure of gang membership capable of distinguishing gang from nongang youth” (p. 124). In similar words, following the Rochester Youth Development Study, Thornberry et al. (2003) noted, “adolescents appear to know what gangs are and whether they are a member of a gang” (p. 22). The self-nomination method has also been used by Statistics Canada (2009) in their National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth. In that survey, Statistics Canada allowed the participants to self-nominate their participation in gangs. For example, a question in the survey asked: “In the past 12 months, were you part of a gang that broke the law by stealing, hurting someone, damaging property, etc.?” (p. 17). Lastly, Pyrooz (2013) endorsed the use of self-nomination for the advancement of gang literature in “important and significant ways over the last two decades” (p. 431) and the author believes the method will continue to be used.

In summary, the participants for this study were selected if they met the following criteria: were males, between the ages of 19 years and preferably 30 years, who self-nominated themselves as individuals who could have potentially joined a gang (as defined by the Eurogang definition) during their adolescence.

3.3.4. Participant Recruitment

I recruited participants through both purposive and snowball recruiting techniques. At first, I approached professionals in the fields of education, counselling, youth work, and outreach programs to elicit possible participants for the study. These professionals included teachers, counsellors, school administrators, youth workers, behaviour specialists, neighbourhood house managers, university professors, and other youth affiliated professionals deemed appropriate. They were contacted via an email and provided with a letter (Appendix C) outlining the nature of the study and the criteria

for prospective participants, because they were most likely to know, and have interacted with, individuals who would meet the criteria for the study. The professionals were also provided with a separate letter (Appendix D) designed to be given to prospective participants, which outlined the purpose of the study and included the necessary contact information. Once the first participants responded to my purposive recruitment, I asked them to consider contacting other prospective participants they were aware of. The snowball group was used by Fagan (1989) to elicit gang members for his study, and it was also suggested as a method by Biernacki and Waldorf (1981) for studying a “sensitive issue” (p. 141) in qualitative research. Apart from the issue of sensitivity, when dealing with a population of young adults who have considered engaging in gangs, previous researchers have highlighted a problem with only relying on adult referrals. They note that because “adults are not aware generally of who belongs to a gang, peers may be an important second source of information on gang membership and gang activities” (Craig et al., 2002, p. 66-67). This observation supports and validates the use of snowballing as a means of eliciting peers to provide a more appropriate means of obtaining additional participants. In this study, I was able to elicit other prospective participants to contact me through the use of the snowball approach. In total, 11 prospective participants contacted me. Out of those who contacted me, three were not included in this study. Out of those not included, one did not meet all of the criteria for the study, and two, although met the criteria, eventually declined to participate in the study. The participants included in this study ranged in age from 19 years to 27 years with a mean age 23 years. All of the participants were born in Canada, with seven indicating Indo-Canadian or East Indian background and one participant identifying himself as having both Caucasian and Asian background. All of the participants indicated that they completed high school and five of them stated having completed some college education, up to a bachelor’s degree. Out of the eight participants, seven are currently employed and three are pursuing further education.

3.3.5. Interview Process

Location.

The location of the interviews depended on the preference of each individual participant. The option of using local universities’ meeting rooms was offered to the

participants, but a number of participants chose an alternate, neutral location. In all cases the participants' request for confidentiality and their level of comfort with the location the interview took place was strongly considered and adhered to.

Confidentiality.

Prior to the interview, but following the participants' acknowledgment and acceptance of the nature of the study, I asked the participants to sign a consent form (Appendix E). I informed the participants that for the purpose of the interview their names would be omitted, and they were asked to provide a pseudonym to accommodate for anonymity. Participants were also made aware that they had the right to withdraw consent for the interview at any time without any consequences and that their personal information and any recordings would be deleted and destroyed. After the interviews, the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and each participant was referred to by his pseudonym throughout all the data related to the participant. Also, any identifying names mentioned during the interview (e.g. geographic locations, names of gangs, or other individuals, etc.) were removed from the transcripts. This was done to ensure that the information would be anonymized. I stored all digital audio recordings, transcripts, and working documents (analysis) on a password protected computer. The computer and any hard copies of the data were kept in a locked cabinet in my home.

Interview.

The interviews ranged between 1 hour to 2 hours and were audio taped. The interviews followed the steps and questions outlined in the interview guide (Appendix C) following the ECIT method. The interviews consisted of three phases. During the first phase, I asked the participants contextual questions about their experience as a teenager and their experience, or opinions, about gangs at that time in their lives. This part of the interview allowed me to learn about the participants' background and helped me to build a rapport with the participants. Then, during phase two, I asked the participants to recall specific critical incidents related to choosing to reject joining a gang. During phase three, I asked participants to share any additional factors they thought would have additionally deterred them from joining a gang while they were teenagers. Lastly, I asked participants for their basic demographic data (Appendix F). During the

interviews, I kept an inquisitive stance, focusing on the questions listed in the interview guide. As needed, I asked clarifying and probing questions that were meant to further provide more detail about the critical incidents or were meant to clarify the participants' recollections. I also employed other counselling skills such as empathy and active listening to help me pay attention to participants' reactions during the interview, as some of their recollections were triggering difficult emotions. Throughout the interview, I was prepared to address participants who became upset or who had a difficult time continuing with the interview, by providing them with options of taking a break, returning to the question at a later time, or stopping the interview completely. None of the participants ever required such support and all of the interviews were completed within the allotted time. Participants were also provided with information regarding free counselling services. Only one participant indicated an interest in additional support. Following the first interviews, participants were contacted for the cross-checking interviews which were completed, based on the participants' wishes, over the phone. During the second interview participants were provided a summary recounting the critical incidents from their interviews, including preventative categories derived from the interviews. Participants were asked to provide feedback regarding these findings. All of the participants confirmed the findings from their interviews as valid and appropriately representing their own experiences and accounts.

3.4. Summary

My choice of ECIT, as qualitative research method for this study, was deliberate as Woolsey (1986) found that it "can inspire counsellors with enthusiasm for research" (p. 252). I also believe that ECIT is consistent with the values and skills of the counselling psychology field. This inquisitive approach, I hope, was able to fully capture the participants' unique critical incidents and identify turning points that influenced youth to avoid joining gangs. By following the above outlined steps of the interview process, I hope I also followed Pyrooz's (2013) observation that, "gang membership is not a behavior, an act, or an event; rather, it is a status, a social category, or identity" (p. 431). In a similar way, I believe the participants offered examples of critical incidents that surpass what has been known so far about gang prevention. Through the methodology

that ECIT provides, I was able to explore the unique factors that offset the lure of the status or identity that gang membership provides to adolescent boys.

Chapter 4.

Results

For the purpose of this study, eight participants, who self-identified themselves as being drawn to and/or considering belonging to a gang during adolescence, were interviewed. To protect the participants' identities no names or any identifying information about the participants are included in this research.

In this chapter, I will describe the various perceptions of gang and the sources of opportunities that the gang seemed to present to the participants during their adolescence. Following this, I will describe the helping and the hindering critical incidents that the participants identified in their lives, as well as the wish list items.

4.1. How Do Adolescent Males View a Gang?

Participants were asked to describe their experiences of growing up and perceptions of gangs during adolescence. Derived from these accounts are 96 descriptors of how the gang was perceived and understood. These descriptors were analyzed and divided into eight separate categories. Four of the categories present how a gang was perceived and another four categories list the opportunities the gang provided. These categories highlight how teenage boys perceive gangs based on their personal experiences, media influences, and general stereotypes. The adolescent boys' perception of gangs is provided to better understand why and how the factors, which helped, hindered, or were wished for, were important from the boys' perspective. The descriptor categories of how the gang was perceived include: friendship group, disappointing allure, misleading stereotypes, and normalized lifestyle. The categories of the opportunities a gang provided include: financial gain, prestigious and fun environment, reputation, and a sense of belonging.

Table 4.1 presents the participation rates for the categories of gang descriptors. The categories are presented in an ascending order from most to least frequently supported descriptions.

Table 4.1. Perceptions and Opportunities of a Gang Lifestyle as Reported by the Participants.

		Number of Participants (n=8)	Participation Rate
		n	%
Perceptions of Gang Lifestyle	Friendship Group	5	63%
	Disappointing Allure	4	50%
	Misleading Stereotypes	3	38%
	Normalized Lifestyle	2	25%
Opportunities Provided by Gang Lifestyle	Financial Gain	8	100%
	Prestigious and Fun Environment	6	75%
	Reputation	6	75%
	Sense of Belonging	4	50%

4.1.1. Friendship Group

The most prevalent view of a gang that was shared by 63% of the participants was not that of a gang, but rather a friendship group. Out of this group, 100% (5 out of 5) of them referred to a gang as either a set of friends, group of friends, or a friendship. Other descriptive words used were crew by 60% (3 out of 5) and buddies by 40% (2 out of 5). This group of friends is set apart from other friendship groups because the adolescent boys would engage in getting into trouble, beating up people, and selling drugs. The teenage boys did not consider themselves a gang and they did not use the word gang when they described themselves. One participant saw his group this way:

When I was growing up, you didn't really think of yourself as a gang; I think a group of friends, more than anything. I know there's, I guess when you are older then there is organized gangs, but when we were young, you didn't think of it as you're organized gang, you're just a crew, buddies, kind of thing.

Another participant also expressed that as a teenage boy, he and his friends never considered the idea of a gang when they referred to themselves:

It wasn't more of like gang . . . of which gang were you part of. It was just more like, these are my buddies, and this is what we're gonna do. We gonna sell some dope and we're gonna have a good time, and that's it. It's just friendship. I guess people who say these are my, nobody says, "Hey, I'm part of this gang." It's just like, "This is my crew, this is my group." Not a gang, it's just friendship.

Even if the teenage boys had a name for their "friendship" group and were aware that they have connections with organized crime, the idea that they may be perceived as a gang was not considered. As one participant explained, it was:

. . . our group of friends and [we] did have a title, a name for our group, and we just thought of it almost as a crew name. There'd be 50 people . . . that was a big thing, going to those events, because there were other groups from different areas and everyone had their name. And it was more how we just thought of each others, just being teenagers, but thinking back we were together, and did beat up people together, and we'd sell drugs together, and stuff like that. We were young and we didn't think of it as anything so organized. We had a lot of talk though about people within our group who did have connections with more organized stuff, more people who were older.

According to most participants, a group that could have been referred to as a gang was seen as a much more organized entity and included individuals who were past the age of adolescence. For the participants, their activities during their youth were viewed more as troublesome than criminal. Also, regardless of the activities or connections the groups had, the boys belonging to these groups did not see themselves nor their own groups as gangs, but rather as crews, buddies, or simply friends.

4.1.2. Disappointing Allure

The view that gang lifestyle can be seen as desirable, but a highly misleading experience, was shared by 50% of participants. Participants during their adolescence did get a chance to experience the reality of the daily gang life that went beyond the enticing, glamorized lifestyle that seemed to be so attractive. The participants touched on a few factors that dealt with such aspects as a demanding type of employment,

constant fear of being exposed and arrested, emotional and psychological pressure, and even problems with marketing.

The most frequently shared frustration offered by the participants was that adolescent boys do not know how hard they will have to work while in a gang. As one participant commented, "People think that selling drugs you make a lot of money, it's so easy. It's not easy. Actually, it is hard." He and others described the difficulty starting with having to work 12 to 14 hour shifts per day and having to be available and constantly on the road. During that time, the teenage boys might be faced with threats from other gang members and the possibility of arrest by the police. All of this pressure created a fear that could have a deteriorating psychological effect on the teenage boys. Finally, the adolescent boys had to compete for clients because, as one participant said, "There is more work than you think." He also added:

I think that you and a lot of people should know, that lifestyle is really glorified. Especially, I see there is a lot of kids, lot of kids getting sucked into that lifestyle. These kids don't understand they are not gonna amount to shit. First of all, there is more work than you think. It's gonna bring nothing but bad situations. It's countless drama; that's what it is. And if you don't know how to deal with it, and if you don't know how to deal with people, then definitely you're gonna be in a lot of trouble.

Another participant explained that there is an aspect of marketing that all of a sudden teenage boys have to be exposed to and be knowledgeable in. He too stressed the exhausting nature of the gang life:

People think, "It's so easy man." It's fucking one of the hardest jobs out there, I guarantee it. I guarantee selling drugs is one of the hardest jobs out there. Because it takes away from you mentally, physically; all aspects. People think, "Oh, yeah, it's so [easy]." Younger kids look, "Oh, yeah, I'm gonna become a dope dealer, sell drugs like that." It doesn't happen just like that. First of all, you have to find clientele. Second of all, you have to keep up to a certain grade of product, otherwise people are just gonna go somewhere else. Then you have to keep to a certain quality plus quantity, cause if you are lynching people, you are ripping them off, they're just gonna go somewhere else too. Because, yeah, you're getting that much better part, but there's someone else who might be giving a little bit more or which will last longer. So there is lots of different aspects, and lots of different things you have to think about. On top of that, you are doing

something that's illegal, so you have to keep that back in mind; you have to watch out for cops, pigs.

The strain of experiencing a very steep learning curve combined with the risk of criminal consequences jarred some adolescent boys into a more clear sense of reality of how little truth there was in the phrase – “It's so easy.”

The participants, who as teenage boys became exposed to the reality of gangs, could describe the gang lifestyle as strenuous and exhausting. As a result, their view and understanding of the gang lifestyle became that much more realistic and factual.

4.1.3. Misleading Stereotypes

The perception that sometimes the gang image is distorted was shared by 38% of the participants. The participants reported that they had a preconceived view of a gang based on accepted knowledge, myths about gangs, and personal experiences. They explained how the images of what gangs were supposed to be clashed with the reality they experienced. In all cases, the participants had a perception of the brutality, ruthlessness, and a physical image of gang members they acquired from news, school, church, or family. The participants found though, through their experience with real gang affiliated individuals, that sometimes there was no support for the images they previously embraced.

For some adolescent boys, the brutal image of a gang was at first a sufficient deterrent to reject gangs. One participant explained:

Our perception on gangs was pretty much, nobody wants to be a part of it. . . . Gangs for me, when I hear gangs, that's pretty much gangs, people that are gangsters, they form a group and they're a gang now. Now, they're killing, they're robbing, they're doing the whole nine yards. They're not stout, they're selling dope, whatever; they're killing, they're doing the whole nine yards. But, at the same time, I think that kind of situation would apply to a kid with different surroundings. For me, it was pretty much, I was growing up in a good house. I didn't care for any of it, obviously killing and robbing – that wasn't even my thing. I think that's pretty much wrong. Shouldn't be killing people and robbing people for what they got.

For other adolescent boys the image of ruthlessness did not deter them from rejecting a gang lifestyle. Instead, it caused them to become susceptible to it, as they were welcomed into a group of people who appeared nothing like the people they were told to fear and reject. One participant expressed shock at how different gang members were from what he expected:

That was the biggest surprise in all of it for me, because I grew up with such a hard view on that people. And that's kind of what messed with me as I grew older. I had such a perception of who I thought was supposed to be a bad person; the almost cartoon characters. How to expect the gangster to be whatever. And meeting all these people, older ones, younger ones, completely blew that away. They were just completely different from what I was growing up being told . . . [such as] everyone would be addicted to drugs, and it was dark, and it was greedy. . . . It was dangerous, but what was surprising over and over again, was how forgiving people were at the time. . . . That's when my conceptions changed, of what I've viewed as people from gangs. I thought they would be completely ruthless, which they could have been, but they were really nice to us. . . . They did fit in a lot of the stereotypical ways, like they were really big, muscular. They had really big, nice tattoos, like really nice tattoos, probably spent thousands on them, but they were really nice guys.

The participant acknowledged that the difference between what he expected gang members to be like and what he experienced himself getting into also collided with his expectations. The challenge for him to see that he was getting himself involved in a gang lifestyle was underpinned by what he thought a gang needed to look like. According to his understanding of a gang, the tattoos, bandanas, and gang names were all essential gang identifying items. He explained:

One of our members, he got caught by the police selling drugs, and I don't know why, but he did say the name of our group and he got listed apparently as a gang. But we had no tattoos or nothing like that. In reference, that's how I thought of it; we need to have tattoos all matching, or bandannas, or something like that, what you grow up hearing, but we didn't have anything like that. We just sold drugs for some bad guys.

As the participant explained, sometimes the absence of characteristics or symbols that were supposed to identify gang members skewed the adolescent boys' view of the actual dangers they were already involving themselves in.

Lastly, another participant added that teenage boys expected to be threatened and harmed if they chose to leave a gang lifestyle. As he explained, “If you get out of it, [the] gang . . . you gonna get beat up – It’s not like that.” This initial expectation, combined with the expectation of ruthlessness and cruelty was eventually challenged by the personal experiences these teenage boys went through. The images of brutality of the gang lifestyle were shared by the teenage boys as a result of the information and presentations they were offered while growing up.

4.1.4. **Normalized Lifestyle**

For some teenage boys, the reality of a gang was normal. Participants were exposed to gangs through friends who had family members involved in a gang, or they had someone in their own family connected to a gang. The idea that a gang lifestyle can be an acceptable part of an individual’s life was shared by 25% of the participants. One participant summarized the experience of the normalization of the gang lifestyle saying, “Those who you associate with is what you become, because that is so normal to you. So, at that time, associating with drug dealers . . . makes you think that that is normal.” This normalization of the gang lifestyle extended to the acknowledgment that for some individuals, and for some families, gang related activities such as selling drugs could be viewed as an acceptable type of employment. One participant explained:

There [are] people . . . whose family was actually involved in gangs. Like the actual, where you would say, commercial enterprise part of it . . . But growing up . . . with friends who were involved in that aspect, I hang out with them . . . When you grow up with something, you just think that is normal, that is happening all around you. Yet, someone’s family makes money from something to do with drugs, or somebody’s making money from drug dealing, and you are just hanging out with them. When it is all around you, at that time, it was just normal. Even at that time I didn’t do it myself, but I just hang out with them, just as I would hang out with someone who didn’t do that.

The normalization of gang lifestyle was even stronger when it was a family member who was involved in a gang. The aspect of growing up in an environment where other family members respond positively to a gang member, who was additionally financially successful as a result of his involvement in a gang, solidified the natural, desirable

image of belonging to a gang for a teenage boy. One participant recalled his childhood when he said:

I was just around it when I was a young kid too, prior to high school. I only knew that . . . I've just been around it and I've seen a lot of things. I've just always thought that, "Oh, I'm probably gonna end up doing this" . . . It was kind of natural . . . So, I knew little things that I can venture out to do. Obviously, I want that kind of money and just seeing other people coming into my house that were up there, or have passed away now and were friends with my [family member]. It's just like my [family member] would be like, "Oh that was this person." And I was growing up always hearing, "Oh this guy is kind of pretty crazy."

The acceptance and approval of gang lifestyle by family members, although not recalled by other participants, for at least this participant was a significant indication that gang lifestyle could be viewed as one of many acceptable future opportunities.

For this group of adolescent boys, their perception of a gang was strongly influenced by the fact that it appeared acceptable, credible, and even commendable. Therefore, their view of a gang was normalized as someone's "typical lifestyle."

4.1.5. Gang as a Source of Opportunities

Many of the participants did not have a specific view of the gang during their adolescence. Instead, they talked about the opportunities a gang membership was able to offer them. These views and observations provide an overview of the factors that ultimately attracted these adolescent boys to a gang. The categories of opportunities that were listed by participants as available through a gang include: financial gain, prestigious and fun environment, reputation, and a sense of belonging.

Financial gain.

One hundred percent of participants stated that as teenage boys, they viewed a gang as a group that could provide them with the opportunity to make money. The boys saw gangs as a source of financial gain that could provide them with a substantial amount of easy money. The participants stated that as teenagers, they were attracted to what seemed, at the time, as a lucrative opportunity. As one participant explained, "It

was definitely lucrative looking at it, if you wanted to get involved in it . . . lucrative, I mean for us – getting money, getting money quick; that was life.” The most frequently mentioned reason for this attraction was being able to see and understand that, for a teenager, the financial opportunity of a gang outweighed other legitimate means of earning an income at that age. One participant mentioned, “It attracted me, because growing up, I would work throughout high school and when you see a group of people, a crew, and you see how easy they make money, it catches your eye.” One participant explained the economical sense behind the attraction, “Going to work, working an eight hour shift, getting paid \$10 an hour, making \$80, \$400 a week. Whereas, you would go work one shift make \$500 a day in six to eight hours. That’s math right there.” Another one agreed, “We’re making like profit wise \$700 to \$800 a day and that was good money. When you’re a little kid, that’s a lot of money.” The lure of financial opportunity was noticed by all of the teenage boys, and it attracted them to the group that could offer it – the gang.

Prestigious and fun environment.

Another opportunity that gangs presented to the teenage boys was the ability to elevate and set themselves apart from the other average teenagers. Seventy-five percent of the participants stated that it was the activities they could do that really attracted them to gangs; for example they saw gangs as an opportunity to have an “exciting,” “flashy,” and “cool” lifestyle. The gang lifestyle, in the view of teenage boys, offered them goods such as expensive clothes, phones, jewellery, cars, and drugs. Gangs also offered the opportunity to go to parties and clubs, to be seen with good-looking girls, to have contacts with well-known individuals, and meet new people. All of these opportunities provided the participants with the experience of having a higher status in the eyes of other teenagers. One participant summarized this saying, “You’re just high on yourself. Fuck, I can do anything I want.”

One participant stated that the gang provided him with the novelty, attraction, and excitement of having a chance to do and experience activities which a teenager would otherwise not have a chance to do:

We would party at this one penthouse [downtown] and I just thought it was so fun at that time, which it was, but it was owned by, I don’t

know if it was [name of a gang] or something, it was a bunch of old gangster people and it was nice. It had all these Versace floor tiles on the floor. It was like something from a movie. It had like cocaine out everywhere; they were cutting it for everyone. After that reflection, that's when I really realized we were getting a lot of drugs from them to sell out . . . and it was so fun for me, at the time; it was exciting. There, those people from that penthouse, they were offering us a car and getting us a lot of drugs, and we go to those rave events.

Another participant described how the people in the gang offered him a sense of prestige and esteem that was difficult to resist and drew him into the group. He imagined himself being able to be a part of the group. He said:

There was something about those people that made me want to associate with them . . . I saw them as cool, older people. They had good-looking women around them and by association I could hang out with those women and be like that.

The enticement of being accepted into a group that was already drawing to itself other attractive and admired individuals seemed to pull adolescent boys and act on their sense of imagination.

For teenage boys the instant gratification and ability to emulate other older boys whom they admired was provided by the opportunities of belonging to the gang. These opportunities allowed adolescent boys to be able to experience a lifestyle filled with excitement, prestige, and glamour that otherwise did not appear to be attainable at their age.

Reputation.

The opportunity to gain or improve a reputation through affiliation with gangs was mentioned by 75% of the participants. They saw the gang as an opportunity to gain a reputation, popularity, or respect. They saw that the other teenage boys who were affiliated with gangs already possessed these attributes; therefore, as one participant stated, gang membership was seen as a means to “not be like a regular guy, kind of thing, . . . be like, . . . those people better know who I am.” In the opinion of the participants, the ability to stand out, be known, and even feared would provide them with

a sense of respect. For example, one participant stated, "The respect level that you get, it's just like - wow."

One of the participants added that the images of respect were also reinforced in teenage boys by popular media. He stated that many teenage boys would aspire to be seen the same way as gang affiliated people were portrayed in movies or music videos. He explained:

It's kind of like the movie Scarface. Every, I can't say every teenager, but I know every teenager in my year watched Scarface, or even like hip-hop music, and like listening to people like that, watching images like that. You kind of portray the way . . . That's the way to be, to be powerful, and [have] money, and to get respect . . . I guess, you want that stuff for yourself, and you wanna be that guy that people point at, and say, "Oh yeah, I've seen that guy. That guy's superior; he makes a lot of money."

The images of power and money were equated in a teenage boy's view to the image of respect. As this participant pointed out, the desire for teenage boys to attain respect pushes them to meet this need by seeking a source of power and money. These characteristics, as popular media seemed to present, could be found in gangs.

Many adolescent boys' attraction to the images of popularity, respect, and success combined with a sense that they too can attain these attributes reinforced for them the view that gangs can provide these qualities.

Sense of belonging.

Fifty percent of participants stated that it was the sense of belonging that a gang was able to provide them with that drew them. The boys thought that, in a gang, they would be provided with the opportunity for friendship, belonging, acceptance, unity, and family. A sense of acceptance and belonging was a strong motivator for adolescent boys because they viewed the gang as a group they would be able to associate with for a long time. One participant explained, "I would say one thing would be a sense of belonging . . . as these were going to be my friends for life and these guys really like me." Another participant also experienced this convincing sense of acceptance. He stated, "I feel better with these guys doing their own thing. They make you feel like

you're part of the family." The boys craved the acceptance they thought gangs offered. They assumed that sometimes, in order to be accepted, they also had to try to fit in. In their view, the extra effort was worth it, because they experienced a sense of unity and purpose; for example, one participant mentioned, "That's what gets you, I think; just wanting to find a niche and a clique, then you're like, oh, I'm wanted here . . . the people make you feel like you're wanted."

Two of the participants provided a more illustrative example of the sense of belonging that gangs could offer, especially in place of a recently lost sense of belonging. They viewed schools as their communities, as places of belonging. During times when school communities were not meeting their need for belonging, the participants found that they could quickly belong through gang membership. As one participant reflected, "Getting kicked out of school, getting suspended and all that, actually did me worse than would have been keeping me in school." The loss of connection to a school, especially when it occurred on multiple occasions, eroded their desire to try to re-establish this lost sense of belonging and purpose with the school. As the participant hesitated to go back to school after the suspensions, he concluded, "When the time came, whether it would be four or five days after, it would be like, OK, should I go back to school?" Finally, he added, the school did something differently; instead of sending him home, what would cause a loss of belonging to the school community, he was required to come to school, but his freedom to move about the school was limited; he was on an in-school suspension. The participant recalled that he appreciated this option. He said, "The first time I got an in-school suspension, I think that was way better. I think the school should have taken advantage of that instead of sending kids home."

The participants expressed their desire to find a group that would accept them, would offer them friendship, and even a sense of a family. They thought that they could meet these needs in a gang. Additionally, some of the participants thought that they were being denied the sense of belonging as a result of being suspended from their local high school. When their desires to be accepted, needed, and valued were not affirmed at their local high schools, in some cases they turned to gangs as a replacement for a sense of belonging.

4.2. Formation of Awareness to Reject Gang Membership

Many of the young men who took part in this study acknowledged that they could notice and pinpoint a time, or a period of time, during which they started to become aware of wanting to reject gang membership. In total, 63% of the participants described a time in their lives when such decisions took place. Information about the timing of this realization, along with the participants' view of the gang, helps to establish some background knowledge to explain why and how they eventually made the choice to reject gang membership. The most frequently used words and phrases to describe this timing were: "at an older age," "a couple years after high school," "after graduation," and "later on in life" indicating that the decision was made either in late adolescence or during the beginning of adulthood. Participants also attributed the ability to make this decision to a few factors, such as experience, retrospective thinking, and maturation.

One of the reasons that participants came to a conclusion to reject gang life was primarily through experience. The participants stated that it was not so much a single point in their lives that made them decide not to join gangs, but rather a series of events and experiences. As one participant noted, it was a process. He said, "It's kind of like a learning thing that you figure out when you're older, so I kind of just figured it out."

Part of the process of deciding not to join a gang included retrospective thinking that allowed participants to analyze the choices they made and how these choices affected them. During this process, the young men discovered that by looking back at their past decisions, they could see the mistakes they made, the reasons for and the consequences of those mistakes, and some of the lost opportunities they may have had. The frustration with some of the decisions made during adolescence was explained by one participant when he said:

You start realizing, "Fuck what was I doing?!" . . . At that point I was just like, "I kind of wasted my life. I could have done something better." Like, if I kept my head into education; you learn after, that knowledge is actually power. You kept on going in the direction [of gangs] and you could have made a lot of money, but then again, there is no promise. That money is not promised, like at least with education.

This type of retrospective thinking allows young men to see and appreciate what qualities hold true value later in life and in the society. With reflection, sometimes driven by frustration, came the realization that money can be short-lived, but education continues to hold value and can empower them to improve their future.

Finally, the young men also started to mature and become wiser. They were no longer just focused on the here-and-now, but they started to focus on their future. As they experienced a shift in their motivation, they started asking themselves questions such as, “Where am I leading to with this?” and “What’s gonna work for me? What’s not gonna work for me?” These questions were followed by new directions participants wanted to explore, such as career orientation, education, or “what’s important and what’s not important” in life.

The complexity of the factors that played a role in the process of the participants’ awakening to the tensions and apprehensions between their interest in pursuing a gang lifestyle and their desire to ultimately reject that option was summarized by one participant when he said:

It’s maybe probably one of the best choices that I ever made . . . you always start seeing those things later on in life, or you don’t notice it at the time because you are enjoying it at the time. But when you see later on that, yeah, maybe this part that feels good in my life, what if that wasn’t there? What if your life gets better? So, it’s kind of like you’re giving up the good for the great.

The participants made the decisions to reject gang membership, because their gang-related experiences, retrospective thinking, and maturation gave them the power to evaluate their decisions in an informed way. Their experiences provided them with a magnifying glass that could zoom in on the consequences of being in a gang and zoom out to see what other opportunities are available to them outside of a gang.

4.3. Introduction to Decision-Making Tensions

Out of the eight interviews, a total of 219 critical incidents were extracted. These critical incidents are divided into three groups. The first group consists of 156 critical

incidents identified by participants as helpful in their decision to reject a gang lifestyle. Within this group, 15 individual subcategories are presented. The next group consists of 30 critical incidents that reflect the aspects that hindered the participants in their decision to reject a gang lifestyle. These critical incidents are divided into six subcategories. Lastly, 33 critical incidents grouped into six subcategories represent suggestions and ideas that the participants identified as possibly being supportive, yet did not exist during the time when they were making the decision to reject a gang lifestyle.

Within each group, all of the critical incidents are also organized and divided into categories that reflect the source or the origin of the critical incident. These categories are: individual at the core, family at the core, and community at the core. Consequently, the categories represent the principles, reservations, and experiences of the participants as they relate to the individual, the family, and the community. The organization of each of the three groups of critical incidents (helpful, hindering, and wished for) into these three categories (individual at the core, family at the core, and community at the core) allows for an easier comparison of the sources of influences that were acting on the participants. It also provides a visual distinction that highlights how different sources of influence affected participants' decision making process throughout their adolescence.

In this section, I describe in detail the categories and subcategories of critical incidents that participants associated to the process of deciding to reject gang lifestyle.

4.4. What Helps Adolescent Males in Their Decision to Reject a Gang Lifestyle?

There are three categories and 15 distinct subcategories that represent the critical incidents shared by the participants as reasons that helped them make the decision not to join a gang. These categories are: individual at the core, family at the core, and community at the core. The majority of the subcategories fall into the individual at the core category and include: volatile lifestyle, risk to personal life, presence of pro-social goals, sense of morality/values, rejection of "toxic" lifestyle, rejection of senseless violence, possibility of a criminal record, ruined reputation, and high-risk event. This is followed by the family at the core category and includes the

subcategories: threat to the family and fear of disappointing loved ones. Finally, the community at the core category includes the subcategories: intervention by a meaningful person, absence of alliance and support, alternate source of acceptance, and witnessing gang desistance.

Table 4.2 presents the participation rate for the critical incidents that helped adolescent boys reject gang lifestyle. The subcategories are listed in their appropriate categories from highest to lowest frequency as reported by the participants.

Table 4.2. Critical Incidents that Helped with the Rejection of a Gang Lifestyle

Category	Subcategory	Number of Participants (n=8)	Participation Rate
		n	%
Individual at the Core	Volatile Lifestyle	8	100%
	Risk to Personal Life	5	63%
	Presence of Pro-social Goals	5	63%
	Sense of Morality/Values	5	63%
	Rejection of "Toxic" Lifestyle	4	50%
	Rejection of Senseless Violence	3	38%
	Possibility of a Criminal Record	2	25%
	Ruined Reputation	2	25%
	High-Risk Event	2	25%
Family at the Core	Threat to the Family	5	63%
	Fear of Disappointing Loved Ones	5	63%
Community at the Core	Intervention by a Meaningful Person	5	63%
	Absence of Alliance and Support	4	50%
	Alternate Source of Acceptance	3	38%
	Witnessing Gang Desistance	2	25%

4.4.1. Individual at the Core

The subcategories listed in this category relate to how the individual participants reacted to events, experiences, and ideas they faced in the decision-making process. The participants' reasons for rejecting a gang lifestyle all relate to the impact a gang lifestyle would have had on the adolescent boys' personal life.

Volatile lifestyle.

The incidents in this subcategory were reported most frequently out of all of the helping subcategories, as each participant shared an incident that represented the unpredictability of life that came with gang involvement. With 100% of participants reporting a volatile incident, the vast majority of participants recalled acts of severe violence including death. For two participants, the violence involved the deaths of gang members whom they came to know and the frequency with which gang members were being killed. As one participant commented, "A lot of these guys' friends did start randomly disappearing, and a lot of their enemies were disappearing as well." The experience of seeing established gang members lose their lives so easily also brought on the realization that if it can happen to such powerful people, then it can happen to anyone. One participant talked about a known gang member and said, "You've got some fucking crazy power buddy . . . and if you can be dispersed off the face of the earth like that man, like, anybody can." Another participant also recalled how a casual acquaintance with some gang members gave him first hand experience of people being killed. He stated:

What started happening is, I actually met a few friends; they were older, about three years older than me. They were involved in drug dealing, but they [were] business people as well. A few of them had proper jobs, but they did things on the side. And I got introduced to a new group of friends. It was the [gang name] group. I just knew them personally, but in the newspapers they would call them the [gang name] and the [gang name] group. I was hanging out with them and going to the beach with them and going to the gym with them, things like that, until one by one they were starting to get killed.

The experience of seeing someone die was not just related to known gang members; more often, it would be a friend who got involved in a gang lifestyle. Three of the participants lost at least one friend each, but one of the participants recalls that behind some of the other deaths he witnessed may also have been a gang connection. He said:

I feel like it is a strong statement. I feel like in my life I've been to more funerals than weddings, and that factor right there scares me. It's funerals of good friends, certain family members that were, that had very, very good life. And you wouldn't know until you actually

dug deeper, and figured out why certain things happen . . . Looking at loved ones that no longer exist - that definitely deterred me from joining a gang.

It was not only death that brought a realization for young men to stay away from gangs, but also seeing people being shot, stabbed, beat up, and arrested by the police. One participant concluded that such a circle of violence could become a trap. He said, "It becomes a big black hole that you'll never gonna get it to stop because you are in that community, unless you leave [the city]. Then you always run into the same people, so that's the reason why too." Fortunately, this realization helped him to avoid this trap by deciding not to join a gang.

Risk to personal life.

The next largest subcategory reported by 63% of participants was related to the risk of losing their own lives. The participants who came close to being involved in gangs came to a realization that their own lives could be at risk. They thought they must be seen as being tough; thus, they might end up getting in an altercation that may end with their death, or, as one participant said, they might "catch a stray bullet." The participants' personal experiences were also being reflected by what they saw in the media. They started to realize that they themselves might become one of the statistics being reported by the news stations as they recognized people they personally knew in the news stories. After experiencing being in a car chase that involved being shot at, one participant remembers:

. . . actually being pretty scared in that moment obviously, cause the guy and the gun that just tried killing us, he's still following us . . . In my head, I just saw being one of those statistics, saw it being another news broadcast at six o'clock seeing, "shooting in [the city], there has been a thing involving cars. Two [the city's] guys with their heads down." Pretty much, two blow holes in their heads. Get it, and that's what I kept picturing like that, because I've seen even in the stories like that friends and even people older, people we've known. Cause they all had the same kind of fate; so, it's kind of like, how many times can you really dodge a bullet before? No one's really bullet proof.

Another participant who also experienced having a gun pointed at him stated that it was the experience of the fear of losing his own life that helped him to stay away from gangs. He notes:

That was personal experience, actually got guns pointed at you and stuff, and it's like, OK, one quick slip of that finger and I'm dead. It doesn't matter if you have one in your hand; you're not gonna react that one millisecond, that quick. Whoever pulls it is dead. And we were getting to that point, where that kind of shit was going on, and I was like, I don't want this. I don't want my life being like this.

The severity of such experiences brought these participants to the realization that their young lives can be instantly cut short. The sense of mortality all of sudden prompted the participants to re-evaluate their decisions - as staying away from a gang meant staying alive.

Presence of pro-social goals.

Another equally large subcategory reported by 63% of the participants contrasts with the two first subcategories, as participants talk about the rejection of the gang lifestyle not because of fear, but a lack of a safe, secure, and predictable future associated with that lifestyle. The participants described becoming more cognisant of the difficulty of merging a gang lifestyle with a socially accepted lifestyle, which would permit them secure employment, business opportunities, marriage, and a future family life. While a number of participants talked about wanting to have a future that involved legal employment and eventually having a family, one young man went a step further. This participant realized that gang involved men tended to be driven by not having traditional family values that would be appropriate for raising children. He stated:

I wanted a different life. I wanted family lifestyle . . . Mostly the older guys you see are ordering the young guys. They always have that lifestyle; they mostly either have a girlfriend or are single. They are jumping from one girl to another, or have a bunch of girls. You couldn't raise a kid in that environment.

This long-term thinking and planning was evident in other comments made by these young men. They talked about doing something positive not only for themselves but also for their current and future families and their communities. One participant who saw

his role as a man who needed to make positive decisions spoke about it in a blunt, yet clear way. He said, "It's just like you know what? I'm a guy. I need to figure something out and just get it done." This long-term thinking allowed this participant to set goals of pursuing further education. Many other males chose to pursue jobs, which even though they did not guarantee the same level of income right away as their association with gangs would, at least the jobs provided them with pride, self-worth, growth opportunities, and the security of having "something to fall back on" as one of the participants emphasized. Another participant alluded to his future role as a provider for his family. He stated:

I wanted to be doing good. I know I'm gonna have a family in the next four, five years. They're gonna be looking up to me as their provider, so I have to do all the right moves as I possibly can right now.

Doing and being seen as doing something positive was also reflected by a number of other participants. For example, some participants did volunteer work through investing time with younger children or being a role model to younger siblings. These young men talked about having a purpose in life that did not fit with the gang lifestyle. One participant expanded on the idea of being a role model. He talked about making sure that his own experience with gangs would benefit his younger sibling. He recalled:

Everything I've always done and stuff like that, he's always pretty much followed in my steps. I know he looks up to me. So, I was kinda thinking, I want him to see that it's not even worth it; it's simple as that. I've told him and he knows all the stuff that's happened to me too. So, I tell him just so that maybe he stayed clear, because he's not wanna get involved in any of this stuff either. So, definitely that. Just so I can be a better older role model.

This participant also noticed that his rejection of gang lifestyle would not only help him be a better sibling, but he could also turn it into a positive aspect for the community, because he would not be "one of those statistics; just some guy on the street making the community a worse place." Instead, he wants to be involved in a legitimate business where he can be a source of pride for the community, for "the community to actually benefit from it, rather than the wrong people getting benefits from it."

Lastly, the participants talked about the frustration that comes from not being able to pursue long-term goals while being involved in a gang lifestyle. The example most often brought up was difficulty with legitimizing the income earned through gang related activities. One participant explained it this way:

OK, this was another huge factor I totally forgot about. I made a lot of money and it was like, I started doing it and I was like, "OK. I'm gonna make enough money where I can build a house, where I can get into construction." I made that money, I had cash, money ready to go. I wanted to buy a lot. Couldn't get a mortgage under my own name, my [family member] couldn't get a mortgage, cause [family member] doesn't work. Now, I ask a few other people to get me a mortgage, nobody gets mortgage and put their name, put their credit at jeopardy. So, I wanted to do that, and I had enough money to do that, and I couldn't even do that. So, I was like, "What the hell is this worth really?" . . . It's not real money. It's like, "What the hell do you have? Nobody knows you have it. A - is nobody knows you have it, b - is no record of it, c - is what you gonna do with it." Can only live that lifestyle, go blow it on things.

The frustration mentioned by the participants showed that these young men regarded the income derived from gang activities as ultimately worthless, as it could not provide them with opportunities to meet their long-term goals.

In general, the participant's ideas of what they want to accomplish, what they want to offer, and how they want to be ultimately perceived did not align with a future of gang involvement.

Sense of morality/values.

Another 63% of participants rejected a gang lifestyle not only because, in their opinion, it did not provide an opportunity for worthy, pro-social long-term goals, but because participants were already experiencing a clash between their own values and the values, or lack of values, offered by a gang lifestyle. For one participant, the reality that he was starting to become influenced and affected by the gang-like behaviour was already a reason to start to question what his own moral stand was. He recalled his experience this way:

I wasn't into robbing people and killing people and torturing people, and extortion, and furthermore shit. I'm not into that. That wasn't

me. Yeah, I started getting to a point where I was telling people to do random things. But then there was like, "OK, when is this gonna catch up with me? When am I gonna be doing it?" And I was like, "OK. Do I really want this? No. Peace out."

For others, the experience was subtler; they just knew all along that their personalities and their value system did not correlate with the gang lifestyle. The participants did not always have a specific descriptive definition for the conflict between their own values and those offered by the gang, but nevertheless, they noticed that there was an evident difference. One participant called it being "a bit more sensitive than the other guys," and having "a conscience," as he reflected on the fact that he would "still care though, that's cause I still have my family in the back of my head." Another participant credited his willingness to being in a relationship. He explained that "just going from girl to girl, like a lot of [his] friends were doing at the time," was not something that he wanted in his own life; it clashed with his value of respectfully appreciating girls. Yet another participant called it being "true to [himself]" and "loyalty," as he talked about appreciating a quality relationship with his male friend that took time and effort to establish, and which came in stark contrast to the relationships he was experiencing with people who were only there when they needed something from him. This young man also referred to his family and defined his values with "the respect factor," which reminded him that he did not want to disappoint his parents. Finally, the last participant within this group referred to the gang-like activities he caught himself doing as "pretty embarrassing" once they were exposed.

Regardless of the terms used and the nature of the situations, the young men's internal values, codes of ethics, or morals brought the realization that the gang-like behaviour and gang lifestyle categorically conflicted with those standards.

Rejection of "toxic" lifestyle.

Fifty percent of participants talked about the harmfulness of the gang lifestyle that they witnessed or experienced and the effects that those experiences had on their lives. The common experience the participants shared, regardless of their individual experiences, was that a gang lifestyle had a destructive effect on their lives and their personalities. For some, it was the fact that they were engaging in fights and elevated drug use; while for others, it was an actual experience of physical illness, including

throwing up and carsickness. One participant recalls such an experience. He stated, “I puked probably like six times in that day and I was like, ‘What the hell?’ . . . You’re getting car sick . . . The only air you get is when the door opens or something cracks open. It’s disgusting. It’s just gross.” While some participants talked about the negative physical afflictions experienced as a result of engaging in gang-like behaviour, others stressed being psychologically distressed and overwhelmed. One participant explained a heightened sense of anxiety brought on by not knowing what might happen, “looking over [his] shoulder,” worrying about running into certain people on a daily basis. Another participant recalled how the anxiety seemed to always be present. He said, “I don’t know if I go to this store, do I know this guy? Or, do I have a problem with him? Does he know who I am? Does he want to rip me off?” This anxiety, as some participants shared, brought on paranoia as well. As this participant points out, the anxious sensation was present during times in public places. Another participant recalls that the paranoia was an all day experience that affected him even at home and even during his sleep. He explained:

Anything I would hear, I would hop out of the bed no matter what time it was and spend just looking. And I’d be so paranoid and it felt like, honestly, out of ten times looking, it felt like four or five times I would be finally seeing something that was kind of directed towards me. So, I felt like, honestly, it came to a point where I was like, “Fuck, it’s not even worth this bullshit.” I keep having so much anxiety for something that’s like, you know, yeah it is great, but it’s not greater than just living.

This experience of paranoia, as the participant pointed out, had such a negative effect on his well-being that it started to outweigh the benefits gang lifestyle could possibly offer him.

Ultimately, the experience of the harmfulness of the gang lifestyle on the participants’ physical and mental well-being brought them to a realization that involvement in a gang would damage any type of quality lifestyle these young men were hoping for themselves.

Rejection of senseless violence.

A smaller group of 38% of participants also mentioned how the gang lifestyle exposed them to a level of violence that they considered pointless and senseless. In all of the examples mentioned by participants, they found themselves having to participate in beatings of another person that, for the most part, they did not want to participate in but they felt obligated to. The beatings were described by participants as brutal, senseless, and to the point of death. One participant recalls how as a teenager he once found himself in a situation where he too had to beat up another teenager and how that left him feeling. He explained:

We ran back to where he was and he smashed a bottle on the guy's head. I didn't even see the other guy saying anything to him, and then he said, start hitting him. So, everyone who was hitting him was now just standing there and I wasn't hitting him and they are like, "You hit him too, you hit him too, everybody hit him." And even though I didn't want to, I did, and this guy was already defenseless. And then I saw him brutally get beat. He was unconscious but one guy held him and they booted him in the face, maybe about three times and the last I heard of that guy he was in the hospital for a few weeks and he had to get a steel plate in his face and they didn't know who did it, but we met up at a park afterwards to discuss what happened, that we wouldn't tell anyone, because we didn't know. At that point they thought they killed him. And there's blood on, like, our shoes, there is on everyone's, just from the splatter from his face, and on everyone's clothes, and I remember going home that day just thinking, like, "What type of like animals am I hanging out with?" Like, for no reason they just almost killed somebody.

Fortunately, it wasn't just this participant who recalled experiencing regret and repulsion after seeing and participating in the beating of another person. Other participants also spoke of feeling bad after the act of beating someone and just as this young man mentioned, they too started to question the gang lifestyle and started to reject the idea of belonging to a group of people who engage in such senseless acts of violence.

Possibility of a criminal record.

An even smaller group of 25% of participants had the experience as adolescent boys of being in a situation that could have potentially had legal consequences. These participants realized that associations with gangs and activities related to gang

membership were illegal. One participant stated, "The consequences, the risks. It's against the law. You may make a lot of money, still you're doing something that's against the law, that is not right." He and another participant both realized that gang membership could possibly get them a criminal charge and a criminal record, which could be a life altering consequence such as having restrictions when wanting to travel abroad or being denied a job that might require a criminal background check. One participant admitted that this realization helped him to make the decision to not join the gang. He recalled, "Catching a drug charge - that was real eye opener, and then I was like, this is not for me."

The realization of possibly having a criminal record as a result of being involved in a gang was noted by these participants, because they actually experienced a situation that brought them to an in-person contact with a law officer. This type of event, although not common in the accounts of other participants, had for the young men who experienced it a very profound consequence. It was an event that brought them to nearly experiencing the full consequences of the cost of gang membership. One of the participants' recollections showed how a casual association with a friend involved in gang life could have caused him serious criminal consequences:

I remember this one scenario . . . I was probably, as early, about 18 – 19 [years old], just same part of time. I was actually cruising with another friend, who was actually working, and . . . we go down that road, and a cop car actually goes right behind, an undercover one. Lights it up and there was actually three cops pop out of it . . . I tell you right now, I remember my balls were flying, simply cause I was just, "Oh my god, I can't believe this is happening right now," cause I know he had this phone on him. So, I remember buddy, he turns off his phone, but luckily he has a stash box in his car and he threw it in the stash box, and he closed the stash box. Yeah, so the cop pulled us out, arrested us, and stuff, saying, we've seen you on this street or something like that. They searched all of us, the ride, they found maybe like 20-bag on me, like a 40ish on him. We just said, "It's our personal." They say, "Yeah, yare, yare, yara," and long story short, they fuckin got us half an hour sitting there, hanging on the side of the road and they never found nothing in the car . . . But the thing is after that . . . this guy told me after that he actually had a gun in that spot too. So, honestly all these feelings of things I was just thinking, "what the f, man." Just imagine, imagine honestly, if they found the stash box, cause people find stash boxes all the time, cops and whatever else, right. I just thought there was just a . . . stuff-load, shit-load of actual drugs in there, but I was less worried about that, plus the actual

phones, so that's trafficking right there. Little did I know he had a gun in there. So, who knows if it was loaded, or if one was in the chamber, cause all of those are different charges itself too. That was probably definitely another factor why I steered clear. Because I felt like it was God giving me a chance saying, "Just get the hell out man. Here is another chance, get out." So, I felt, I guess, I took advantage of what's happening in front of me.

As this participant recalled, his fortune was his ability to understand the severity of the consequences he could have faced, which then pushed him to make the decision to grasp at the opportunity he was presented with and turn away from a gang lifestyle.

Casual associations with gang-involved friends gave these participants a quick and poignant lesson of what could happen to them if they made the step to fully immerse themselves in a gang lifestyle. Fortunately, the participants paid attention during these lessons and the fear of having a criminal record deterred them from taking the step of becoming a gang member.

Ruined reputation.

Another group of 25% of participants feared that joining a gang might damage their reputation. These participants did not experience police contact and possible criminal charges, but regardless, they talked about not wanting to be viewed as criminals just by having people associate them with the gang lifestyle. One participant recalled the moment he came to realize this when he said, "I started saying, why am I hanging out with these people? Like yeah, I'm not involved in anything, but just by association . . . my reputation's ruined." Another participant also recalled realizing there would be a price to pay if he chose the gang lifestyle; he remembered it this way:

. . . you don't want to be known as criminal. The status isn't much to me. I really never judge a book by its cover, but then you also need to hold your head up high and be able to walk around in certain situations.

The fear or concern of not wanting to have their reputation ruined by being associated with gang lifestyle was enough of a wake-up-call for these participants to help them make the decision to not join a gang.

High-risk event.

The critical incidents in this subcategory were described by 25% of the participants. These events involved serious incidents that were experienced by adolescent boys who found themselves involved in a gang-related incident. High-risk events introduced the participants to other thoughts and experiences that later magnified the confidence in their choice of not wanting to be involved in a gang lifestyle. The significance of these experiences were clearly stated by the participants as reasons for rejecting gangs. One participant's recollection of a police chase that went from bad to worse really stood out in his memory, as he stated it was: "yeah. Definitely. 100%" the reason for making the decision that he should not join a gang. He explained:

I got into a high-speed car chase with the police. Things went south. From after getting away . . . after a high-speed car chase, after having hit a car. Then after having to ditch the car, running out, running. The police officers running, the helicopters chasing, the dogs out . . . I was scared. I just got into a high-speed car chase with the cops, I run for at least 15 – 25 minutes, running, jumped over 45 fences, was far away from the scene . . . I remember slowly I could hear, before it was just the cops, then you could hear the chopper and the light going everywhere. Then slowly the dogs started coming, you hear they started coming closer and closer every yard. Then I was, "Who do I call? What way do I go?" I was trapped, cause I remember they were coming from every single angle. Yeah, I just remember, "Whose gonna save me? Who do I call?"

Another participant also recalls a high-risk situation that was also "one of the main reasons" he chose not to join a gang. He recalls the day of the serious event when an ordinary day turned disastrous as an individual approached him and his friend. He explains:

With the back of my eye I notice that that guy was actually parked there and we noticed, we were kinda wondering what was he doing there. And next we know, he actually jumps out of his car and he is walking towards our car, saying to my friend, "Oh, hop out." This is actually what he was saying, "Hop out, hop out," and my friend turns to me saying, "I think he wants to talk." And I look and feel, I already knew just from the gut feeling, something told me that he didn't wanna fucking talk, and I already knew that he didn't want to talk. You could just tell by the way he was toning and the way he was walking to the ride, just like that, that he wasn't there for a conversation. So, this guy was fidgeting with something in his

waistband area and I told him, "This doesn't look good man." I tell you right now, luckily that my friend when he pulled over to the side of the road that he left the car started, running, otherwise I'm sure it would have been little different story too. But, pretty much, the guy starts walking to the car and he pulls out a revolver out of his waistband, and he points it at my friend, and I told my friend, just right there, I'm like, "Just get out of here, kick it." And he threw it into a gear and slammed the gas, and I remember just ducking our heads, and at least I remember, four or five shots ringing off, and I'm pretty sure two hit the car, but I remember at least four, five shots were ringing off. I remember ducking down and as we were ripping away that guy jumps in his car and actually starts following us, ripping it too. We're driving pretty radically, driving in and out of traffic. I know one bullet hit the tire, so the tire is blown too.

The high-risk events described by the participants continued to stand out for them. Even though they occurred a number of years ago, the participants described them in detail. They had experienced these events at the end of their adolescence and these high-risk experiences forced them to take a serious look at how their young lives may come to an abrupt end if they did not make the right decision to reject joining a gang lifestyle.

4.4.2. **Family at the Core**

The subcategories in this category relate to the impact a gang lifestyle would have on the families of the participants if they decided to join a gang. This category has two subcategories of incidents that were reported by the majority of participants, highlighting the significant impact their families had in helping them make a decision to not join a gang.

Threat to the family.

Sixty-three percent of participants feared that their family members might be put at risk if the participants decided to join a gang. Consequently, many of the participants realized that their actions could bring consequences to their families and loved ones because they either already experienced some threats, they saw it happen to other families, or they realized that their families were not immune to the violence that would follow if the participants decided to join a gang. All of the participants talked about the fear that their family could become a target of a gang, but some of them realized that

they were already bringing the risk home, because their family's houses were starting to become the targets of shootings or acts of vandalism. In the case of one participant, he experienced his house being the target of a shooting. This scared him into thinking that his family might be at risk. He said that he took that incident as a warning "to stay away, to not even associate." He concluded by saying, "I had no business being there . . . for the fear of, mainly of my family." Another participant recalled an incident when he was coming home and he knew something was not right. He said, "I was being followed by the wrong people. And I felt like, my house was targeted a couple times." When he was asked to describe what caused him to believe his house was targeted, he stated that his family's house was "vandalized, once vandalized and once [there] was gunfire, when no actual bullets actually hit the house."

In other accounts, the participants feared that the risk associated with joining a gang would not just be limited to their family homes but would be directed at specific family members. While one participant feared that something might happen to his family members and loved ones, two other participants specifically thought of the possible risks to their younger siblings. One participant said:

If I was to get really deep into gang stuff . . . I always thought of how people will retaliate against each other, they go for family. I think, if I didn't have sisters, then I would have gone a lot more deeper.

These participants very clearly articulated their deep love and care for their families. They stated that it was the care for loved ones, whether it would be for the whole family or for a specific member that helped them realize that they did not want to join a gang. One of the participants had a clear experience of the risk a gang lifestyle could have on the loved ones. This participant did not have to just hypothetically anticipate the threats; he actually experienced a face-to-face conversation with individuals who made direct threats against his family. He said that actual gang members:

. . . sat me down and said if I really want to get into this, then I have to provide photos of my family members and two other families, and their whole families' photos. So that it would go, my family and the two other families that are closest to me, so if anything were to go wrong in the shipment, or to get lost, or if I were to ever talk about that, then they said they would kill everybody. So, right then I said, "I couldn't do it," because, just because of the family reason, which is, I

think, was a very good point. If I didn't have a family that I cared about then you would have seen me go in that line of things.

This experience really allowed him to see the effects that a gang lifestyle could have - not just on the individual himself, but on the immediate family of that individual and possibly other extended families. He came to recognize how joining a gang could be an act of greed and selfishness. He concluded by saying:

Somebody that I love can be hurt and for me to make money, I have to put my family at risk when they didn't do anything. And I've seen people's families, like their homes get shot and their children die, and when you see that, it's the family that gets torn apart and not the person, cause the person is gone . . . they're bringing all that home and the family didn't sign up for that. That was their decisions destroying their families. That was one of the turning points.

Fortunately, for this participant, he realized that his decisions carry consequences that extended past his own life and affected others. The participant's strong sense of not wanting to inflict undeserved pain and grief on his family was credited with helping him to reject a gang lifestyle.

Be it perceived or the actual fear of bringing violence to those whom these young men cared for, their families, that eventually acted on these participants as a deterrent to not seek membership in a gang, but rather to cherish and protect their loved ones.

Fear of disappointing loved ones.

This subcategory is also represented by 63% of participants who realized that joining a gang might be viewed by their families and their loved ones as a source of pain and disappointment. Each participant had a close bond with someone in his family and as a result of the bond and respect for that loved one, each participant recalled the pain and disappointment his possible involvement in a gang would cause the loved person.

A number of the participants identified themselves as having experienced living with, or being brought up by, a single mother. The love for their mother, the care for her, the concern for her, and even the fear of the mother all played a very significant role in the participants' process of making decisions. Participants expressed concerns such as,

“What is my mom gonna say about it?” or, “What would my mom think of me? How she’d be feeling? How she’d cope with it all?” The prospect of disappointing their mothers strongly affected the young men’s sense of concern and emotional protection with which the participants were referring to their mothers. This concern became very real when participants started to see the effects of their life choices on their mothers. One participant recalled:

Definitely, that hurt me the most, sort of thinking about all of that . . . just because I know my mom takes all that stuff to heart. And it would bother me, because she works graveyard. I would know it’d be going through her head during that long drive to work and long drive back.

Another participant also recalled how he would start to worry what effect his decisions were already having on his mother and what the future might look like if he made the choice to join a gang. He said:

I just saw the way she was. She started worrying more; she was always upset. She would stay up long nights, when she’d go to sleep regularly 9:30 – 10 o’clock, she’d be up all night. Random stuff like that, that was pretty much it. Just random stuff, just seeing how my mom was. Like, do I really want to see her like that for the rest of her life?

The real struggle for these participants, especially those who identified themselves as coming from a single parent household, came from the fact that they wanted to help their moms the best way they could. They experienced the trap of knowing that they needed to contribute financially, as one participant recalled his teenage years, “The house bills [came], you need money now. Where’s the money gonna come from?” While another participant described a similar concern, “At the same time I wanted to make money and do good, but you were doing bad doing good.” This moral dilemma created an additional pressure for these teenage boys, of having to decide to do the honourable thing of helping their families financially, while knowing they would expose their families to undue stress and worry. Eventually, the love and care for their mothers and their mothers’ emotional well-being prevailed and helped them to reject gang life.

The participants also mentioned the care and love for other family members. In one situation a participant spoke about the sadness that came from disappointing his father, who, unfortunately, was not present anymore in his life. He said:

One day, I actually thought it and was sad about it. I was like, "What the hell I'd do if he was around and he actually sees me doing this?" You know, what would he think? What would actually happen? Obviously, I thought about it and it was nothing great.

Another participant who also did not have a father present in his life anymore explained how that experience, and the care and love for his younger sibling, created an additional source of strength that helped him to make the right decisions. He said:

I can't mess up, because it will affect her . . . I've put her into consideration a lot, just thinking about how there is already one guy who left and I didn't want the other one to; I didn't want her to see me get; I think about her quite a bit . . . I was scared to really mess up, just cause of what she would think.

All of the participants identified someone in their lives they cared for so much that the thought of hurting or disappointing the person helped them make decisions not to enter a gang lifestyle.

Not all of the participants came from single parent households; some grew up and still lived with both parents. One of the participants recalled how watching his parents work hard, struggle to raise him, and provide for him really made a difference in his decision to not join a gang. He gave credit to the sacrifices his parents made in raising him. He said, "They raised me pretty good. I think they worked their asses off, and I was being a dumbass with the wrong people." This participant said that after seeing what his parents had to go through to provide for him, his decision to join a gang would be an act that would be "ruining their hard work," and he would be "the rotten egg."

Ultimately, participants who grew up with both parents or with single mothers came to a realization that if they chose to join a gang, they would be "causing stress on [the] family," they would be a "burden more than a benefit," and they would be "harming [the] parents at the same time or whatever other family members." Thus, with a thought

of “more hurting them than benefiting them,” the decision not to join a gang lifestyle was easier to make when they considered their thoughts and feelings about their families, especially the consequences of disappointing their loved ones.

4.4.3. Community at the Core

The subcategories in this category relate to the aspect of the community. Some of the participants found that they experienced an intervention from the community at large, while others found that the sense of community that they expected and did not receive became the source of tension that helped them to make their decisions.

Intervention by a meaningful person.

The most frequently stated factor for not joining a gang was the experience of having access to someone who was significant and meaningful in the participant’s life. This type of critical incident was noted by 63% of the participants. For the most part, participants mentioned that it was more than one person in their lives and that different people had an influential effect on their lives at different times.

The most frequently identified meaningful person was a participant’s girlfriend. A girlfriend was identified by 50% of the participants, although for most of the participants, except one, other meaningful individuals in addition to the girlfriend were also identified. When participants spoke about their girlfriends, they would frequently highlight the significant role she played in their decision making process; they would say: “she also had a big factor [in my decision],” “[my] girlfriend was the main thing,” and “my girlfriend was a huge factor.” The significance of a girlfriend as a meaningful person was most often declared because she was the person who spent a substantial amount of time with the young man. The participants did not hide their activities from their girlfriends, including their gang-like activities. In most situations, the girlfriend was mentioned as someone who helped the young man make the decision to reject a gang lifestyle. The way a girlfriend exerted her influence on the participants’ decisions were most frequently mentioned in two ways. First, the girlfriend kept the young man away from friends she considered were a negative influence on her boyfriend. Some of the comments participants made about this were: “[she] stuck with me and made sure I’m not with

them,” “she didn’t want me anywhere close to anybody that did that,” and “she wouldn’t want me doing more stuff.” The girlfriend would also use threats or manipulation to make sure that the young man did not continue to be involved in gang-like activities. One participant recalled a fight with his girlfriend when she gave him an ultimatum. He said, “She was pretty much pick one way or another. And then I was like, OK, meaning me [the girlfriend] or this bullshit.” Another participant recalled how even an unhealthy, controlling relationship with a girlfriend ultimately helped him. He said:

It wasn’t more complicated than that, she just wanted my time, so I was just always with her. Yeah, just because instead of going out and partying and being involved in all of that, she demanded my time. It wasn’t the healthiest relationship, but I was with her all the time. I was sleeping at her house, so my time just went away from a lot of those friends too. Especially because all we do is party a lot, and she knew there was a lot of girls at parties and she didn’t want me going. That’s kind of the reason why she was like, “No I don’t want you going out with them.” So, she pulled me away.

Second, the way a girlfriend exerted her influence on a young man was through helping him to see the risks, pitfalls, and consequences of a gang lifestyle. She would also encourage him to turn his focus on more positive forms of earning income. One participant recalled how his girlfriend “had her head definitely straight.” He recognized that the girlfriend helped him to make positive decision; he said, “If it wasn’t for her, I definitely would have spiralled into a different path.” Another participant credited his girlfriend with helping him recognize the mistakes in his thinking. He said, “She just basically changed my whole set, my way of thinking.” Finally, another participant recalled how the bluntness of his girlfriend’s comments made him realize the consequences of being associated with a gang lifestyle. He stated:

She knew pretty much everything that was going on, but she didn’t want to face the facts . . . So she kept throwing those kind of curve balls at me and I’ll be like, OK? And then one day [it] really hit me. She goes, “Listen. You have all the money in the world. You take me in all the good places. You’re always dressed good. You’re so young.” And then she was, “What do you really have in the reality world?” She’s like, “You have nothing. In reality you tried signing up for a credit card and you couldn’t even get it.” And I was like, “You’re right.”

Two of the participants found that it was a male friend who helped them along the way in making the decision to reject joining a gang. One participant explained that one of his best friends (since elementary school) had a positive impact on him through a tragic circumstance that happened for this friend and ended up having a strong impact on him as well. The other participant recalled how an older friend took the time to speak to him in a direct way about the need to eventually make a drastic decision to cut ties with people prone to gang-like activities.

In two other situations participants' teachers were credited with helping them (while they were teenagers) to make the decision to reject a gang. They recalled two factors about their teachers that really stood out for them and eventually helped them. First, their teachers were taking an interest in them; and second, they were not afraid to confront these participants on issues the teachers considered concerning. The fact that the teachers took an interest and cared for the participants really stood out for these young men. One of the participants stated that he appreciated how the teacher was "not just being a teacher." Another participant was surprised when he found out how much his teachers cared for him. He pointed out that this level of care went beyond the job of being a teacher. He said, "It makes me . . . realize that they cared that much. Because, not in any demeaning way, but they are teachers, they are not my uncle or aunt, they are my teachers." The second aspect that the participants mentioned was appreciating that teachers confronted them while they were still teenagers. One participant noted how being confronted by his mistakes and challenged to be a better person helped to build up his character. Another participant recognised his teachers' confidence in confronting him on his mistakes, and credited the teachers' bluntness for getting his attention. He explained how:

My two English teachers, they pulled me into one of the offices in the school and they literally told me straight up, "You're fucking up, you're fucking up your life." That's how they said it to me. And I was just sitting there and they couldn't have said it more bluntly. They were like, "We know that you are going out and you are partying, and you are getting involved with a lot of shitty characters, and you're fucking up your life." There is no better way they could have said it and then I was just sitting there and I didn't really know how to take it at the time . . . that did make me think, well, if it is that bad that they can point that out to me in that matter too. It wasn't gentle. That played a part, I'd say.

Such directness in the teachers' approach forced this participant to reflect on his life during his adolescence. He recalled how "it led to a lot of thoughts after all that."

It was not just girlfriends, friends, or teachers that these participants noted as helpful. One of the participants credited his older cousins who were also involved in gang-like activities for helping him. This account highlights a situation where older, more experienced adults were looking out for younger, inexperienced boys because they did not want these boys to get hurt. The participant recalled how his older cousins "didn't want [him] slipping through the cracks" and they "were trying to keep [him] out of trouble." The cousins monitored the participant's activities and challenged him by saying: "Is that life really the life you want to live?" Eventually, he stopped his gang-like activities because he was forced to tell his cousins about his involvement in those activities. He explained how the monitoring of his activities served a purpose of giving him enough space to learn from his own experience, but only to a point. He recalled:

Then I got pretty much shut down. The older brother's like, "You're not doing anything no more. Go find a job somewhere." I was like, "OK?" . . . And the way I think they showed me, they purposely did that, so I don't do that and I really see what's up. Like, you can make a lot of money, but is that really what you want to do?

In all situations, the participants were successful in not joining a gang because of the meaningful and significant people in their lives who knew what they were doing and were willing to speak to them about it. Being challenged and confronted with tough issues by a person who cared about them helped the teenage boys make the decision to reject the gang. One of the participants' comments highlights the value of adolescent boys having access to people who care about them. He said, "You start thinking, and I am happy I started thinking, and I had people around me to make me think."

Absence of alliance and support.

This subcategory, which was supported by 50% of participants, emphasizes the disillusionment the participants experienced when they took a closer look at the gang lifestyle. This group of participants recalled how disappointed they were with the lack of alliance, friendship, loyalty, trust, and support within their gang-like groups. The list of

negative aspects and the lack of positive social and communal qualities expected from a group of like-minded peers is extensive.

The most frequent complaint about gang-like groups was the lack of true friendship. Many of the participants shared this concern. For example, one participant questioned the character of people he considered his friends. He wondered, "If this is what your friends do, what type of friends are they really?" Another participant agreed saying, "You are not friends with the person. It's just like a business . . . there is no friendship in business." Finally, two other participants questioned the authenticity of the so-called friendships within gang-like groups. One of them stated, "I lost really good friends, but I really don't know that I can call them good now," and another participant concluded, "When you're going through actual real struggles in life they're not there."

Another quality that the young men frequently questioned was loyalty. The participants expressed their frustration and disappointment with the realization that not everybody was as loyal as they were. One of the young men noticed that, "Loyalty even had an expiration date . . . cause you can be loyal so long, but when push comes to shove and your eyes really open to who's there for you, then you know what real loyalty means." Trust was also a quality that was questioned; one participant said, "You just couldn't trust anybody," and he concluded that people are not "true to who they are."

Following the lack of positive qualities the participants were searching for, they also noticed an abundance of negative qualities that were present in people participating in gang-like groups. They noticed evidence of tension and friction among group members that led to fights, forcing them to take a side, which led to more hostility. One participant recalled a situation when he "got slapped in the face for helping somebody." This experience really challenged his perception of friendship within a gang. The participant explained, "The guy who slapped me was my friend, but I wanted to protect the other guy. I said, 'He is not at fault,' and then he slapped me again." Another participant observed how "people just turn on you over money or whatever it could be, girls, stuff like that." Participants mentioned how they were being used, objectified, and viewed as a commodity. One participant noted, "There's a purpose for you. And if that purpose is gone, then you wouldn't be in the circle." Another participant also

experienced that members were not truthful and they did not follow any accepted code that would allow for reasonable, societal expectations. He said, "They didn't really do the business ethic, the right way."

All of the concerns and observations made by the participants were summed up and confirmed by an experienced gang member who once opened up and warned one of the participants about the selfish and callous nature of gangs. This participant explained:

Even one of their friends, amongst the groups said, he was older, he was probably 35, 36 [years old] right now and he said to me one day. We were drinking, and he said, "Nobody around you over here is your friend. And when something were to happen," in his words, "when shit would pop off, they would all turn against each other." So he said, "Nobody is your friend, you're here by yourself and as times are good when everyone's making money, having fun, drinking, everything is all good, but when, if there was an event to happen, things go sour, it's every man for themselves and nobody, people who you thought were your friends, they are not really there at the end." Cause he was involved in things and that's what happened to him. And, based on that, I started thinking. If somebody was involved in that, if they are saying that, then you should take their advice for what's it worth.

Ironically, the people the adolescent boys were looking to emulate and join were the same people who showed them that the gang lifestyle is packed with selfishness, greed, and a lack of true loyalty and friendship. Regardless if this knowledge was obtained through observation, experience, or hearing glimpses of honesty shared by gang members, the truth about the gang lifestyle acted as a warning sign that prevented these participants from becoming gang members.

Alternate source of acceptance.

Thirty-eight percent of participants came to realize that the sense of acceptance they were looking for could be met in places other than a gang-like groups. The participants talked about hopes they had for themselves, emotional needs they wanted to have fulfilled, and expectations others had of them that they wanted to meet. As the participants were striving to meet those needs and expectations, they realized that by being in a gang they could only experience a fleeting sense of the aspirations they really wanted to fulfil in their lives.

Two of the participants spoke of their need to feel that they belonged and were accepted. Both of these men expressed how they craved being part of a large group of people that would meet those needs. The need for belonging and acceptance might have been desired for different reasons. One participant spoke about being an only child, while another participant spoke of missing the experience of being surrounded by people with similar views – something he used to experience by attending a church. In both situations though, the participants found a source that provided them with the sense of belonging and acceptance they were looking for. One of them said:

Personally for myself sports . . . You're in the moment, you're with team members, you're part of a crew. That does a big thing for me. Growing up as an only child and being in a team atmosphere and being with people that have the same goals as you, that was just something totally different.

The other significant need that adolescent boys wanted to meet was the acceptance and validation from others. They wanted others, mainly family members, to be proud of them as they earned their respect, which gave the adolescent boys the sense of approbation. One participant explained, "I came to [the] conclusion that, honestly, I could [be] doing something legit, something that I could tell my family about, something I could tell my grandpa about, something that they would be proud of me." He also recognized that it was not just the immediate family that could be proud of him; he realized that his family would not have to be ashamed or dismissive of him. They could speak with respect about him as their son. He explained:

I wanted to go out there and kind of gain respect, or gain some kind of, you know like, "He is actually doing something with his life," rather than just being, "What is he actually doing?" The unknowns like that. I wanted [the family] to be proud, actually tell other people this is exactly what he is doing.

The participants' insights, fuelled by their emotional needs, helped them to seek acceptance, validation, and a sense of self-worth in places other than gangs.

Witnessing gang desistance.

The final subcategory within this category, represented by 25% of the participants, relates to an experience of witnessing a gang member leave the gang. The nature of this experience was limited as it involved the intimate knowledge of someone who was already involved in a gang. It is through the personal accounts of gang members that participants could hear of the full consequences of joining a gang, including the reasons that led gang members to leave. After hearing a personal story about his gang-involved friend making the decision to leave, one participant recalled how it made him question his possible involvement in the gang. This is how he remembered his friend's situation:

I saw him go up to his parents after he did that and say, "Yeah I'm involved in this." And he told his parents straight. Cause he said that at nighttime he wouldn't be able to go to sleep. He was thinking about what could [have] happened to him. So, he said it straight to his parents, and they made him right away cut off ties with the people. And while he was doing it, when he cut off ties, then I said, "If this guy was closer to those people than me and he did it, and he stopped, then I should. You know, why would I do it? He's gone through it more than me, then does it make sense for me to do that?"

Another participant was also fortunate to be able to witness the real danger associated with living a gang lifestyle. In his case, an older family member was being targeted and the young man became aware of the risks that gang life encompassed. He said:

It was at a point my [family member] took his family and kid and took off as well. He took off. Pretty much ran away. Yeah, he kicked it from here, cause he had police come to his house telling him. And then one day him and his wife were coming back from some sort of gala or something and there was somebody there the whole night. He kept thinking it was cops and he woke up the next morning and there was another truck, it wasn't the same truck. And when he took off that morning, the truck kept following them. There was a certain number the cops gave him like, "Call this number if you're ever in any issue," so, he just kept driving and he is like, "I just kept the phone on the speaker and talked to him" and they go, "Look, we have no surveillance at that point. We just came to warn you that day." So, he sort of got a hint that someone was trying to figure out his daily movements, figure out what's going on, trying to kill him. So, he took his wife and his kid and he took off.

Although this experience was not common, for the few participants who had the opportunity to witness a gang desistance, the effect it had on them was significant. It helped the adolescent boys to recognize that if gang involved individuals are choosing to leave gangs, then this type of lifestyle might not be as desirable as they thought.

4.5. What Hinders Adolescent Males in Their Decision to Reject a Gang Lifestyle?

There are two categories that represent the critical incidents identified by the participants as factors that made the decision to reject joining a gang difficult: individual at the core and community at the core. In the category of individual at the core there is one subcategory: loss of a substantial source or money. For the category of community at the core there are five subcategories including: loss of alluring lifestyle, loss of friendship and comradery, social connections, loss of protection, and feeling indebted. The majority of the subcategories fall into the community category because they highlight the communal qualities that the participants found that they either enjoyed or entrapped them.

Table 4.3 presents the participation rate for the critical incidents that hindered the process of rejection of a gang lifestyle by adolescent boys. The subcategories are listed in their appropriate categories from highest to lowest frequency as reported by the participants.

Table 4.3. Critical Incidents that Hindered the Rejection of a Gang Lifestyle

Category	Subcategory	Number of Participants (n=8)	Participation Rate
		n	%
Individual at the Core	Loss of a Substantial Source of Money	4	50%
Community at the Core	Loss of Alluring Lifestyle	4	50%
	Loss of Friendship and Comradery	4	50%
	Social Connections	2	25%
	Loss of Protection	1	13%
	Feeling Indebted	1	13%

4.5.1. Individual at the Core

There is one subcategory listed in this category that relates to what the participants were fearing or were concerned about if they planned to reject a gang lifestyle. Although there is just one subcategory, the overarching category underlines the source of the friction and hesitation which influenced the decision making process. The inclusion of the category with only one subcategory also helps to highlight the unbalance between the limited influence of hindering factors rooted in individual himself versus the overwhelming influence of hindering factors rooted in the aspect of community. Specifically, the one subcategory in this category emphasizes the unique influence money had on the adolescent boys' lives.

Loss of a substantial source of money.

Half (50%) of the participants stated that the significant financial benefits of joining a gang would be difficult to replicate through other, standard means of employment. In their opinion, it was definitely a lucrative process of earning a substantial amount of money in a relatively short amount of time. Of all the participants who stated that money was the reason why they had a hard time rejecting a gang, money was the first and main factor in all the cases except one (in this case it was the second reason). For example, one participant said it was “money, plain and simple – money. Nothing else – money” that made it difficult to reject joining a gang.

Although they all stated that money was an enormous part of why it was difficult for them to reject being in a gang, the money represented different aspects to different participants. For some participants, it was just the amount of money they could earn at a young age. For example, one participant said, “What [would] I do to get that much money that quick? . . . Where else [am I] gonna make like six – seven thousand a month, while on the other side, I don't know how many years I would have to work?” The prospect of having to earn an income in a traditional way was not appealing to a number of the participants. As another participant explained, “Turning away from that [money] and thinking I'll have to make legitimate money, that kind of sucked.” Another participant also compared the income amounts he earned through a gang lifestyle

versus a traditional means of working and admitted that it continues to challenge him to this day. He stated:

You still may be making over a hundred K's, easy. And for the average person that's a lot of money. Like, I've even known then, that the hardest thing for me [was] going from that to what I am doing now. What do I make? At forty grand in a year, that's nothing. Forty grand a month, maybe two. And today, I still think about it.

Participants, apart from knowing that there was a substantial and quick amount of money to be made to buy them their way into desirable lives, they were also afraid of the reality of "regular" life. This was magnified in some situations when some participants thought that they needed substantial education or skills to be able to support themselves. For example, one of the participants commented:

Just being scared of the financial situation after. Will I be able to hold myself together? Keep myself up until I figure out what I'm gonna do? How long this process is gonna take? Pretty much, it was scaring me.

As this participant emphasised, money was not just a source of fun but also security. The potential loss of security that money provided this young man with was one of the reasons why the loss of substantial, albeit illegal, income made it difficult to reject joining a gang.

4.5.2. Community at the Core

The following five subcategories in this category highlight either the loss of social and communal benefits that were associated with a gang lifestyle or the experience of entrapment that was brought on by the gang lifestyle.

Loss of alluring lifestyle.

Fifty percent of participants were concerned they would no longer enjoy the same level of social lifestyle. For some participants, the amount of money and the security of having money were reasons that made it difficult for them to reject gangs. For other participants, the money often gave them access to a more glamorous lifestyle. One participant stated that he struggled to reject the gang lifestyle because he was "blinded

by whatever it might be. You can have this, you can have this.” Another participant agreed and commented on the types of desirable benefits money provided him. He said, “Money was everything. Partying was the money. Going out of town was the money. Going on trips was the money. It was all money.” For teenage boys and young men, this desirable lifestyle they visualized having was ingrained in them from early adolescence. One participant explains:

During high school, you’re kind of growing up and you want this visual, you see a lot of things when you are growing up. So, they know what you can get, what you cannot get. If you keep wanting to go down that road. I think, that’s what, it was hard for me and probably hard for the 100% of the other kids out there. They see what you can get, and just looking the part.

This desirable fantasy life seemed to be a draw for the participants because it included beautiful women, nice cars, partying, and a sense of being somebody. One participant shared how difficult it was to accept losing all those benefits. He said, “Who are we gonna hang out with where there’s women or things like that? It just gonna be us guys. We’re not gonna go to house parties; we’re not gonna be known.” Finally, the gang offered the participants a sense of being carefree in a fun atmosphere that extended beyond attractive women, nice cars and parties, and provided them with a daily, worry free existence where someone else was always taking care of them. One participant recalled that during his adolescence, “Someone would be buying everyone food, all those stuff, all day, and it was so fun. We’d go to the movies . . . so that was fun, because you are getting treated out by people who you know are your friends.” This desirable, carefree lifestyle was difficult to reject because it offered the participants many benefits they hoped for and looked forward to since their early high school years. After all, in the perception of fifty percent of the participants, “it was a great life.”

Loss of friendship and comradery.

Also 50% of the participants stated that not joining a gang would cause them hardship through the loss of friendships, companionship of their peers, and a sense of belonging to a group that seemed very special and unique. The participants regretted having to give up this sense of unity and belonging with people who seemed to have a special bond with each other, had common goals, interests, and personalities. Some of

the participants would call it a team, a crew, a brotherhood, or a comradery, all of which implied a deep sense of connection that was sometimes established over years of growing up together. One of the participants provided a powerful description when he said:

I just didn't want to leave the team, the crew behind, or whoever I was with. My worry was the only thing I had at that time to go off and I couldn't turn. . . . I like to go back to even like when we used to grow up. We used to watch movies, thinking of Godfather, The Scarface, and that's pretty much where that attitude came from. I didn't want to let go of that comradery, brotherhood. I didn't want to let go of that. That was a hard factor to let go.

Other participants also explained how the sense of deep friendship allowed them to experience being accepted, giving them a purpose and sense of guidance. In at least one case, this sense of acceptance for this participant was a substitution for the loss of belonging and support from his biological family, making the rejection of the gang much more difficult. He explained how he would experience a deep void by rejecting a gang lifestyle, saying:

The thing I love the most about it was just being around people, where I really felt like they really cared for me. Because at that point, I guess I did feel pretty empty inside. That was the biggest factor what made me stick around, just being so accepted by so many people. Cause at that point in my life I had no guide. . . . I was just making my own mistakes and I really wished I could have someone to help me at that time, but all I had really were those friends. What made it difficult too, what was so enticing to me, just having that, like I brought up earlier, the church thing. There is so many people who have the same kind of view as you, and people accept you. Kind of that, what I was really going for. . . . It was just the thought of "If I leave that, then where would I go?" Because I didn't have anyone to go to really, cause everyone else was really religious around my family, so I didn't want to go to them. . . . I'd say that was the biggest thing, that I just felt so loved there. And I felt like I almost had a purpose. I was free to do what I wanted and people weren't telling me what to do. That was what made it difficult to cut ties.

The deep desire for acceptance and belonging experienced by teenage boys proved to be a need that was very difficult to be easily replaced. As 50% of the participants stated, letting go of the "crew" or "brotherhood" for the loneliness and isolation that followed was not an easy decision to be made.

Social connections.

A group of 25% of participants were concerned that the social connections they established with other gang affiliated members would make it difficult for them to break these ties once they decided to reject a gang lifestyle. Some participants were concerned with the strong possibility of future contact with the remaining gang affiliated members, while other participants were concerned with the verbal assaults, questions, and the damage to their image that was going to occur. One participant feared that running into the other members while living in the same city would be problematic. He said:

Just living in the same city. It's not that big of a city. You see people everywhere and you stop talking to somebody for a second. You need a reason to stop talking. If you just stop answering phone calls, something's up. Once you are associated, it is hard to stay away. Even if you want to, you gonna be seen somewhere, whether it'd be a restaurant or a mall. They gonna come up and they gonna ask for your new number. There is not much you can do, especially if they know where you live. All those things I said played a factor.

This participant's concern with being questioned by other gang affiliated members was shared by another participant, who said, "You know, obviously people talk and shit like that. 'Oh, yeah, you're not hanging out with buddy now. What are you scared? Blah, blah, blah.' Start talking shit." Although the main aspect associated with having social connections with gang affiliated members was the fear of running into them, participants also spoke of grieving the loss of socialization with friends who would continue to be involved in the gang. One participant commented, "You kinda miss driving around, seeing the same people you kind of see all the time, your regulars."

Loss of protection.

This subcategory, loss of protection, was supported by 13% of the participants. The safe connections that participants created with gang affiliated members acted as a deterrent. For some teenage boys the affiliation with a group of people known for, or thought of being in a gang, gave these boys a sense of immunity from being targeted by other individuals. This sense of immunity or safety stemmed from the perceived fear of future retaliation from the group the boy was associated with. One participant explained,

“Say you would get into fights, arguments with people and if they know who your other group of friends are, they would get an end to it. They wouldn’t want a situation with you.” The realization of losing this form of immunity, protection, or safety once the participant rejected the gang lifestyle made the decision difficult.

Feeling indebted.

This subcategory was supported by 13% of the participants and refers to them feeling obligated to continue making themselves available to gang affiliated members. The participants, after experiencing support from gang affiliated members, would continue to carry a sense of obligation and duty to repay that support. One participant explained:

After they did helped me with the situation, I remember this one time, he called my name, like, “Hey, come outside, bring a baseball bat.” And we go and he is driving me, driving following someone. He had a problem of his own, and he is like, “We’re gonna beat this guy up.”

The perceived debt the participants thought they owed to gang affiliated members acted as a bind that seemed to be difficult to break. With this bind in place, a complete freedom from a gang seemed difficult to attain.

4.6. What Else Could Support Adolescent Males in Their Decision to Reject a Gang Lifestyle?

The participants identified critical incidents that gave them ideas about what could have helped them reject the gang lifestyle. These incidents are represented within two main categories: family at the core and community at the core. The category, family at the core, includes only one subcategory – family stability. Although there is only one subcategory in this category, the category identifies the encompassing source of support the participants were referring to. The inclusion of a category with only one subcategory also acts as an emphasis and a point of reflection signifying that the adolescent boys were predominantly looking at their community for possible additional support. This observation is reflected by the second category, community at the core, that includes the majority of the subcategories identified as the wish list, such as personal guidance and

mentorship, knowledgeable preventative education, targeted approach, and involvement in a purposeful activity. The subcategories in this section reflect the support the adolescent boys were hoping to receive from their community of family members, familiar people in the community, local schools, community centres, and recreation centres.

Table 4.4 presents the participation rate for the wish list items that, according to participants, could have helped adolescent boys with the rejection of a gang lifestyle. The subcategories are listed in their appropriate categories from highest to lowest frequency as reported by the participants.

Table 4.4. Factors that Could Have Helped (Wish List Items) with the Rejection of a Gang Lifestyle

Category	Subcategory	Number of Participants (n=8)	Participation Rate
		n	%
Family at the Core	Family Stability	2	25%
Community at the Core	Personal Guidance and Mentorship	4	50%
	Knowledgeable Preventative Education	3	38%
	Targeted Approach	3	38%
	Involvement in a Purposeful Activity	3	38%

4.6.1. Family at the Core

The participants listed a few critical incidents implying that family dynamics possibly played a role in their attraction to a gang lifestyle. Addressing those family dynamics during their adolescence might have helped to deter the participants from considering joining a gang. There is just one subcategory listed in this category.

Family stability.

Improving family stability was seen by 25% of the participants as potentially helpful for them in rejecting joining a gang because it would have provided more stability

in their lives. The participants saw stability differently depending on the circumstances they were faced with in their immediate families. In one situation, a participant shared that not having a second parent limited the amount of supervision he received and thus, provided him with more opportunity to get involved with troublesome peers. He stated that addressing the aspect of additional supervision would have been a helpful factor; he explained:

It was easier for me to get out of the house and do this, because my [family member] worked graveyard. I never had that much authority over me. So, if I had another parent or something at home, then I think it would have been different . . . If I had like another authority figure at home, that would have kept me at home to do my homework instead of going out and hanging out with those guys.

Another participant defined the need for more stability in his immediate family differently. For him, it was not the lack of, or the quantity of parental supervision, but the quality of that supervision. The participant recalled that arguments, fights, insults, and criticisms played a vital role in him being drawn towards spending more time with troublesome peers. Providing adolescent boys with a caring and supportive home environment where they were protected, loved, and provided with direction would act as a preventive measure in stopping them from joining gangs. This participant explained how the lack of this kind of support was affecting him during his adolescence. He said:

If my family was more close and it wasn't so broken apart, and arguments, and fights, and that's what was going on. With my own family causing me, like at the end of the day your house is supposed to be somewhere that you want to go to. But for me it was more like, I don't want to fucking go home. It was hard, just arguing and stuff like that, just causing more like, I'd rather stay out late, just be with buddies . . . So, it's something I wish I could have changed that probably would have. If everything was like happy in the family, I wouldn't want to do that. If people were more positive and pointed me in the right direction, and I never saw the things that I did when I was a kid . . . Most of the time we couldn't stay 15 minutes of quiet; somebody may say something wrong and it's, "Fuck you, you stupid idiot." There is no positivity in the house besides my [family member], my [family member] that would be positive around me. It was just more of like, "Oh you're lying, you're stupid. You never know this, you never know that."

In both cases, the participants indicated that regardless of the nature of the problem with the family stability, improving the likelihood that they would spend more quality time at home would have helped deter them from joining a gang.

4.6.2. **Community at the Core**

The following four subcategories in this category show additional supports the community could have offered these participants during their adolescence.

Personal guidance and mentorship.

The largest group, 50% of participants, stated that having access to a meaningful relationship with an individual who would be a guide and mentor would have helped them stay away from joining a gang. Even though these participants grew up seeing, knowing, and being exposed to a much more illicit knowledge than the average teenager, they emphasized their desperate need to be guided by someone else in their lives. They talked about having a desire for mentorship, help, guidance, accountability, assistance, connection, and presence. Although the individual needs of the participants might have varied, they all wanted to be mentored by someone who would care about who they were, would support them with what they needed help with the most, and would be there to advise them as they were trying to figure out their lives.

For participants who knew they wanted to be successful and productive in life, yet did not know how to become successful through any other means except through gang membership, mentorship by a successful person was seen as a clear answer. One participant explained:

If say, you could get like an amazing entrepreneur like Richard Branson, say just out of the blue, to mentor you to start a business at that time. Something that can put some money in your pockets; like any type of thing that can make you self-dependent. It wasn't even also making money, it's that you're making money not working for anyone, you are doing something yourself. So, if there was some type of mentorship, or program, or something by someone who's been successful and you can be under their wing, I think that would have definitely helped.

Another participant added that this type of mentorship could be offered through youth programs that specifically focused on addressing the career paths of teenage boys. He offered a suggestion that these programs would not merely let the teenage boys know what they could or should do in the future, but that these youth programs would invest in the boys based on their goals and interests. The program's aim at getting to know the boys would eventually benefit their whole family. The participant explained how such a program could work:

It's not just, "You got to get this, this, this class and you go." They're actually seeing what your interest is, what you excel at, what's deterring you from doing that. And actually when you take all of that into combination, you're not just helping that child that's needed, but you are helping his whole family with his situation.

The support that these participants suggested highlight the need for a relationship based approach. Teenage boys want to know and feel that programs are not just forced on them but are built around their needs. Other participants also commented on this type of personalized support, focusing on the need for guidance with everyday life problems and difficulties. The participants talked about having someone who would help and listen. They did not define who this individual could be, but as it turned out for these participants, the person was a teacher, a coach, an older brother, an older friend, an older person, and eventually a father (for those who did not have a father figure physically or emotionally present in their lives). The need to talk to someone was strongly shared by one participant who wanted such guidance. He said:

I feel what would have helped me a lot was, if I had someone at the time. I just had no one to go to, just to talk to about, to learn about life from . . . It just kind of sucked feeling like I had no guidance . . . and there was nobody who I really felt like I could go to talk to about life experiences and problems.

The participants explained that having someone to talk to, not only helps teenage boys with being able to receive guidance with life, but it also lets them know that someone is paying attention to what they are doing and who would intervene before it was too late. This sense of wanting someone to step in and stop the participants' momentum of getting themselves into serious trouble was explained by one participant who said, "Having accountability towards people, like knowing that if you mess up these other

people, they're gonna know" would be very helpful. The sense of accountability would not only stop teenage boys from getting themselves into serious trouble, it could also give them a strong sense of knowledge that someone is paying attention to them and caring enough about them to share with them his own life struggles for their benefit. One of the participants explained his desire to learn from somebody who would be older and could guide him. He said:

I've always wanted and I always wished I had like an older brother maybe. Just like an older brother, someone to talk to . . . I was lacking maybe just an older person, or an older friend, older brother pretty much. Someone that I was connected to, that actually gave a shit. Was there to show you, that they went through those type of scenarios, like that they could guide you, put you down the right kind of things.

As this participant explained, his evident desire for an older, experienced, and caring individual highlights the void teenage boys could be experiencing when they are left to themselves to figure out how to navigate through adolescence and the risk of gang membership.

Lastly, two of the participants explained that the presence of a father would be beneficial for teenage boys as a source of relationship and guidance. The participants explained that it cannot be just the physical presence of a father but rather needed to be a physically present father with an emotional presence as well. One participant stated, "I wish it could have been my dad . . . I know though that so many people don't have good relationships with their dads, but I am just saying that I guess I just felt so alone in that sense." Another participant tells of the need for the emotional presence of a father in a boy's life when times are difficult. He said:

I can tell you there [are] so many scenarios where I felt like I wanted to talk to my dad. I was dying to talk to my dad, just like that, but he just wasn't there, simple as that. He might have been there physically, but 100% I give you, he is not there. He'd kind of be like, "Just go fuck off," or anything like that. Like, he just doesn't give a shit. So you start talking about something; he'd be more engaged in the TV and like just chilling out, having a drink, rather than actually stopping, looking at you, actually having an engaging conversation, talking back.

As the participants described the desire to receive sincere and personal guidance and mentorship during adolescence, they emphasized that it could prevent boys from joining gangs. They overwhelmingly were suggesting that such support needed to come from an adult. This adult, whoever he was, was described by participants as someone with experience, whom they could trust, to whom they could look up to, and who has their best interest at heart.

Knowledgeable preventative education.

This subcategory, supported by 38% of the participants, mentioned the idea of offering adolescent boys and their parents informed education about the dangers of a gang lifestyle. The participants stated that current education about gang life that was offered to teenage boys needed to be revised because it lacked examples and honest discussion. Also, statements such as, “You are hanging out with the wrong people” were seen as an ineffective means of trying to convey a complex message, lacking any attempt in trying to engage them in a meaningful discussion. One participant explained that in the view of teenage boys, such oversimplification of a complex problem ends up being met with a rejection of the message the adult was trying to convey. Boys often responded to it with statements such as, “What do you mean? What do YOU know?” Participants commented that adolescent boys need to be educated in an appropriate and effective way, where facts, examples, and up-to-date information is being offered to answer their curiosity. One participant said, “If you knew at that time how much harm it’s causing you, rather than good in your life, you would steer away from it more.”

The second group of individuals who need appropriate education are parents, especially parents who immigrated to Canada. Aside from education related to gangs, they need to know about the whole experience of adolescence, including the dangers and difficulties that teenage boys face while living in Canada. One participant explained that parents need an “understanding [of] what the life is really about for the kids” and that it can be provided through “more community events where [parents] can get certain ideas of why [their boys] are acting a certain way.” The participant added that he is optimistic; he is already seeing more of these opportunities available for parents today, than when he was a teenager.

Targeted approach.

Thirty-eight percent of the participants proposed that focussing on at-risk youth would improve the odds of these youth rejecting gang membership. The participants explained though, that the targeted approach has to be thought out so that it is not punitive, but rather designed as a youth outreach program aimed at building connections with at-risk boys. One participant explained it as, "Targeting the main people that you might think are gonna cause trouble. I guess go more hard-core after this. Have their own separate meetings. Not segregate them, but just let them know you are there." Another participant added that taking the time to hear the boys out and to learn what is going on in their lives is crucial. He pointed out that disciplinary approaches do not work. He said:

School doesn't know how to handle the kids. They're just like, "Oh yeah, lets suspend this person; it's gonna make him turn out better." That's not the way to do it. You gotta find out [what is] the problem that's behind the scenes, what is going on.

The participants shared that even with the best intentions, it might be difficult for adults to reach at-risk youth, because they "do not want to listen to anyone," or "they do not even cause trouble at school, but they are still involved with it, back at home or outside of school." Regardless of these challenges, the participants suggested that more youth outreach programs need to be offered to reach at-risk youth.

Involvement in a purposeful activity.

This subcategory, supported by 38% of the participants, emphasises how important it is for adolescent boys to be involved in a purposeful activity. The activities that are suggested range from sports, community activities, after-school programs, to volunteer opportunities. The main reason behind these suggestions is that they offer boys a way to continue staying involved and engaged in positive activities. As one participant said, "As long as you stay busy, then you don't bother with other things." He suggested that the absence of a purposeful activity (e.g., sports) creates a situation where a boy's "mind starts wandering; [he has] nothing else to do." He concluded saying, "Sports would be really beneficial, just to get kids into sports, then they have no time to wander around, to get into trouble." Another participant also suggested that

there were other benefits of involving teenage boys in purposeful activities; he proposed that it gave them “more of a sense of place within the community.”

On top of all of the purposeful activities that adolescent boys could be involved in during their spare time, participants also suggested that simply being able to attend and be connected to a high school community played a major role. From not being suspended or expelled, to being able to attend a regular, full day school, the participants viewed that as a preventative strategy in helping to deter boys from joining gangs. One of the participants who had to attend an alternate (part time) school said:

Honestly, the first thing I think of for this question, I think that if I was spending a normal amount of time in a school, like the conventional school, [because] I just feel like with all that time I had, I was just looking for somewhere else to fill it.

As the participants mentioned, their own high schools are the places they want to be connected to, but they also need to be able to continue to have access to opportunities in their communities. The idea they shared is that the more time they can spend being engaged in a purposeful activity, the less time they have for falling into gang-like activities.

4.7. Summary

The critical incidents participants identified and credited as turning points in their lives, together with the hindering factors, and wish list items were grouped together in their individual sections and presented in categories to emphasise the source of influence for these factors. These categories signify the emphasis placed on the individual himself, his family, or the community during the decision making process of rejecting a gang lifestyle. The categories also act as comparison guide to allow for a quick evaluation of the level of significance of each of the factors presented by the participants. As a result, the categories help to highlight a misbalance between the sources of influence, because not all of the sources of influence that are reflected by the categories are viewed by adolescent boys with an equal importance. At times, one of

the sources (categories) may show a very significant influence, while at other times it may show virtually no influence at all.

In the next chapter, I will connect the helping and hindering critical incidents and wish list items to existing literature on protective factors and gang and crime desistance. I will explain how the critical incidents act on adolescent boys to help deter them from joining a gang.

Chapter 5.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore preventative measures described by young men as helpful in guiding them to make the decision to avoid joining a gang. Specifically, using the research method called the Enhanced Critical Incident Technique, I addressed the question: What helped and what hindered adolescent males to choose not to join gangs when they were at the verge of falling into a gang? As I discovered, Hill et al. (2001) was correct in cautioning that there truly is no “magic bullet” when it comes to the prevention of youth joining gangs.

In the following discussion on gang prevention, I focus on two key themes: (a) protective factors and (b) experiential gang deterrence factors. The three major categories (i.e., individual at the core, family at the core, and community at the core) and their subcategories will be brought into the discussion as they relate to these two themes. In relation to the first theme, the current literature relating to gang-life protective factors is limited (Howell, 2010), inconsistent (Howell & Egley, 2005), and truly should only include “processes that counteract risk” (Klein & Maxson, 2006, p. 140). Because the literature on gang protective factors is just emerging, I provide new examples of possible protective factors that arose through this research project. In relation to the second theme, the results showed a strong resemblance to other researchers’ gang-exit factors. By examining ideas about gang-exit factors, I identified participants in this study as having actual experiences of trying out gang life. Taking this into consideration, I call the experiences that the participants highlighted in this study as *experiential gang deterrence factors* to differentiate them from the gang-exit factors cited in the literature; therefore, these factors are a second key theme in this study. The experiential gang deterrence factors identified in this study are volatile lifestyle, risk to personal life, threat to the family, rejection of “toxic” lifestyle, absence of alliance and support, alternate

source of acceptance, witnessing gang desistance, intervention by a meaningful person, and high-risk event. I compare and contrast these experiential gang deterrence factors to the gang desistance literature in order to provide further support for my findings. Additionally, I will also address factors that participants identified as hindering their decision to reject a gang lifestyle.

It is also important to note how my findings concur with Erickson's (1950, 1968) theory of the stages of psychosocial development. As he indicated, although the formation of identity is significant during adolescence, it does not stop there but continues into adulthood. The accounts of the participants in this study present a similar path related to their identity development as they made choices to reject a gang lifestyle. These young men looked back at their own, frequently risky, transitions from adolescence into adulthood when describing the critical incidents that occurred over this period of time. Many of these critical incidents resemble gang-like behaviours, because the participants' interest in joining a gang sometimes included behaviours normally associated with street gangs. The participants, nevertheless, indicated that they did not belong to a gang and these critical incidents became turning points that shaped their identities, which ultimately today have nothing to do with being a gang member.

Finally, I conclude this chapter by addressing the implications of my findings for professionals and family members dealing with at-risk adolescent males. I also note some limitations of this research project and suggestions for future studies.

5.1. Protective Factors – Do They Really Exist?

This part of my research is the most challenging to present as I realize that my findings on protective factors are being compared to literature that continues to be debated to this day by experienced gang researchers (e.g., Howell, 2010; Klein & Maxson, 2006). Klein and Maxson (2006) specifically stressed that researchers should be careful using the term "protective factors," because they might run the risk of considering that the absence or diminished influence of known gang risk factors means that there may be the presence of possible protective factors; this in turn, they continued, may cause the findings to be confusing. With this warning in mind, I present

the accounts of the participants who clearly spoke of what they considered “turning points” in their lives that appear to be within the realm of the debated protective factors. These protective factors include a sense of moral and ethical codes, lower tolerance for deviant peers, presence of pro-social goals, involvement in communal activities, and the desire to gain the approval of the family.

5.1.1. A Sense of Moral and Ethical Codes

The qualities, values, and advantages that the participants spoke of as sources of protection against joining a gang, are most strongly related to the participants’ sense of moral and ethical codes. This study does not answer the question of where boys acquire these morals and ethics, but based on their age and the examples they offered, it is possible to determine that they are the values and ethics they acquired growing up. Across multiple subcategories (e.g., sense of morality/values, rejection of senseless violence, and possibility of a criminal record) of the individual at the core category, each of the participants referred to a situation during which his moral compass was triggered. The strongest examples of such situations came in the form of the rejection of acts of violence that clashed with the participants’ ideas of “conscience,” “the respect factor,” or being “true to myself.” The evidence of the moral compass that prevented the participants from joining a gang is their sense that gang activity is against the law, wrong, or inhumane. A strong moral and ethical code was also noted by Katz and Fox (2010) as a belief in a moral order and by Esbensen et al. (1993) as a lower tolerance for deviance.

5.1.2. Lower Tolerance for Deviant Peers

Connected to the moral compass is the lower tolerance for deviant peers. Esbensen et al. (1993) found that youth who do not belong to a gang showed less commitment to delinquent peers and more commitment to positive peers. This study showed that the participants did not want to be associated with their gang peers and friends because they were afraid that their reputations might be tarnished (see the subcategory *Ruined Reputation*).

5.1.3. Presence of Pro-Social Goals

Another gang protective factor noted for teenage boys is the presence of pro-social goals (see the subcategory *Presence of Pro-Social Goals*). Having a pro-social goal may include a current goal or long-term goal. For example, participants had current goals related to education, volunteering, mentoring younger children, being a role model and long-term goals such as future employment, business opportunities, marriage, and a future family life. Pro-social goals can also be seen in teenage boys as having a drive towards a future that aims towards a life-purpose or a role in the community.

5.1.4. Involvement in Communal Activities

The participants anticipated that as teenagers they would have been additionally protected from joining gangs by being involved in communal activities such as sports teams, community activities, after-school programs, or volunteer opportunities (see the subcategory *Involvement in a Purposeful Activity*). They thought that being connected and engaged in these activities would keep them away from falling into a gang lifestyle. Because it was stated as a wish list item, therefore a factor that was not formally experienced by the participants, the strength and significance of this protective factor may only be assumed as true until it is further verified by future studies. There are though some mixed findings relating to the involvement in communal activities in other studies. For example, Escribano (2010) found that students' self perception of belonging to the school helped deter them from gangs, whereas, as pointed out by Alleyne and Wood (2014), the commitment to education yielded no difference between gang involved and non-gang involved youth. Maxson et al. (1998) suggested that community or school-based groups do not protect boys from gangs unless they are religious activities.

5.1.5. The Desire to Gain the Approval of the Family

Protective factors related to the relationships with family members and individuals whom the youth deem as significant in their lives were also noted. One of the protective factors relates to the boys' desire to please and not disappoint their family members (see the subcategory *Fear of Disappointing Loved Ones*). The participants showed concern over the future possibility or a past act of disappointing and hurting a

significant family member. The significant member was most frequently identified as the mother but they also identified family members such as the father, both parents, and a younger sibling. The current literature does not explain how the youth's desire to please and the fear of disappointing their significant family member acts as a protective factor, but it does highlight the significance of the quality of the youth's relationship with the parents (Stoiber & Good, 1998), as well as, strong family involvement (Li, Stanton, Pack, Harris, Cottrell, & Burns, 2002) as possibly diminishing the chances of gang involvement. It would appear that strong family involvement might promote the adolescent boy's relationship to his parents; therefore, foster such a bond with the parent or family member that the boy might not want to jeopardise it by gang involvement. This concept was supported by Alleyne and Wood (2014), who found that youth turned to their parents for guidance and support, and McDaniel (2012) who reported that being monitored by parents acted as a protective factor. This study additionally revealed that youth who did not experience a sense of support, emotional connection, or discipline from their parents stated that they wished for it, because it would have helped them not join a gang (see the subcategory *Family Stability*). Additionally, it might be speculated that the sense of connection and support received from parents might improve the youth's family-based self-esteem, as it has been found that positive self-esteem rooted in connectedness to the family can act as a protective factor against joining a gang (Maxson et al., 1998; Whitlock, 2004).

5.1.6. Summary of Protective Factors

Possible protective factors found in this study show five distinct characteristics or qualities that diminish the possibility of at-risk adolescent boys joining gangs as noted above: (a) a sense of moral and ethical codes, (b) lower tolerance for deviant peers, (c) presence of pro-social goals, and (d) the desire to gain the approval of the family. The one additional protective factor mentioned, (e) being involved in communal activities, is a factor shared only as a wish list factor, so is not verified by the actual accounts of the participants. The majority of the mentioned protective factors were related to the individual at the core, two to the family at the core, and one (wish list item) to the community at the core categories. This may suggest that different sources of protection

are acting on the youth, but the strength of protective factors related to the individual at the core appears to be most significant.

5.2. Experiential Gang Deterrence Factors: Deciding to Exit a Gang

This research study has explored what helped and hindered at-risk male youth at the verge of beginning to engage in a gang lifestyle and prevented them from joining gangs. Apart from protective factors, this project shows how experiential gang deterrence factors also played a role as gang deterrents. These experiential gang deterrence factors exist because participants frequently referred to turning point events in adolescence that helped them avoid joining a gang. Similar factors are also noted by the gang desistance literature (e.g., Carson, Peterson, & Esbensen, 2013; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule, 2014; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Vigil, 1988). There is also a clear indication in the literature that multiple factors help the individual to eventually desist from a gang (Carson et al., 2013). Curry et al. (2002) identified and confirmed the existence of a group of youth who neither were gang members nor non-members, but still showed a strong relationship to delinquency that “lies along a scale between full-fledged members and non-members” (p. 289). Curry and colleagues (2002) wondered what will happen to these youth over time, and as this study shows, some adolescent boys who find themselves in this group choose not to join a gang, but they credit the gang-like experiences with helping them to make that decision.

5.2.1. Similarities Between Deciding to Reject Entering a Gang and Deciding to Exit a Gang

When considering the similarities between gang desistance literature and the findings of this research, it is imperative to remember that the participants in this study were young men, between the ages of 19 years and 27 years, who as adolescent boys were attracted to the gang lifestyle and were beginning to exhibit gang-like behaviour. The fact that the participants were attracted to the gang lifestyle sets this research and the findings of this research apart from research that only focuses on preventative approaches that might be acting as deterrents for either gang-entrenched youth or non-

gang involved youth.

Successful experiential gang deterrents

When examining reasons for gang desistance, researchers identify *push* and *pull* factors (Carson et al., 2013; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Push factors are considered to be internal factors that push the individual out of the gang. They are manifested by the cognitive changes that an individual experiences such as becoming more conscious of the violence or becoming disappointed or frustrated with life in a gang. Pull factors are considered to be external influences that pull the individual out of a gang. These factors may include significant individuals, job opportunities, and family influences that promote the weakening of the individual's attachment to the gang (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Further, some researchers (Carson et al., 2013) grouped reasons for desistance into four categories: violence, disillusionment, adult intervention, and life transitions. This project found two of those categories – violence and disillusionment – as strongly supported by the incidents presented by the participants. Intervention by a meaningful person, a factor recognized by previous studies (e.g., Decker et al., 2014; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011; Vigil, 1988), is also noted by the participants as an experience that helped them make the decision to not join a gang. Additionally, high-risk event, a factor not seen in other studies (although related to other factors such as adult intervention and violence) completes the list of factors that prevent youth from joining a gang.

Violence.

The experience of violence is the most frequently cited factor category in choosing not to join a gang. Violence is experienced in a variety of ways such as the recognition of the gang lifestyle as volatile; there is a risk of harm or death for the adolescent boy, and his family if he chooses to join the gang. The strongest, most frequently supported experiential gang deterrence factor within this category is volatile lifestyle (see subcategory *Volatile Lifestyle*). All of the participants recalled the experience of becoming aware of acts of severe violence, including the death of gang members, some of whom were friends of the participants. Such a dramatic experience, especially when it happens to the friend of an adolescent boy, who himself is also

considering joining a gang, acts as a strong deterrent leading to the rejection of the gang lifestyle. Decker et al. (2014) confirms the experience of death as a motivator for gang desistance, while the study by Carson et al. (2013) adds that the death or injury of a friend was reported as the second most common factor.

Another part of the recognition of the volatile lifestyle is the experience of witnessing a shooting, a stabbing, or a beating of a gang member; any of these experiences act as deterrents against joining a gang. The experience of witnessing violent incidents acts as a motivator for choosing to leave a gang and has been noted by other recent studies (e.g., Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Decker and Lauritsen (2002) noted that most former gang members, who left a gang due to violence, expressed specifically that the experience of witnessing violence directed at other gang members made them leave.

The second way that violence acts as a deterrent against joining a gang is represented by the risk to personal life experiential gang deterrence factor (see subcategory *Risk to Personal Life*). The experiences related to risk to personal life, although not reported as often as violence towards others was, nevertheless, frequently reported. Other studies (e.g., Decker et al., 2014; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Carson et al., 2013) also found the threat of personal violence acting as a factor for gang desistance. In this study, the incident of possibly losing a life was experienced by participants who were shot at, threatened at gunpoint, or harmed as a result of an altercation. Regardless of how the participants experienced this risk, the fear of losing their own lives and becoming “one of the statistics” reported by the news, was an experience that helped them avoid joining a gang.

The third way violence is credited with providing a motivation to reject gangs is through the fear of harming the family. This type of violence is reflected by the experiential gang deterrence factor of threat to the family (see subcategory *Threat to the Family*). Other researchers (e.g., Carson et al., 2013; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002) confirm that threats or acts of violence against the family of a gang member act as a motivation for leaving a gang. Because the participants in this study were not gang members, the actual acts of violence against their families did not involve family members actually

getting hurt, but rather, these acts included threats directed towards the family. The threats took the form of the family house becoming a target of a shooting or vandalism, as well as, anticipated or pronounced threats against family members. With so many examples of violence experienced while still not even being a member of a gang, participants very strongly (100% of participants) cited the real or anticipated acts of violence as the reason for not wanting to join a gang.

Disillusionment.

The other most frequently cited reason for choosing not to join a gang is a disillusionment with the gang lifestyle. The participants' disappointment with the reality of gang life was cumulated by seeing full gang members exit the gang. Carson et al. (2013) found that some adolescents naturally become disillusioned with the gang lifestyle and choose to leave. In their study, it was the most frequently cited reason for gang desistance irrespective of demographics and the level of involvement in the gang. The Carson et al. (2013) study offered two subgroups for disillusionment – "I just felt like it," and, "It wasn't what I thought it was going to be" (p. 517). In my study, I found that the disillusionment with gang lifestyle is represented by these experiential gang deterrence factors: rejection of a "toxic" lifestyle, absence of alliance and support, alternate source of acceptance, and witnessing gang desistance. Most of the experiential gang deterrence factors related to disillusionment are represented by the community at the core category as the disillusionment arises from the disappointment related to the quality of relationships within and outside of the gang. Some of the disillusionment, represented by the rejection of "toxic" lifestyle experiential gang deterrence factor, signifies that participants became dissatisfied with the psychological impact the gang may have on them (see subcategory *Rejection of "Toxic" Lifestyle*). The participants noticed that their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being was slowly eroded by the increased level of negative symptoms, including getting physically sick or experiencing anxiety and paranoia (also noted by Haigh (2009) in youth involved in crime). The awareness of the negative experiences that can be attributed to belonging to a gang challenges the boys' interest in a gang lifestyle and is further reinforced by the realization that there is no real sense of friendship within the gang, and non-gang groups can offer them their sought-after companionship. The participants experienced disappointment with a lack of positive social qualities within gang groups

such as alliance, friendship, loyalty, trust, and support. The most compelling disillusionment came from the realization that there was no room for true friendship within a gang, but in its place gang membership offered tension, hostility, mistrust, and the feeling of being used (see subcategory *Absence of Alliance and Support*). This awareness was also the reason why teenage boys looked towards other groups or individuals to meet their need for acceptance, validation, and a sense of self-worth (see subcategory *Alternate Source of Acceptance*). Carson et al. (2013) suggests life transitions such as making new friends, as one of the reasons for gang desistance. My study explored, in more detail, the reasons behind youth moving on to new friendships and relationships. The disillusionment with gang life could be the starting point in the search for what may eventually be considered a life transition. Lastly, participants also become disillusioned by the gang lifestyle as they learned of actual gang members who decided to leave the gang (see subcategory *Witnessing Gang Desistance*). The experience of knowing members can reject a gang lifestyle offers youth a source of reflection and motivation to avoid joining a gang in the first place.

Intervention by a meaningful person.

Other experiential gang deterrence factors that can be credited with gang deterrence is either experiencing the intervention of a meaningful person or wishing for personal guidance and mentorship. The person most often credited as helpful was the participant's girlfriend. The girlfriend, or in other studies (e.g., Decker & Pyrooz, 2011) either a girlfriend or a boyfriend, has a powerful influence over boy's decision-making processes. In my study, half of the participants identified their girlfriend as a very significant person in how they made the decision to avoid joining a gang. This was mostly because the girlfriend was aware of the choices the participant was making and could challenge his decisions, as well as draw him away from gang involved peers. Decker et al. (2014) explained this type of a relationship as an aid in influencing a boy's decisions as a form of *surrogate family* that promoted self-reflection and acted as a contrast to the gang lifestyle. Additionally, as noted by Vigil (1988), the girlfriend also simply helps with keeping the boy focused on daily pro-social activities. In this project, I moreover found that other people can have a role in intervening in the adolescent boy's life, including a male friend, a distant family member, and teachers. These significant people, similarly to girlfriends, have knowledge of the teenage boys' actions and

decisions. Specifically, they are willing to speak to the boys and challenge them on the decisions they are making. It is through the caring relationships the boys enjoy with these important individuals that open them to self-reflection after someone significant brings attention to their gang-like choices (see subcategory *Intervention by a Meaningful Person*). Just as Alleyne and Wood (2014) found youth want their parents' guidance, the participants in this study who lacked guidance and did not have a relationship with a meaningful person explained how, outside of the family, they also wished for mentorship, guidance, accountability, connection, and presence from such people as a teacher, a coach, an older friend, or an older person. What is also interesting to note here is how most participants who experienced the intervention of a meaningful person commented how, at different times in their lives, more than one person brought up concerns that caused them to be self-reflective.

High-Risk event.

Finally, a smaller group of participants credited a high-risk event as the reason for choosing not to join a gang. A high-risk event is an experiential gang deterrence factor that included high-speed car chases, in one case by a gang member (who was also firing a gun at the car the participant was traveling in), and in another case by the police with the help of a trained police dog. As explained by the participants, the experience of going through a terrifying incident possibly leading to fatality or incarceration can have a significant effect on an adolescent boy. Such experiences highlight the true reality of gang life and the plausibility of the serious risks embedded in such a lifestyle. It also brings awareness of the imminence of the consequences of further pursuing that type of a lifestyle.

Reservations That Make Rejecting a Gang Difficult

Just as there are experiential gang deterrence factors that help adolescent boys in deciding to not join a gang, the same is true for some of the reservations participants experienced that made it difficult to reject a gang lifestyle. These reservations are rooted in the participants' existing relationships with individuals who are engaging in gang-like activities and in their fear of losing money and an alluring lifestyle. These factors are represented mostly by subcategories within the community at the core

category and one subcategory within the individual at the core category. When it comes to relationships, the participants were concerned with the fear of the losing friendships, comradery, and the protection of members, but also feeling indebted and trapped by these social connections. Additionally, when it comes to money and lifestyle, participants were concerned by the loss of a substantial source of money and a glamorized lifestyle.

Loss of friendship, comradery, and protection.

Although the participants were not gang members, their close relationships and main circle of closely interwoven friendships included those with gang members. The loss of the friendship and comradery seemed devastating to participants, as it meant giving up on a sense of belonging to team, a crew, or a brotherhood. It also meant having to sever close bonds with long-term childhood friends not knowing how and if that void would be replaced (see subcategory *Loss of Friendship and Comradery*). Pyrooz et al. (2014) observed that the loss of friends youth experience after making the decision to leave a gang represents a loss of identity and the introduction of what now becomes an isolated life. Although the act of leaving close friends seems a hindrance in the process of making the decision to avoid joining a gang, Sweeten, Pyrooz, and Piquero (2013) suggest that through decreasing existing ties to gang members and, at the same time, increasing ties to non-gang individuals, youth will have better chances of leaving a gang. In my study, I found that it is not just the loss of companionship that participants feared; they were also apprehensive over losing the protection a gang could offer them (see subcategory *Loss of Protection*). Although this concern was not frequently reported by the participants in my study, Pyrooz et al. (2014) suggests that gangs do offer youth a sense of social support and protection. Similarly, participants in this project explained how, for them, a loss of protection also meant the loss of safety and immunity, since they saw how being in a gang was a deterrent against attack from other individuals who would view the non-gang involved youth as exposed and defenceless.

Entrapment through social connections and sense of indebtedness.

The next two aspects that make it difficult to reject gangs are also related to the sense of relationship with gang members, but instead of the fear of the loss of the

relationship, it is the existence of these relationships that causes adolescent boys to feel entrapped. This entrapment is experienced by the fact that participants have social connections to gang members and feel indebted to them. The social connections participants have with gang affiliated members cause them to fear both running into gang members in everyday life, being questioned, and experiencing verbal attacks (see subcategory *Social Connections*). Such run-ins with gang members are possible as a result of living in the same city or having common friends (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Additionally, ex-gang members, even after long periods of time, still have social connections with their former gang members (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Pyrooz et al., 2014), making such fears valid and factual. Pyrooz and Decker (2011) reported that as a member exits a gang, the other members might have negative feelings towards the individual who left. Decker and Lauritsen (2002) and Carson et al. (2013) observed that some ex-gang members experienced threats after they left the gang or even experienced violent consequences. Another aspect of feeling entrapped by the relationship to gang members was the participants' sense of feeling indebted. This sense of obligation, although not frequently reported, was felt by participants as a result of the support they received from gang members in the past. The sense of burden the participants carried was a result of thinking that they would be called to repay the favour; therefore, they thought they cannot reject the gang before the favour has been repaid (see subcategory *Feeling Indebted*). Gang desistance literature notes that cutting ties to gang members is problematic because many of these ties are friendships, family connections, or living in the same neighbourhood, and these relationships existed before individuals decided to join a gang (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Also, as pointed out by Decker and Lauritsen (2002), the fact that an individual decides to cut ties with his former gang members does not mean that those members will want to accept the new situation and will want to view the individual as a former member and currently dis-attached. The researchers warn that their past identity may still remain.

Loss of money and lifestyle.

The other significant reason why adolescent boys have a hard time rejecting a gang lifestyle is reflected in the money and lifestyle a gang provides. The two subcategories mentioned by participants as hindering were: loss of substantial source of

money and loss of alluring lifestyle. Gang literature shows that gangs attract members by giving them opportunities to make money, have fun (Esbensen, Deschenes, & Winfree, 1999), and excitement (Maxson & Whitlock, 2002). Participants in this study shared how it would be difficult through acceptable sources of employment to replace the amount of money that could be made by joining a gang. Haigh (2009) reported that the large quantities of money were also affiliated with status and respect. Similarly, participants in this study found that they were “blinded” by the alluring lifestyle that was fuelled by the opportunities money could buy them.

Improvements That Could Make Rejecting a Gang Easier

The participants who chose not to join gangs said they would have found it helpful if, during their adolescence (when they were attracted to gangs and were beginning to engage in gang-like activities), some additional forms of preventative interventions would have been offered to them. The approaches the participants would like to see were subcategories within the community at the core category and included access to knowledgeable preventative education and a targeted approach by adults focusing on at-risk adolescent boys.

Access to knowledgeable preventative education.

The participants stated that gang-prone boys would benefit from gang prevention education that is delivered by experienced and knowledgeable individuals who do not shy away from difficult topics and are open to tackle the adolescent boys’ perceptions, experiences, and sometimes complex dilemmas they are left facing on their own. The participants added that at-risk adolescent boys tend to reject current programs that focus on oversimplification, cliché statements, and general warnings against gangs. In their view, they are being treated with information that does not allow for honest discussion that addresses their curiosities. Decker et al. (2014) expressed the same concern in their research as I found with the participants in this study; he said, “Interventions must be able to discern and document the doubts, concerns, and needs expressed by participants in deviant groups” (p. 280). An honest discussion may lead the youth to make decisions to reject gangs. As Haigh (2009) noted, older crime involved youth want to make conscious decisions on their own. Lastly, adolescent boys are hopeful that the

education would not only be limited to gang risks, but would have a more holistic approach that includes other challenges and pitfalls of adolescence. Additionally, youth would like to see their parents, especially in families of new immigrants to Canada, be better informed about the difficulties faced by them during adolescence.

A targeted approach by adults focusing on at-risk adolescent boys.

The second approach the participants proposed for improving gang prevention is a targeted approach specifically focused on at-risk adolescent boys. Here too, the participants expressed concerns that this approach usually takes the form of punitive punishment. Instead, participants emphasized that these programs should offer support and connections that address the underlying issues adolescent boys are facing. The approach of targeting at-risk youth has been met with mixed results so far, as millions of dollars has already been spent on gang intervention programs in both Canada (Smith-Moncrieffe, 2013) and the U.S.A. (Klein & Maxson, 2006). Interestingly, the participants themselves anticipated that this approach may have limited results, because youth interested or involved in gangs may not be open to listen to anyone, or they may not exhibit their true intentions in a school setting.

5.2.2. Differences Between Deciding to Reject Entering a Gang and Deciding to Exit a Gang

In comparing experiential gang deterrence factors related to adolescent boys who are interested in joining a gang to those individuals who have left a gang, there are many similarities that can help to inform us about the participants' process of rejecting a gang lifestyle. Nonetheless, there are a number of differences between the two groups, for example, the length of time it takes to make the decision, the motivations for the decision, and the form the process of rejecting takes.

The Length of Time it Takes to Make the Decision

One of the differences between the participants in this study and the youth who were actual gang members can be seen in the length of their gang membership. Although it is difficult to compare the two groups, there is an interesting discrepancy. According to a number of longitudinal studies into gangs, the majority of youth enter and

leave the gang within one year or less. For example, 67% left the gang within one year or less in the Denver Youth Study (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993), 69% in the Seattle Social Development Project (Hill et al., 2001), and 53% in the Rochester Youth Development Study (Thornberry et al., 2003). Gang membership peaks between the ages of 14 years and 15 years (Esbensen & Weerman, 2005; Hill et al., 1999; Klein & Maxson, 2006). When these two aspects (age and duration) are taken into consideration, it is reasonable to assume that the majority of gang members join and exit gangs during mid-adolescence. Interestingly, participants in this study who were interested in a gang yet never joined one, took much longer, past their mid-adolescent years, to make that decision. Although the study did not require the participants to state their age when they finally decided not to join a gang, the majority of the participants described this time as “at an older age,” “a couple years after high school,” “after graduation,” and “later on in life.” This may suggest that adolescent boys who experience an attraction to gangs need more time than boys who decide to join a gang in finally make the decision to reject a gang lifestyle. One of the possible explanations for this discrepancy may be the fact that boys who are drawn to gangs, yet choose not to join them, may also be prevented from joining the gang by other protective factors (e.g., a sense of moral and ethical codes, lower tolerance for deviant peers, presence of pro-social goals, involvement in communal activities, and the desire to gain the approval of the family). It may be speculated that the combination of these protective factors combined with the experiential gang deterrence factors (e.g., volatile lifestyle, risk to personal life, threat to the family, rejection of “toxic” lifestyle, absence of alliance and support, alternate source of acceptance, witnessing gang desistance, intervention by a meaningful person, and high-risk event) although slowly, but eventually erodes their desire to join a gang. This proposition stands in contrast to the idea of *gang embeddedness*, which Pyrooz et al. (2013) suggest is when those who have weak ties to a gang decide to leave the gang sooner than those with stronger ties. In this study, participants with weaker ties (weakly embedded to the gang) appear to continue to show interest in the gang for considerably long periods of time – almost into young adulthood. Another interesting observation about this participant group is they continued to be connected to pro-social networks (e.g., family, non-gang involved friends, school), which may have prevented them from forming any substantial ties to a gang. As gangs tend to replace social networks, the gang members separate their new members from pro-social

circles (Thornberry et al., 2003). As my study indicates, youth who never join a gang and do not form substantial ties to a gang benefit from their connections to pro-social networks which ultimately overpower gang attraction.

The Motivations for the Decision

When considering motivation, some researchers (e.g., Carson et al., 2013) note that factors related to disillusionment of gang life are the most frequent motivation for leaving a gang, with factors related to violence being the second most common reason. The current study finds the opposite – participants who never joined a gang yet were drawn to it were more motivated to not join because they were more concerned with factors related to violence than factors related to disillusionment. It may be speculated that as adolescent boys consider joining a gang, they are much more strongly influenced by the fear and concern of the anticipated violence they might experience in a gang. Such fear may be derived from pop culture, media reports, and myths about gangs. Another possible explanation may stem from the absence of experience with a gang. Youth who never had to experience real gang life have not been exposed to a sufficient amount of disillusionment with the gang lifestyle.

Another significant difference when comparing to gang desistance literature is the role of the family. It has been shown that parent intervention played a role in the process of desistance (Carson et al., 2013). Parent interventions in desistance process could include the mother or the grandmother (Decker et al., 2014). In the current study, the role of the family was identified by participants but with family having a different function. Contrary to the gang desistance literature, in this project there was no evidence of any acts of intervention taken by family members to aid in the process of rejecting gang lifestyle by the participants. Instead, what motivated the participants to reject gang lifestyle was the fear of either disappointing family members or the fear of the family being victimized if the participants decided to join the gang. Although it should be noted that some participants mentioned family stability and having someone to talk to (mostly a father) would have also helped them to make the decision not to join a gang.

The Form the Process of Rejection Takes

The process of rejecting the gang lifestyle between non-gang involved youth and

gang members is experienced differently. The literature on the gang desistance process suggests that former gang members leave gangs in one of two ways, either abruptly or gradually (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002). The literature also indicates that the actual process of departure can take the form of either hostile or non-hostile exit (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Contrary to the literature, in this study, the possible variations of gang-exit processes were not observed. All of the participants reported rejecting the gang lifestyle through a gradual process without experiencing any hostile acts directed towards them. Likewise, in some cases where former gang members reported a single event as a single reason in leaving a gang (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002), all of the participants in this study listed a number of factors that eventually helped them reject joining a gang. It can be speculated that because the participants did not belong to a gang, they also did not have to abruptly cut ties to gang members; therefore, the process was slower and dotted with many turning points. Lastly, following the desistance process, past gang members are at risk of experiencing victimization from their former gang (Pyrooz et al., 2014). This experience was also not reported by the participants in this study, suggesting that youth who do not make the decision to join a gang may not be at risk of victimization once they decide to cut ties to gang members. This observation may appear to be easily recognizable to an outside observer, but as the participants in this study explained, they did experience the fear of being verbally attacked and intimidated by individuals still associated with the gang.

5.2.3. Summary of Experiential Gang Deterrence Factors: Experience and Time Help to Highlight Violence

Although a few differences exist, the similarities between the experiential gang deterrence factors that help at-risk adolescent boys make the decision to not join a gang and the factors that help gang members leave a gang are overwhelmingly comparable. Just as leaving a gang is a process of push and pull factors experienced over a period of time (Pyrooz et al., 2014), the experiential gang deterrence factors described by the participants push and pull on these boys during their adolescence. One of the possible explanations for the similarities between these two groups are the stories of individuals who leave gangs. These stories tend to be similar to individuals who did not belong to a gang yet were involved in committing crime (Laub & Sampson, 2001). The participants

in my study presented many examples of coming in close contact with crime, if not by committing crimes themselves, then by associating themselves with those who committed them. The participants also, as mentioned in gang desistance studies (e.g., Carson, et al., 2013), said that there were a number of different factors that eventually helped them avoid joining a gang. They strongly credited these experiential gang deterrence factors as helpful in their decision making process.

Nevertheless, there are a few differences between adolescent boys who were only interested in joining a gang and those who left the gang. These differences suggest that, although the two groups were engaging in gang-like behaviours, the length, motivations, and process of rejection of a gang lifestyle was distinctively different between the two groups. These differences, though, still indicate that the experiential gang deterrence factors are benefiting youth. The experiential gang deterrence factors help at-risk adolescent boys to realize that they too can eventually distance themselves from gangs because the factors help to emphasize a youth's real concern with gang violence throughout the youth's prolonged interest and engagement in gang-like activities.

5.3. Can Life-Course Account for Saving Lives?

Desistance from crime is not well understood (Laub & Sampson, 2001) so there are many theories offering explanations of the process of desistance from crime. The perspective that appears to be common in gang literature (credited as valuable in explaining the process of joining, persisting, and desisting from gangs) is the life-course perspective (Decker et al., 2014; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). One of the life-course perspective theories is Sampson and Laub's (1993) *age-graded theory of informal social control*, which states that a person's criminal involvement during a life course can be predicted based on the individual's strength of social bonds to social institutions. Delinquency and desistance from crime is facilitated by the strength of social bonds and can occur during the life course. The social bonds can become turning points as they potentially include marriage, military service, employment, and parenthood (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Although the life-course perspective has been applied to other studies seeking to explain desistance from gangs (e.g., Decker &

Lauritsen, 2002; Pyrooz et al., 2014; Sweeten et al., 2013), there appears to be no studies that would attempt to apply the life-course perspective to the process of making the decision not to enter a gang. Because in this research project I found how a combination of protective and experiential gang deterrence factors played a role in the participant's rejection of a gang lifestyle, there is, nonetheless, a chance that life course processes had an impact on some of the participants. Due to the fact that most of the participants made the decision to reject the gang lifestyle in late adolescence or early adulthood, some of the life course events (e.g., desire for stable employment, sound education, stable romantic relationship, the anticipation of future family) did play a role in their decision making processes. Although similar processes were noted in gang desistance literature (e.g., Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011), the identification of protective factors (although combined with the experiential gang deterrence factors) helped to prevent the participants from entering gangs.

5.4. Suggestions for Adults who Support Adolescent Boys

The findings in this study have many implications for practitioners in the fields of counselling, education, and youth work in terms of guidance for at-risk adolescent boys and interventions in working with them. The participants in this study strongly acknowledged the help of significant people in their lives and indicated their wish for more guidance and mentorship from caring adults. I propose that the recommendations of participants extend beyond professionals and include any caring adults who have the opportunity to aid at-risk adolescent boys.

Although the goal of this research was to identify preventative approaches, the findings highlight how important it is for adults who work with at-risk adolescent boys to be ready to guide these boys through gang-like experiences they are bound to have prior to making the decision not to enter a gang lifestyle. Before I propose examples of focus and direction in gang prevention, I want to highlight Pyrooz's (2013) caution that gang membership is not just a behaviour or an episode in the boy's life, but it is also a status and an identity. I propose that the attraction to the gang needs to be viewed through a similar lens. By adhering to this view, it will be easier for adults working with

at-risk youth to not overlook a young person as one needing support even if he does not, specifically, affiliate himself with a gang. Also, just as desistance from gangs is complex because it involves developmental, psychological, and sociological processes (Laub & Sampson, 2001), there is no one factor that can account for an adolescent boy's decision not to join a gang.

The recommendations informed by my study are pertinent to any adult who interacts with at-risk adolescent boys, including boys who do not appear to be currently showing interest in gangs. These recommendations are structured on both the protective and the experiential gang deterrence factors reflecting the participants' successful processes of rejecting gang lifestyle.

5.4.1. Structuring Support on Protective Factors

The findings of this research show that protective factors such as sense of moral and ethical codes, lower tolerance for deviant peers, presence of pro-social goals, involvement in communal activities, and the desire to gain approval of the family were acting on the participants. Based on these protective factors, the following recommendations might be helpful when structuring support for at-risk adolescent boys to help them resist making the decision to join a gang. These recommendations include: guiding boys in their exploration of moral and ethical codes, and helping boys develop pro-social goals.

Guiding boys in their exploration of moral and ethical codes.

It is recommended that adults working with at-risk adolescent boys are aware of protective factors. The familiarity with protective factors will allow adults to purposefully refer to the ideas represented by these factors when interacting and speaking with adolescent boys. Adults working with youth may not have the ability to impart these factors since most of them have their roots in the boys' childhood, parenting style, and family values, but adults working with at-risk youth, nevertheless, can encourage these youth to reflect upon their own moral and ethical codes. Such conversations and reflections could occur on an ongoing-basis during daily interactions with the youth. For example, during a conversation about the youth's interactions with his friends, the adult

could inquire about the youth's thoughts and feelings as they relate to the activities or choices his friends are making. The adult could then reflect on how the youth's thoughts and feelings about his friends compare to his own moral and ethical codes. To help with this process, the adult could also ask the youth to reflect upon the moral and ethical codes of the youth's family, thus guiding the boy to tap into his own code of morality and allowing it to be brought into consciousness. Once the boy is more conscious of his own values and how they are connected to his family's values, the adult can begin to challenge the boy's decisions beside these values. Decker et al. (2014) suggested that as individuals catch themselves torn between the demands of gang life and the wishes of their families, they are more prone to self-reflection that could push them avoid violence.

Helping boys develop pro-social goals.

A similar strategy can be applied to the adolescent boys' sense of pro-social goals. By exploring their dreams, desires, and goals, adults can help adolescent boys to verbalize and strategize pro-social goals. For example, the adult can explore with the youth his interests in obtaining employment, pursuing further education, or joining a team or a club. Once the youth explores his goals, the adult can then help the youth to strategize what steps need to be taken to attain this goal. During the process of supporting the adolescent boy, the adult has the opportunity to motivate and encourage the boy to stay focused on his goal, as well as help him problem solve and navigate through challenges or disappointments that might arise while pursuing his goals. As adults guide at-risk adolescent boys through this process, this is also a chance for the adults to not dismiss the youth's aspiration for money, prestige, reputation, and a sense of belonging, the objects this study has shown the boys pursue, but to embrace them. Sánchez-Jankowski, (1991) warned that there is a misconception that gang members are lazy; he observed that, instead, they are driven and want to obtain the same benefits of life as anybody else. These benefits (be it physical, emotional, or social) the boys pursue can be incorporated into pro-social goals, and through guidance and support of a caring adult, may aid the boys in experiencing success and meeting their needs and aspirations in socially appropriate ways. The encouragement, development, and sustainment of pro-social goals may also decrease the tolerance for deviant peers and may promote their involvement in communal activities. The access to positive peers and

pro-social activities was also noted by Carson et al. (2013) who proposed that such opportunities may help youth avoid joining a gang.

5.4.2. Structuring Support on Experiential Gang Deterrence Factors

The experiential gang deterrence factors were frequently credited by the participants as helping them stay away from gangs. It is important to note that many of the experiential gang deterrence factors reflected gang-like activities, and through these first-hand experiences with gang-like activities, participants were deterred from further pursuing gangs. This project found that the experiential gang deterrence factors that aid adolescent boys to reject gangs are reflected by violence and include: volatile lifestyle, risk to personal life, threat to the family; by disillusionment with gangs and include: rejection of “toxic” lifestyle, absence of alliance and support, alternate source of acceptance, witnessing gang desistance; by high-risk events; and by the intervention by a meaningful person. Additionally, participants stated that teenage boys would benefit from support offered through knowledgeable preventative education and a targeted approach.

This study also shows that the majority of the experiential gang deterrence factors are related to the categories of individual at the core and community at the core. Minimal evidence is shown for the category of family at the core. In light of the experiential gang deterrence factors that the participants in my study highlighted as helpful for at-risk adolescent boys, I want to propose recommendations for adults working with these boys. These recommendations include three steps: (a) concentrate on building meaningful relationships with the adolescent boys; (b) be open to acknowledge that boys will engage in some gang-like behaviour; and (c) continue to offer knowledgeable and straightforward gang education.

Concentrating on building meaningful relationships.

Establishing meaningful relationships with at-risk adolescent boys is the key to success as it is not just a single, standalone proposition of preventing adolescent boys from joining gangs, but a fundamental first step that allows the other steps that follow it

to be implemented. The meaningful relationship can be built and sustained through the adult's engagement in the boy's life and through shown interest in him as an individual. This is a process that takes time, effort, and a willingness from the adult to become available to the youth. This process may also take different forms depending on the types of relationship and interactions the adult has with the youth (i.e., counsellor, teacher, coach, parent, etc.) The focus and goal of this step is for the adult to continue to build and invest in this relationship. As meaningful relationship builds over time, the youth will be open to discuss the challenges of adolescence including the attraction of a gang. Participants indicated that as adolescent boys, they sought mentorship and guidance from older individuals. They also indicated that punishment (suspension in the case of a school setting) only further isolated boys and pushed them towards risky activities. The presence and access to an adult role model strengthens the boy's social bond and, as proposed by Carson et al. (2013), can also help to avoid gang membership. It is the boy's sense that he is valued and accepted that will encourage him to share his struggles and desires as they relate to a gang lifestyle.

Openness to acknowledge that boys will engage in some gang-like behaviour.

The second step in supporting at-risk adolescent boys through the experiential gang deterrence factors is the adult's openness to acknowledge that at-risk boys will engage in some gang-like behaviour. Throughout the process of establishing relationships with adolescent boys, it is imperative to be open to conversations during which youth may share that they engaged or continue to engage in gang-like behaviours. The goal is not to approve of the behaviours but to recognize that these behaviours have a crucial role in the process of change. As mentioned by the participants in this study and confirmed by gang desistance literature, the aspects of gang violence and disillusionment with the gang both played a central role in deciding not to join a gang. It is important then for the adult to be open to listen and have a non-judgmental approach when the youth is describing his experiences related to gang violence and disillusionment. It may be speculated that when these experiences take place, having an open and honest conversation about the experience with the caring adult might be the most effective gang prevention method. It is during these times when a youth has experienced or witnessed victimization that he is separated from the gang

and more susceptible to reducing his gang involvement (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002). Adults should remember to refrain from judging adolescent boys and thus possibly closing lines of communication. An open and accepting approach may encourage the adolescents to disclose their experiences, including the factors that entice and hold them connected to the gang-like lifestyle, in order to provide an opportunity for self-reflection and guidance.

Continually offering knowledgeable and straightforward gang education.

The last step in the process of supporting at-risk adolescent boys through experiential gang deterrence factors is offering them knowledgeable and straightforward gang education. It is important to keep focused on this step, because irrespective of the thoughts and perceptions adolescent boys may have about gang lifestyle, their information, as pointed by the participants in this study, is often mainly based on pop culture, myths about gangs, and false perceptions of an easy and glamorous gang lifestyle. The participants also explained that gang prevention education directed at them does not work; what works is education directed to them that is provided by knowledgeable individuals capable of engaging them with honest information that addresses their curiosity. It is important for adults working with at-risk youth to be up to date with current gang information, because it will also help to expose the myths about gang lifestyle (Carson et al., 2013). Through education based on honest discussion, adolescent boys may be willing to explore their curiosities, doubts, and concerns knowing that their opinions are just as valid as that of the adult who is presenting this information to them.

5.4.3. The Role of the Family in Gang Prevention

Although some research (e.g., Decker, et al., 2014) has noted a strong influence of the family as a gang desistance factor, the current study has found very minimal support for the role of family within the experiential gang deterrence factors. Within experiential gang deterrence factors categories, threat to the family is the only subcategory in the family at the core category. The only other time a family member is mentioned is as a wish list item in the subcategory personal guidance and mentorship, where some participants mentioned that they would have liked the physical and

emotional presence of their fathers to guide them. One possible explanation for this apparent lack of family in experiential gang deterrence factors may be the fact that since the participants in this study were non-gang entrenched, their interest in gangs and some gang-like behaviour might have not been noticed by their families. This possibility, and the fact that girlfriends and teachers were credited with intervening in the boys' lives, might suggest that frequently the process of rejecting gangs occurs outside of home and family. This observation, although on a limited number of participants, nevertheless should strengthen the effort of the community to incorporate the findings of this research. The efforts of the community should not eliminate the efforts families can take to protect their adolescent boys from joining gangs, but can act as the first line of defence, since it appears that at-risk adolescent boys are more inclined to turn to their community for help. Families, together with the community, can aim to strengthen their efforts at implementing the steps recommended by this research to help adolescent boys reject gangs.

Additionally, families can play a significant role during a boy's childhood and pre-to early-adolescence. During these times, when the moral and ethical codes are formulated and attachment to the family continues to be significant, the protective factors can be fostered and strengthened.

5.4.4. Summary of Suggestions

Similarly to crime and gang desistance literature, which suggests a combination of factors that eventually lead to the rejection of a criminal lifestyle (Decker et al., 2014; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Laub & Sampson, 2001), this research also recommends that multiple aspects in gang prevention should be utilized to help at-risk adolescent boys. Adults who support adolescent boys can incorporate recommended approaches related to both types of factors, the protective factors and the experiential gang deterrence factors. The protective factors can be strengthened through guiding boys in their exploration of moral and ethical codes and helping boys develop pro-social goals. And the experiential gang deterrence factors can be incorporated by following these three steps: (a) concentrating on building meaningful relationships with the adolescent boys; (b) being open to acknowledge that boys will engage in some gang-like behaviour; and

(c) continuing to offer knowledgeable and straightforward gang education. Such an holistic approach will help tap into the boys' social, emotional, and psychological domains.

5.5. Limitations of the Study

The strength of this study is also the limitation. The study explored gang preventative measures and found support for some protective factors. Unfortunately, the literature on protective factors suffers from the limited knowledge of existing protective factors (Howell, 2010) and the inconsistency of the literature in defining what protective factors are (Howell & Egley, 2005). With the limited body of knowledge related to gang protective factors, this research explored a unique group of young adults who were interested in joining a gang and either contemplated or began to engage in a gang lifestyle yet ultimately decided against it. From an extensive review of the literature, no other such group of individuals has been explored. Therefore, the findings of this research could not be directly compared to existing studies. The closest comparable research focuses on crime and gang desistance; consequently, I used the findings from crime and gang desistance research to compare and contrast the findings of this study. Although I took all precautions to address the above noted challenges with establishing the definition of a protective factor, with the limited knowledge and availability of protective factor literature and with the lack of comparable gang deterrence literature, the comparison is limited.

Another limitation of this study relates to the sensitive topic this study focused on. All of the participants in this study expressed a concern with making sure that their identities remain confidential. Some prospective participants chose not to participate out of the concern of exposing some experiences of an illicit nature. Due to these reasons, the limitation of this study is the limited number of participants who took part in it, which although meets the ECIT method's requirement for validity, limits the generalizability of the findings.

5.6. Directions of Future Studies

The research into gang protective and deterrence factors should continue and expand, as adolescence, apart from being a challenging time for the formation of identity (Erickson, 1950, 1968), also introduces opportunities for boys to explore and satisfy their desires, aspirations, and interests which include gang life. Although gang desistance is almost inevitable (Carson et al., 2013), some youth do pay the ultimate price for joining a gang – their own lives. I propose the following suggestions for future studies: explore the conclusions of this study with an adolescent population by implementing and testing the recommended steps for working with at-risk adolescent boys and explore if the youth's reluctance to acknowledge association with gangs can improve the gang deterrence process.

The findings of this research explored some new possibilities in viewing gang prevention efforts. Instead of solemnly focusing on the protective factors, my study offers the recommendation that it is through a combination of protective factors and experiential gang deterrence factors rooted in gang-like behaviours that adolescent boys decide not to join gangs. Based on this finding, I propose that future research focus on exploring this observation with younger age groups. In my professional employment, I have already heard 17-year-old boys share similar experiences. It would be beneficial to test the conclusions of this research to see if there is an age barrier that would prevent at-risk adolescent boys from even having to experience any gang-like behaviours before making the decision to reject gang lifestyle.

Another focus of gang prevention and deterrence study could attempt to validate the recommendations of this research, specifically the three steps of working with at-risk adolescent boys: (a) concentrate on building meaningful relationships with the adolescent boys; (b) be open to acknowledge that boys will engage in some gang-like behaviour; and (c) continue to offer knowledgeable and straightforward gang education. In this study, the support of community based programs or institutions has not been credited in helping at-risk adolescent boys make the decision to reject a gang lifestyle, although in other studies the church was viewed as helpful in transitioning out of a gang (Decker et al., 2014). My study showed a limited indication that school was a source of

support, but it was the teachers, not the institution, that was credited as influential by the participants. Future research could attempt to validate if following the implementation of the three steps by community and institutional organizations, there will be an increase in the recognition of support of these institutions.

A future study could also focus on the adults who support at-risk adolescent boys, especially boys drawn to the gang lifestyle. It might be speculated that most professionals in the fields of teaching, counselling, youth work, probation, and social work, to name a few, although are most often involved in dealing with at-risk youth on on-going bases, do not have personal experiences of having to reject a gang lifestyle. One of the concerns the participants in this study shared is that the adults who either try to talk to the youth or intervene in the youth's lives to prevent the youth from joining a gang do not sound trustworthy because they lack the knowledge of gang life. It would be then interesting to conduct a study to test if a prevention and deterrence program offered to at-risk adolescent boys by reformed ex-gang members would be more successful and speedy.

The last suggestion is to explore if the youth's reluctance to acknowledge association with gangs can improve the gang deterrence process. This study found that at-risk youth who engaged in gang-like behaviour resisted self-identifying themselves as gang members. It could be speculated that such resistance could have improved the process of rejection of a gang lifestyle via a cognitive and psychological refusal to acknowledge any self-identification with a gang. A future study could test this hypothesis.

5.7. Conclusion

Our understanding of gang desistance has suffered from limited research (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Sweeten et al., 2013) and has only gained some growth in the recent years (Carson et al., 2013). Additionally, the literature focusing on gang protective factors continues to be inconsistent (Howell & Egley, 2005) and limited (Howell, 2010). My interest in the topic of gang desistance has been motivated, not by the limited academic knowledge, but by

personal experiences of watching adolescent boys join gangs, face the consequences of the gang lifestyle, and even pay the ultimate price – the loss of life. This research has been able to extend the body of knowledge on gang prevention and deterrence factors by understanding more about specific turning points that influence desistance for youth facing life-changing decisions at such a young age.

Just as there are multiple factors that attract adolescents to gangs (Decker & Curry, 2000), this research has shown how multiple factors are at play when it comes to making the decision to reject a gang lifestyle. Two groups of factors affect the adolescent boys during their decision making endeavour - the protective factors and the experiential gang deterrence factors. As a result of this observation, the suggestions of this research are only a few, but they incorporate succinctly the experiences, the warnings, and the hopes of the participants in an effort to aid current and future adolescent boys to be more successfully supported to not fall into the gang lifestyle. First, adults who work with at-risk adolescent boys can strengthen the protective factors by guiding boys in their exploration of moral and ethical codes and helping boys develop pro-social goals. Second, adults can incorporate the suggested three steps: (a) concentrate on building meaningful relationships with the adolescent boys; (b) be open to acknowledge that boys will engage in some gang-like behaviour; and (c) continue to offer knowledgeable and straightforward gang education in their gang preventative work with adolescent boys. Lastly, as leaving a gang is a process (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Sweeten et al., 2013), so is the rejection of the gang lifestyle. Adults need to remember that their continued commitment to provide a presence and support alongside a struggling and curious adolescent boy may produce the ultimate success – a saved life.

I started this research project disappointed by what seemed as my limited ability to intervene and stop adolescent boys from joining gangs right in front of my eyes. Through the stories, I learned that they too were experiencing similar frustrations, as one of them exclaimed, “. . . what was I doing?! . . . I kind of wasted my life. I could have done something better.” The potential remedy for this frustration may be in the open and honest conversation between a caring adult and the adolescent boy, acknowledgment of the curiosity and attraction to gangs the boy might be experiencing, and the exploration

of the fears and risks a gang lifestyle holds for those who choose it. Counsellors, teachers, youth workers, parents, and friends who assist youth in the desistance process (at times, a murky process) can unknowingly save a life.

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Appendix A.

Interview Guide

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Unknowingly Saving Lives: Enhanced Critical Incident Analysis of Gang Entry Prevention
Study number: 2014s0421

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for meeting with me. I am interested in learning from you what helped you to make the decision not to join a gang. As you hear this question, I want you to think of all the possible different reasons that influenced you, or happened to you, and stopped you from possibly joining a gang. I also want you to know that there is no specific answer I am looking for, but instead, I want to hear about your experiences and learn from them.

This interview will have three parts. During the first part I will ask you to tell me what was it like for you when you were growing up. What thoughts and experiences you had about gangs? Then, in the second part, I will ask about the experiences or events which happened during that time, and which became the turning points in your life. What was it about these experiences or the people in your life that helped you make the decision not to join a gang. I will also ask you about any factors, which made it difficult to make the decision not to join a gang. Finally, in the last part, I will ask you about any things you wish did exist, or you had access to which would have helped you in making the decision not to join a gang.

As a last note, please keep in mind that even though very specific and detailed examples of the turning point events in your life will help me to better understand what influenced your decision not to join a gang, at the same time, some memories may bring painful feelings. If during the interview you experience pain, anger, disappointment, or any other feeling that you think will make it difficult for you to continue the interview, please let me know, so that we can stop the interview and decide how to proceed further.

Before we begin, do you have any questions about the interview?

PHASE ONE

Describe to me what were you like when you were a teenager. For example, did you do well in school, did you get into trouble, were you into sports, and how did you spend your free time?

What were your thoughts and/or experiences with gangs, or any group of youth who were like a gang, and were getting into trouble?

PHASE TWO

We will now focus on the turning points in your life.

When you think back to your experiences during the time you just described, what factors influenced your decision not to join a gang? When you hear the word factors, think of what

specific events, people, beliefs you hold, things you did, or anything you think was significant, helped you to turn away from possibly joining a gang?

Tell me exactly what was it about ...(the factor the participant mentioned) ... that helped you make the decision not to join a gang?

OR: Can you tell me exactly how ... (the factor the participant mentioned) ... helped you make the decision not to join a gang?

Is there anything else that helped you not to join a gang?

Now we will talk about things that made it difficult to make the decision not to join a gang.

As you think back, what were the factors, again considering people, events, or any things that were influencing you, which made it difficult to make the decision not to join a gang?

Tell me exactly what was it about ...(the factor the participant mentioned) ... that made it difficult to make the decision not to join a gang?

Is there anything else that made it difficult for you to make the decision not to join a gang?

PHASE THREE

This is the last part of the interview, the wish list. Can you tell me about any factors you wish, for example, existed, you had access to, happened to you, you possessed, that you think would make it easier for you to make the decision not to join a gang?

CLOSING

Is there anything else you would like to share with me that you think is important for me to know about your experience in deciding not to join a gang?

In a moment I will ask you for some demographic data, which you can choose to provide. Now, I want to thank you for participating in this study and deciding to share with me your experiences and your thoughts. In a few months, I will contact you to verify with you if I was able to report correctly what you just shared with me. In the mean time, please remember that you can always contact my supervising professor or me if you have any questions.

IN CASE OF PARTICIPANT NEEDING OR WANTING FURTHER COUNSELLING SUPPORT

Surrey SFU Counselling Centre: 604-587-7320

New Westminster UBC Counselling Centre: 604-525-6651

Pacific Community Resources Community Clinic: 604-592-6200

Crisis line: 604-951-8855

Appendix B.

Interview Log

INTERVIEW LOG

Participant	Interview Date	Helping Critical Incidents		Hindering Critical Incidents		Wish List	
		Present	New	Present	New	Present	New
1	Oct. 20, 2014	9	9	2	2	2	2
2	Oct. 27, 2014	7	2	3	1	2	2
3	Oct. 28, 2014	7	1	2	0	2	0
4	Nov. 3, 2014	7	2	3	3	1	1
5	Nov. 3, 2014	8	0	2	0	1	0
6	Nov. 13, 2014	8	0	1	0	4	0
7	Nov. 25, 2014	9	0	1	0	1	0
8	Dec. 18, 2014	5	0	1	0	2	0

Appendix C.

Recruitment Letter to Professionals

CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

DID YOU FEEL DRAWN TO JOIN A GANG IN YOUR YOUTH AND CHANGED YOUR MIND?

If you did, researchers at Simon Fraser University are looking for male volunteers to speak about their experiences of what helped and what hindered the decision of not joining a gang.

GOAL

We hope to learn from young adults who, during adolescence, were either considering joining a gang or were starting to get involved in a gang like behaviour. You can teach us about the factors that influenced you to make the decision not to join a gang. What were the specific turning points (such as people, events, experiences) that helped or hindered you?

PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANTS

For this study we are inviting participants who:

- are male;
- are currently between 19 years and 30 years of age;
- will identify themselves as individuals who, as a youth, were interested in joining or were beginning to interact with a gang;
- have made a decision **not** to join a gang;
- would be willing to participate in a one time 1.5 – 2 hour interview **that will provide them with the opportunity to share their experiences.**

DO YOU KNOW SOMEONE ELSE WHO MIGHT PARTICIPATE?

If you know of any young male adult who meets the above criteria, please contact him and let him know about this study.

I CAN THINK OF SOMEONE, WHAT DO I NEED TO DO NOW?

Please contact him and let him know about the study to see if he is willing to participate or has questions we can answer. He can contact us directly or you can contact us with his permission. If he allows you to provide us with his contact information, then please ask for his email or phone number and we will contact him.

WHAT IF I STILL HAVE QUESTIONS FOR YOU?

Please email the Principle Investigator, Damian Dym, at [REDACTED] or call Damian at [REDACTED] with any questions or interest in participating.

Thank you

Appendix D.

Recruitment Letter to Participants

LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

Unknowingly Saving Lives: Enhanced Critical Incident Analysis of Gang Entry Prevention

Study number: 2014s0421

My name is Damian Dym and I am a graduate student at Simon Fraser University working on an important study about what factors prevent male youth from becoming gang members. You are being contacted as someone whose experience may be very valuable in this study.

With your help, I want to learn what supports can be offered to teenage boys to prevent them from joining gangs. What you will share with me will become a part of a study where other young males like yourself are providing their own stories about their decision not to join a gang. Your experiences will help teach counsellors, youth workers, and teachers about what you found important in helping teenage boys from getting involved in gangs. Such information is currently very limited and your own experiences could help stop other young boys from making the mistake of getting involved in gangs.

CAN I HELP?

If you are a male, between the ages of 19 years to 30 years, and were considering joining a gang, or were getting involved in a gang like behaviour, you can help. If this sounds like you as a teenager, then I would really appreciate your help.

WHAT WILL I NEED TO DO?

You will be helping by agreeing to a 1.5 – 2 hour interview with me. During this interview, I will ask you questions about your thoughts and experiences and how they relate to you making a decision not to join a gang.

Your personal information will be kept confidential, meaning that your name will not be recorded or included in this study. Following the interview, held at SFU or another location of your choice, I will contact you one more time, either through email or phone, to ask you to verify if what I learned from you is correct.

HOW CAN I CONTACT YOU?

You can contact me directly through email [REDACTED] or phone [REDACTED] if you have any questions or if you are interested in participating in the study. If you received this letter through somebody else asking for your help on my behalf, you can either provide your contact information to that person, so he/she can forward it to me, or you can contact me directly.

Thank you very much for considering to volunteer for this study.
Damian Dym

Appendix E.

Participant Interview Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Unknowingly Saving Lives: Enhanced Critical Incident Analysis of Gang Entry Prevention
Study number: 2014s0421

WHO IS CONDUCTING THE STUDY?

Principal Investigator: Damian Dym, MA Student
Faculty of Education, SFU
Email: [REDACTED], Tel: [REDACTED]

Co-Investigator: Dr. Patrice Keats, Associate Professor
Faculty of Education, SFU
Email: [REDACTED], Tel: [REDACTED]

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

I am interested in learning how to help prevent teenage boys from joining gangs. In this study I want to talk to now young men, who as teenagers were considering possibly joining a gang, or were starting to become involved in a troublesome youth group. By talking to these men I want to learn:

- What factors helped them to make the decision **not** to join a gang?
- What factors made it difficult to make the decision **not** to join a gang?
- What factors they wish existed when they made the decision **not** to join a gang?

Your participation in this study is appreciated, but is voluntary. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to participate, you may still choose to withdraw from this study at any time without any consequences.

WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY?

By agreeing to participate in this study you agree to speaking with me for a 1.5 to 2 hour interview during which time I will ask you about your experience as a teenager in relation to gangs. I will ask you to describe to me what affected you as a teenager not to join a gang. At the end of the interview I will ask you to provide some demographic information including age, cultural/ethnic background. This interview will take place either at SFU or at another private location of your choice.

Up to three months after the interview, I will contact you, depending on your preference, either over the phone or through email. During that time you will have a chance to review the results that your interview added to the study.

For the purpose of this study, I will audio record only the first interview. In order to keep your information confidential the recording will only be used to generate a transcript. The recording will be kept on a computer which is password protected. Only my co-investigator and I will be able to listen to the recording. After this study is completed, by April 2015, the recording will be deleted. Participation in this study is completely voluntary, there is no financial nor other compensation for your participation.

IS THERE ANYTHING NEGATIVE ABOUT PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

Although you will tell me about positive choices you made as a teenager, some of the reasons why you made these choices might have not been so positive. By sharing your stories, you may possibly experience some negative or painful memories. If that was to happen, remember that you do not have to share anything that may cause you discomfort. You can also take time for a break or stop the interview. I am a trained counsellor, so I will support you through this interview by paying attention to your words and reactions and I will respond accordingly. I will also provide you with information on getting further psychological support if you wish to do so.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

By participating in this study your personal successes will be used to help educators, counsellors, and others who work with teenagers to be better informed about gang prevention. What worked for you may be the type of information that is needed to help to prevent other young boys from joining a gang.

HOW WILL YOUR IDENTITY BE PROTECTED?

You and any information about your identity will be confidential. All documents will identify you only by a pseudonym, meaning that your name will never be recorded on any document outside of this consent form. Further, the audio recording and any documents related to this study will be kept on a password protected computer and in a locked cabinet. Finally, any published document disseminating the findings of this study will not include any participants' names.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN AFTER THIS INTERVIEW?

Following this interview, I will contact you one more time to ask you to let me know if what I learned from you is correct. Below, you will let me know how you want me to contact you. The information provided by you will be combined with the information from other participants in this study to form a thesis. If you are interested, you will also have a chance to learn the results of this study.

WHO CAN YOU CONTACT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?

If you will have any questions or need any additional information, you can contact Damian Dym: [REDACTED], or [REDACTED], or Dr. Patrice Keats: [REDACTED], or [REDACTED].

WHO CAN YOU CONTACT IF YOU HAVE A COMPLAINT OR CONCERN ABOUT THE STUDY?

If you have any concerns about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, you may contact Dr. Jeffrey Toward, Director, Office of Research Ethics: [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY.

Taking part in this study is entirely up to you. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to take part, you may choose to pull out of the study at any time without giving a reason and without any negative impact.

- Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.
- Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

Participant Signature

Date (yyyy/mm/dd)

Printed Name of the Participant signing above

For the follow up interview, I prefer to be contacted by : phone email.

My phone or email: _____

I would like to be contacted to receive the results of this study: yes no.

NOTE: Telephone and email are not a secure means of communication; therefore confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

IF YOU REQUIRE FURTHER COUNSELLING SUPPORT

Surrey SFU Counselling Centre: 604-587-7320
New Westminster UBC Counselling Centre: 604-525-6651
Pacific Community Resources Community Clinic: 604-592-6200
Crisis line: 604-951-8855

Appendix F.

Demographic Data Questionnaire

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Unknowingly Saving Lives: Enhanced Critical Incident Analysis of Gang Entry Prevention
Study number: 2014s0421

ALL QUESTIONS ARE OPTIONAL

Age:

Ethnic background:

Country of birth:

Level of education completed:

Currently: employed/ studying/ neither employed nor studying: