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Barriers to Leaving the Gang: An Exploratory Analysis

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Background and Context of Research

Gangs are not a new phenomenon; however their increasing presence in Canada has generated concern (Criminal Intelligence Service Saskatchewan, 2005). Winnipeg has acquired a reputation for being one of Canada's gang capitals, along with Edmonton, Saskatoon, Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal. Across Canada there are an estimated 7,000 gang members, with an estimated 434 youth gangs established (Public Safety Canada, 2007). Despite the efforts of criminal justice agencies to combat it, gangs have continued to grow over the past 20 years in provinces such as Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, (Goff, 2005). Statistics Canada reports that gang-related homicides have generally been increasing since the early 1990s, with one in five 5 homicides being gang-related in 2009 (Beattie and Cotter, 2010). Over-representation of Aboriginals in Canadian prisons has been well established, particularly on the Prairies (Nafehk 2004; Grekul, LaBoucane-Benson and Erickson, 2009). Aboriginal gangs such as the Manitoba Warriors, the Indian Posse, and the Native Syndicate, pose an increasing problem specifically in urban centres such as Winnipeg, Manitoba. With Aboriginal gang numbers highest in the Canadian Prairies, it is important to develop a more thorough understanding of their process of gang membership and how it is subjectively experienced by the individuals themselves. Most of the gang research to date has been concerned with the risk factors that lead to

gang membership, the victimization of gang members and has focused predominantly on gangs in the United States (Taylor, 2008; Taylor, Freng, Esbensen, and Peterson, 2008). It is important to expand our understanding of not only gang activities, but also of the possible exit strategies available to gang members.

The crime desistance literature has stressed the need to focus on within-individual changes that occur during the desistance process, rather than focusing solely on between-individual comparisons (Farrington, 2007; Kazemian, 2007; Savolainen, 2009). Typically, studies have examined the impact of factors such as employment, family, and social exclusion on arrest, conviction, and incarceration. It has been suggested that researchers must place more emphasis on what these factors mean to the individual (Gadd and Farrall, 2004; Massoglia and Uggen, 2007). Despite these recommendations, research addressing crime desistance remains relatively limited, and research specifically addressing gang desistance and gang exit strategies is notably absent. The current study attempts to partially address this gap in the literature by examining specifically gang desistance while considering individuals' subjective experiences throughout the desistance process.

Literature Review

Crime desistance literature has portrayed desistance as a process rather than a single event or end point (Kazemian, 2007). Research has identified the success of a multi-modal approach to desistance, which includes therapeutic relationships with probation officers, pro-social modelling, positive reinforcement of non-criminal behaviour and attitudes, self-efficacy, and social support during the post-release reintegration process (Burnett and McNeill, 2005; Gunnison and Mazerolle, 2007; Kazemian, 2007). The strength of this approach lies in its ability to meet diverse offender needs. However, research has found that more serious offenders are less impacted by such attempts at social control and deterrence (Gunnison and Mazerolle, 2007).

The extant literature provides few studies that explore gang desistance, and those that do exist are primarily American. Two possible routes of desistance have been identified; for some desistance includes quitting the gang abruptly and entirely, while for others it is a gradual process of drifting away from the group (Decker and Lauitsen, 2002; Pyrooz, Decker, and Webb 2010). Previous interviews with American gang members and ex-gang members have revealed that it is not uncommon for young adults to "fade out" of gang activity after an average of one year (Del Carmen et al., 2009; Taylor, 2008). It is not known if this trend is similarly found in Canadian gangs. For those considering leaving the gang either in drastic or prolonged fashion, what sorts of circumstances discourage this? Unfortunately, very little research has been done examining the barriers to exiting a gang (Kazemian, 2007). Pyrooz and colleagues use the life-course perspective to theorize that individuals who gradually leave the gang find themselves in a gray area, where transitioning into a different lifestyle is hampered by the social and emotional ties to their friends and family who are still involved in the gang. True or total desistance is difficult.

In Winnipeg, many gang members are completely surrounded by family and individuals in their neighbourhoods who retain their gang allegiance. Is it possible for these individuals to safely 'leave' the gang? This brings up the distinction between primary and secondary desistance that has been made in the desistance literature (Burnett and McNeill, 2005). Primary desistance refers to the achievement of an offence-free period, whereas secondary desistance refers to an underlying change in identity and the acceptance of an ex-offender label by the individual. Conceptually, researchers need to weigh the issues of identifying a state or condition of desistance; does such a state prevent lingering ties to the gang? Such ties might include seemingly innocuous relations such as any "hanging out," playing sports, watching television with a cousin (who is a gang member), to more serious activities such as drinking alcohol and doing illicit drugs (Pyrooz, et al., 2010).

Some research exists that suggests that there may be different exit strategies. Some members are beaten out of the gang, called "taking your minutes" or "getting a d-board", while others must commit a crime for the gang (Taylor, 2008; Taylor, Freng, Esbensen, and Peterson, 2008). Some avenues consist of exploring traditional Aboriginal culture, referred to as "taking the Red Road" (Nimmo, 2001). A community based program in Winnipeg's North End, Ogijita Pimatiswin Kinamatwin (OPK), employs Aboriginal street gang members, focusing on skill building and employment in skilled trades such as carpentry for gang members. Gang members involved with OPK do not renounce membership but try to redirect their gang activities into spiritual and cultural healing, as well as the work and training aspects of the program (Bracken, Deane, and Morrissette, 2009; Deane, Bracken and Morrissette, 2007).

Manitoba Corrections and the GRASP Program

Manitoba has initiated a number of programs in an attempt to manage gangs, including Spotlight for youth gangs (Weinrath, Donatelli, Murchison, and Cattini, 2009), the Good Life (Minobimasdiziwin) adult prison gang program (Weinrath, Murchison, and Markesteyn, 2009) and the Criminal Organization High Risk Offender Unit (COHROU) (Circular Manitoba Justice, n.d., Weinrath and Doerksen 2011). The Winnipeg Auto Theft Suppression Strategy (WATTS) has targeted young offenders, many of whom are gang members, and it has resulted in a huge decrease in auto theft (MPI, 2011). The Gang Response and Suppression Plan (GRASP) program is modelled after the Spotlight and WATTS programs, in that it targets high risk gang members, involves intensive probation supervision, probation counselling, and provides client specific community programming and rehabilitation services (LaFontaine, 2010). While Spotlight and WATTS focus on young offenders, GRASP targets adult offenders and mimics the multi-modal approach previously outlined. By multi-modal, we refer to the use of a varied set of strategies to promote behaviour change.

The GRASP program is focused on a high risk group of which we know little: Prairie gang members, most of whom are Indigenous Canadians. The current research seeks to address the lack of research by examining barriers to leaving a gang. We used interviews conducted with GRASP offenders to investigate the challenges that gang members face when trying to leave the gang. From a policy perspective, we also inquired as to what probation services or other justice agencies can do to facilitate the exit process. A better understanding of the barriers faced by gang members would enable justice agencies to develop strategies to help them successfully desist from gangs and crime. The current research also has the potential to inform policy aimed at improving the reintegration process for gang members contemplating an exit from their gang. This study also seeks to address two gaps in the research by examining the desistance process from gangs specifically, as well as by adding to the sparse literature concerning Canadian gangs.

Methodology
Procedure

This research is qualitative and exploratory in nature, using in-depth interviews as the main source of data. The procedure was approved by The University of Winnipeg Institutional Ethics Review Board. Interviews with active GRASP members took place at the Adult Probation Services COHROU (Criminal Organization High Risk Offenders Unit) office. Interviews with GRASP members that have returned to custody took place at the Winnipeg Remand Centre. Participants were greeted by the interviewer who provided them with an informed consent to sign, as well as a copy of the debriefing statement, which outlined the purpose of the research and the intended use of the data, and a copy of the interview questions (these item may be obtained by contacting the authors). Participants were informed that they were not required to answer any questions they did not feel comfortable answering, that they could chose to end the interview at any point without repercussions, and that their answers would

be kept confidential and anonymous. An audio-recorder was used to tape-record the interviews. Participants were encouraged to elaborate freely and to explain or clarify where necessary.

Although confidentiality and anonymity were ensured, participants were informed prior to interviews that any information divulged on their behalf regarding child abuse, homicide, or suicide must be reported. Participants were advised that the results of the study would be made available to them should they so wish.

The current research was delayed by some unforeseen challenges. Some participants had returned to custody and had to be interviewed at the Winnipeg Remand Centre. To gain access to the specific population the researcher had to undergo security clearance by the Manitoba Department of Justice. This was a drawn out process beset with obstacles and significantly delayed the start of the interviews. However, interviews that took place in the community brought with them some unique challenges. The voluntary nature of the research resulted in many appointments being made to conduct interviews that were ultimately fruitless.

Participants

Participants consisted of 8 individuals who are currently members of GRASP category A (actively participating in the program). Participants were entirely male between the ages of 18 and 27 years. Seven of eight were Aboriginal and the other was a visible minority. Four individuals were interviewed out in the community at their probation officer's office, and the remaining participants were interviewed at the Winnipeg Remand Centre.

Limitations

This study was exploratory in nature. Findings reflect the experiences and opinions of a small group of gang offenders with unique histories, who are involved in a program

with a strong emphasis on surveillance. While interview methods do provide rich detail and subjective accounts, our small sample warrants caution when generalizing (Massoglia and Uggen, 2007). Another limitation to the current research is the reliance on the self-report of offenders. While participants were more than willing to share their gang exit experiences, it is difficult to confirm that those who claim to have left a gang have actually done so. As with any desistance research, it is impossible to be sure these individuals actually left the gang or merely have eluded the police's detection (Gadd and Farrall, 2004).

Results

Interviews were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Brown 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967) in which participants' responses are constantly compared with others' responses to determine themes or trends in statements. The main purpose of this research was to explore the issues faced by gang members in Manitoba when they exit a gang. This research was intended to address a gap in the existing desistance literature by examining gang-specific desistance, and further to address Canadian gang desistance issues. Participants answered the interview questions based on their personal experience with exiting a gang. Most participants had first-hand experience of leaving a gang. Some had left and remained out of the gang, while others had left but had since joined another gang. Although there was one participant who had never left his gang, he answered questions based on his perception of his friends' experiences of leaving a gang. The following sections will outline themes and trends from subject responses, using quotes from the interviews to highlight the issues from perspectives of the participants, and giving voice to gang members themselves.

The length of time spent contemplating leaving the gang

The question posed to participants was "How long had you thought about leaving your gang before you actually left?"

Responses from the majority ranged from a relatively brief period of 6 months to a lengthy 5 years. Most participants indicated that they had contemplated leaving for a significant period of time before acting on the idea. Even those participants who considered leaving for a short period still indicated that they had put serious thought into the decision.

> I thought about it 'cause I was in the hole for a bit. When you're in the hole you got a lot of time to think, you know, you're locked up 23 and a half hours a day in your cell, nothing to do. I thought about it for a couple weeks.

For most, wanting to exit the gang does not easily translate into physically leaving. Decker and Lauitsen (2002) describe the pathway out of the gang as a gradual departure. Furthermore, for some participants this was not their first time exiting, or attempting to exit, the gang. More than half the participants reported having left gangs in the past, but had fallen back in with the same gang or a new one. The on-and-off again membership of these individuals shows primary desistance: the achievement of an offence-free period, or in this case, a period of no membership (Burnett and McNeill, 2005). The fact that so many of the participants have left and returned to gangs demonstrates the difficulty of accomplishing secondary desistance from a gang. Pyrooz and colleagues (2010) suggested a life-course perspective of desistance which depicts gang desistance as a process rather than a single act. The lengthy periods of contemplation coupled with the in-and-out pattern of gang membership underscores the procedural nature desistance can take on.

Unlike the majority, one participant expressed that his decision to leave his gang was a sudden one and that he acted on it quickly.

> Uh well, very short period I guess, I just thought of it and it happened shortly after I guess. Probably with all three gangs, very short, abruptly came to an end (….) Nothing really made it hard to leave, right, you just leave.

Although for this subject leaving the gang was a straight-forward endeavour, the majority of participants found it was a much more thought-out process. It should be noted, however, that other investigators have found that some individuals take a more sudden approach to leaving the gang (Pyrooz, Decker and Webb, 2010).

Pivotal life events

Given the time spent contemplating leaving the gang, we were interested to know what eventually motivated them to transition from thought to action. Participants were asked to discuss any significant events that may have acted as a pivotal point in making the decision to leave. Most participants identified a turning point, or a personally significant event that motivated them to act on their previous thoughts of leaving. For some, this event was violence-related and prompted by the behaviour of others around them.

> The way they're treating their own people… telling them to go beat some guy for nothing (….) I seen too much violence and I was thinking this is not how it's supposed to be. They're like robbing each other.

For another individual, the violence was aimed at those who were close to him.

> I thought about it for a couple weeks [while in jail], 'cause those guys were doing stuff on the streets to my friends and that. It was pissing me off (….) They were like jacking them and shit, and they know that they're my brothers. They were just pulling some really messed up stuff on the streets. They jacked my brother (….) They kept telling me if I keep talking about it I'm gonna get punched out.

These participants expressed that the violence they had experienced within the gang ran contrary to the reasons they had originally joined, such as friendship and support. After much consideration, they realized that what they had originally sought in gang membership was either no longer there

or was being overshadowed by the violence. This realization acted as their pivotal point. This mimics findings from previous research that once an individual accepts that the gang's identity no longer complements them as an individual, they are more likely to act on previous thoughts of leaving the gang (Decker and Lauritsen, 2002; Vigil, 1988).

Along similar lines, two other participants expressed that for them, it was the politics of the gang that were interfering and overshadowing more appealing aspects of gang membership.

> No violence, no. There's probably, out of the three gangs I left there's probably two events towards the end that made me leave (…) one was over drugs and the other was over just some in jail politic-type stuff I wasn't really too happy with and, uh, that was that.

> It's about respect and loyalty. I'm sick of the bull, and the politics. The politics now is different. Four years ago it was the shit, it was good. It was all about making money and respect, right (….) They gain the position of power and then they start acting stupidly.

Both these participants expressed that it had been comaraderie that initially attracted them to the gang. For them, the politics were detracting from the camaraderie and rendering the gang less appealing.

For the remaining participants their turning points were internally motivated. One was brought on by a personal achievement that held great significance to him.

> When I graduated [from high school]. None of my family members have ever graduated before, I was the first. And maybe I can maybe help my sister or help my brother change their life too (….) I just kind of wanna look at myself like as a working person and somebody that can be supportive to other people, like my girlfriend and my godchild.

This individual was motivated by his high school graduation to leave the gang and change the way himself and others per-

ceive him. Two other participants also alluded to a desire to better themselves as the turning point that finally made them leave the gang. One individual showed particular insight when he expressed that the way he was looked at by others had harmed the way he perceived himself.

> I changed myself 'cause I think one day when I asked myself what I'm doing, why I'm involving myself with people that are going somewhere that is not ok to be there, you know, while I could be doing something, proving to people that, you know, I'm a great person, you know. While I'm doing all this stuff I'm not great, you know. I'm making other people have fear, I'm giving them fear. So how can I think about other people and think about myself? So I'll pull myself out and then gotta do the best I can and do it to impress other people, my family (…) try to impress them so they can talk good about me. 'Cause when you look back nobody say hi to you, you know. They scared of you, you know (…) As a person you gotta feel good for yourself.

Another participant claimed that a desire to be a better father had motivated him to leave the gang. He himself had never had a father figure in his life and he wanted his children to be able to turn to him and rely on him. This awareness and concern for others' perceptions may come as a surprise from a group of individuals who are perceived to not care what others think of them. Curiously, on the one hand sensitivity to the approval of others is an external motivator, but only at such time as an individual internally decides to care about the opinions of the community at large.

Other findings from the current research do not align with findings from previous studies. Laub and Sampson (1993) found that structural turning points, such as employment, marriage, or parenthood, are the primary influences that act as turning points. However, in the current sample this was the case for only 2 participants. The participant who had recently graduated from high school and the participant who

wished to be a better father were motivated by structural changes in their lives to finally leave the gang. Others have suggested that research must consider what these structural turning points mean to the individual in order to appreciate their subjective importance in the desistance process (Savolainen, 2009). The majority of participants in the current study, however, did not allocate great importance to such structural issues.

Autonomy in decision-making

A number of participants brought up the issue of autonomy when discussing their decision to leave the gang. All but two participants reported having family members or close friends try to convince them to stay out of gangs. For some, these attempts persisted throughout their gang membership. It stands to reason that the pleas of those close to them had some impact on their decision to leave the gang. However, half the participants reported that this was not the case. Although not directly asked whether or not they made the decision to leave autonomously, half of the participants mentioned that the decision was one they had made on their own, of their own free will, and for their own reasons.

> It was my own decision in my own head (….) Nobody can convince you, nobody who wants you to do it except yourself.

> I had to make my own decision to leave, whatever I gotta do I gotta do myself. I not trying to tell nobody, 'Hey, I'm gonna leave this, I'm gonna leave that.' Because I make my own decision in the first place and I do my own decision by getting anywhere my own way.

Research in the probation field has pointed to the need for intrinsic motivation (Burnett and McNeill, 2005). The fact that participants brought up the issue of autonomy without being asked or prompted to suggests that this was an essential aspect of the transition out of gangs for them.

The role of employment in leaving the gang

The issue of money and income had arisen in almost every interview before any questions were asked. It was clear that this issue was one that was at the forefront of many participants' minds. Subjects were asked whether or not they had held a legitimate job in the past, whether or not they held one when making the decision to leave the gang, and how important they felt steady income was for the desistance process.

Responses for this section were evenly mixed. Half the participants had never had a legitimate job in the past. The other half of participants had held jobs in the past, with two of them reporting having held a job at the time they left the gang. Participants who did have a job acknowledged that they took pride in their work.

> I don't really have people skills with the real world. But, uh, I prefer to work 'cause I find it more motivating for myself. Plus, you know, it gives me time to think too while I'm working you know, 'hey this is honest money', and to be honest I felt good about it. I actually felt about that there a few years ago. I felt good about it, you know, come home, slowly fixing that place up again, getting back your t.v. and couches. I used to feel really good about it coming home from work and started looking around my place and like, 'Wow this place is starting to look nice again'. It's all this hard work you know, finally paid off. Feels good.

> There were times I went to work. I just left selling drugs and went back to work, try to do something different (….) It keeps you from the gang 'cause they're like 'Oh what are you doing? How come you don't come chillin?' And it's like 'Because I'm working, doing my job.' And they can't say nothing.

This last response underscores the shift in routine that comes with employment. Not only does employment ease the financial challenges of leaving a gang, it also alters the daily ac-

tivities and routines of individuals (Savolainen, 2009). Gang members who obtain employment must now modify the way they allocate their time; spending more time at work results in less time spent with the gang.

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

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

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

The role of family in the decision to leave the gang

Many participants stressed that leaving the gang was a decision they had made on their own, without being convinced or persuaded by anyone else. While family was not cited as the sole motivation to leave the gang, all but one participant acknowledged that family was a factor.

Children

All participants reported having children of their own, although there were two participants who identified as fathers under special circumstances. One of these individuals had experienced a miscarriage with his partner, and the other had a god-child. Both were able to relate to parenthood in a unique way. Previous research has examined the role that parenthood plays in gang desistance (Moloney, Hunt, Joe-Laidler, and MacKenzie, 2011; Moloney, MacKenzie, Hunt, and Joe-Laidler, 2009). Findings have shown that with parenthood comes a shift in priorities, responsibilities, activities, and identity. These changes can act as catalysts to the desistance process (Savolainen, 2009). However, it is unclear as to whether this trend was observed in the current sample. When asked what the turning point had been for them, none of the participants mentioned their children. However, when asked explicitly if their children had factored into their decision to leave the gang, all but two participants expressed that they had.

> I didn't like them knowing what I was doing. I don't want them acting like that, right. They try to act like that and I tell 'em not to.

> Ya, there was my kids, my kids really. You know I kinda wanna be there for them to have all the answers, and try to be there for them every step of the way. 'Cause you know like I was raised without a father, or father figure and that's what I want, to kinda wanna play that role towards them as a father figure (….) I didn't like the drugs around, you know like, I didn't like having any of that stuff around like drugs and drug money you know, and plus I didn't wanna get the kids apprehended by CFS too. It feels good to come home and see your kids smiling at you.

It is clear from these remarks that the participants' children did play a role in their decision to leave the gang. Improved relations with their children were perceived as one of the benefits of leaving the gang. In spite of this, children were not

cited as a pivotal event or influence in the participants' transition from contemplation to action. Unfortunately, the current research cannot speak to why this discrepancy occurred.

Although most participants acknowledged that their children did give them motivation to leave the gang, not all participants felt this way. Two participants reported that their children had not factored into their decision to leave the gang at all. Their comments suggested that they did not perceive gang membership to be a detriment to fatherhood. It is important to stress that only a small minority of participants expressed this view.

Spouse

Participants were asked to comment on the role any girlfriend or wife played in their decision to leave the gang. All but two participants reported having either a girlfriend or common-law wife. One of the participants'girlfriend, who was also the mother of his child, had recently passed away. However, he was still able to comment on the role she played in his decision to leave the gang. In most cases participants expressed that their spouses had encouraged them to leave the gang prior to their decision to exit.

> She [girlfriend] always talk to you, she always cry to me. I never try to hurt somebody close to me. I don't like seeing them cry, cuz I've been hurt and I've seen a lot of people cry (….) So I made my decision, you know, looking at my girlfriend crying every day. Why's she crying? She's crying for me, you know, to help me out, to try to make me a right [good] person. She knows that there's something in me, a good part of me. She try to bring it back.

One participant reported that his girlfriend had not urged him to leave, but stated that he knew she would support any decision he made.

> She [girlfriend] was behind me (….) No she didn't try and urge me to leave but she just supported what I was

> thinking. One day I thought I wanted to leave, she supported that, if I wanted to stay she supported that.

The issue of support came up repeatedly when discussing this question. All but one participant stated they knew their spouse would support them in their decision to leave.

> She [common-law girlfriend] is actually like 'Why do you need something like that, you're better than that. You've got kids to think about now, you know, you're becoming a family man. You're not the same person you once were before when I first met you. And it kinda gave me something to think about at night when I was alone or when I was incarcerated too. I'd sit in my cell sometimes you know and think, I don't really need this.

Responses indicate that girlfriends and spouses did not necessarily convince participants to leave the gang, but their support for that decision was felt. Knowing that they had the support of their girlfriends or spouses seems to have made it easier for the participants to move from 'thinking about leaving' to acting on those thoughts.

Parents

Participants were asked whether or not their parents had played a role in their decision to leave the gang. Participants reported having limited contact with their parents, if any contact at all. Explanations for the weak bonds with parents varied, some had parents who had passed away when they were young, and some had histories of abuse at home. Many participants had been raised by their grandparents. Due to the weak relationships with parents, it was not surprising that all participants indicated their parents had played no role in their decision to leave the gang.

There was a common sentiment that certain reasons to leave the gang were perceived as more legitimate than others by gang members. Gang business or gang disputes spilling over into member's families were seen as a legitimate reason to consider leaving the gang.

> Violence never really scared me to be honest with you. People have made so many threats against my life before… if you're gonna threaten my family, or any one of my friends, if you're gonna try to do something to them just to try to get to me, of course its gonna hurt me and its really gonna affect me in a way, you know. Especially if its my family member or my kids.

In these cases, the sentiment expressed was that if the gang mistreated their family members who were also members of the gang, then this was grounds to consider leaving. However, some participants stated that their family was extensively involved in gangs as well. For these participants it was quite normal for gang business to overlap with family business.

Exit rituals

When participants were asked about the consequences of leaving the gang, responses revealed the subjective severity of exit rituals as perceived by the gang members themselves. Previous literature has repeatedly reported that exit rituals for gang members are violent (Taylor, 2008). It has been suggested that the threat of these violent rituals is sufficient to deter members from leaving. In the current research, all but one participant reported violent beatings as their gang's exit rite. Referred to locally in Winnipeg as 'd-boards', these rituals consists of 2 or 3 minutes of beating from 2-6 gang members. While this appears barbaric on the surface, to the individuals involved it is perceived as more normative and less severe. The present findings suggest that gang members themselves, while acknowledging the existence of such rituals, do not view them as significant enough to deter one from leaving the gang if they have already decided to leave. Instead, they are seen as an inevitability that needs to be accepted.

> I said 'I'll take a beating man. I'm done with your shit man. And I took a beating. I took like 2 minutes and 30 seconds with 6 guys (….) I wasn't worried about the beating they were gonna give me, 'cause I've done that stuff. I'm used to that, you get used to that stuff.

89

> Ya you do get a beating, probably pretty badly for some people. I've been through a few of them already and I just got up walked away and laughed about it.

In addition to the diminished subjective severity of exit rituals, the current findings also suggest that these rituals may not be as inevitable as previously thought. Two participants reported that not everyone goes through these violent exit proceedings and that they themselves did not experience any.

> There were expectations like that like uh you have to get beat up for a minute straight, but I always see them downtown and nobody does nothing to me. A lot of people are scared to get one [a d-board].

> There is but no, not me. Well there's supposed to be, see things are changing. There was definitely in the early and mid 90s, you know but, there's supposed to be, but you hear of hardly of anybody now.

It was suggested that the traditionally violent 'beat-outs' are becoming less common with the newer and younger gang members. While the certainty of exit rituals may be starting to wane, the type of exit ritual appears to have remained very consistent over time and across gangs.

Challenges faced while/after leaving the gang

Participants were asked to discuss specific challenges they, or their friends, faced when they decided to leave the gang. It was then further explained that we were interested in any obstacles that may have stood in their way, whether those be financial, social, or physical. Upon clarification, social challenges were most frequently reported with over half of participants claiming to have lost friends. This loss of friends lead to the loss of protection, increased harassment, and the loss of their reputation.

> I gotta watch my back, everywhere I go, I gotta. I already got punched out for leaving. Its hard to leave a gang and you're still in the city of where that gang is. You're gonna meet people in that gang.

> Friends not talking to me no more, I lost a lot a lot of friends. And, that's about it. Besides some hater messages on facebook and stuff.

> The bad rep name I guess, and being a roll-out. When you're considered a roll-out its pretty much being called a bitch.

Despite these social challenges, a common response to this question was that there are few challenges faced when leaving a gang that are insurmountable.

> It's really hard to try to get out but, like, if you got a good head on your shoulders and everything you can talk for yourself try to reason with them you know, like. That's the best thing I think to do is try to reason with them (….) Like I said if we can just be two reasonable men and just sit down and try talk about it, you know, instead of escalating to violence (…).

Two participants described their experience of leaving the gang as quite straightforward. According to them, if you wish to leave the gang you simply leave.

> Nothing really made it hard to leave, right, you just leave. You know, uh things are a little different nowadays then they were back in like the early-mid 90's I guess. But now it's a little different, nothing really was hard, it wasn't really hard to leave.

These responses portray gang membership as more informal and optional, suggesting that most do have the choice to leave if they wish to. Considering this with the sentiment that "no barrier is insurmountable", it raises an important question: why is gang desistance perceived as so difficult? It may simply be that more people do not exit the gang because they do not wish to leave. One cannot rule out that for some, gang violence and making money are exciting and pleasurable activities. For others with limited education, job experience, family support and a small social network, gangs provide income, friendship, and protection; these are powerful inducements to remain in the gang.

The role of probation services in their decision to leave

All the participants in the current study were on probation at the time of the interviews. For most, this was not their first time on probation. Participants were asked to discuss the role of their probation officer in their decision to leave, as well as discuss what they think probation services in general could do, or could have done, to help them leave the gang. It is important to keep in mind the intensive supervision experienced by our subjects and aggressive nature of the GRASP program. Very few had anything positive to say about either probation in general or their specific probation officer. None of the participants reported having sought help from their probation officer. Furthermore, none of the participants reported that their probation officer, current or past, had ever discussed the issue of exiting the gang with them.

An interesting theme emerged from these discussions. Most participants shared the sentiment that even if they had felt comfortable enough with their probation officer, they would not have gone to them for help. Furthermore, when asked what they thought probation services could do to change this, most participants simply said there was likely nothing they could have done.

> A lot of people, a lot of gang members are hard-headed and they don't like their POs, they wouldn't talk to their POs. A lot of people aren't cooperative. I bet you a lot of people won't actually sit down and talk like we're doing here.

> Probation officers are helpful because they sit there and they chat with you and that (…) But I don't think they can help you leave a gang. They can talk to you about it, like any other person you know, they can. But I don't think they can help you leave.

Some participants expressed that they would not take help offered by probation officers because they preferred to take care of things on their own.

> Not really, I like to do my stuff myself. I don't like asking people and boring people with my problems.

Similar to the discussions on autonomy earlier, it seems that making the decision to leave the gang was something they needed to do on their own.

Summary and Discussion

The current research aims to fill a gap in gang literature by examining the Manitoban gang situation and gang desistance. Our participants belong to a highly specialized probation program targeting high risk gang offenders. Despite the assumptions that this population would be resistant to desistance discussions, there was a great willingness of these individuals to share their personal experiences.

The majority of participants indicated they had spent a significant length of time contemplating leaving their gang before they acted on it. Participants were asked if they had experienced a turning point, or a pivotal event, that motivated them to finally act on their previous thoughts of leaving. Contrary to previous research (Savolainen, 2009), very few of the participants referenced structural changes in their life, such as marriage, parenthood or employment when recounting their personal turning points. The issue of autonomy proved to be very important to these participants. While not explicitly asked about the topic, participants raised the issue on their own and were adamant that the decision to leave the gang was one they had made on their own terms, for their own reasons, and without being convinced by anyone else.

Participants spoke about the role their families had played in their decision to leave the gang. In general, having children had not been a pivotal life event for participants, but their children had acted a source of motivation to leave the gang; They anticipated leaving the gang would be good for their relationships with their children. Most participants reported that their girlfriends and spouses had given them a great

deal of support in their decision to leave. Participants made it clear they had been reassured knowing that they would support them in their decision to leave. Most participants reported either damaged or non-existent relations with parents, and hence not a single participant credited their parents for having influenced their decision to leave the gang.

Participants were evenly split when it came to employment. Those that had held a job described the sense of pride they had achieved from their jobs. Also, they reported that holding a job made it easier to spend time away from the gang if they so wished. Those that had not held jobs stated that it was not for lack of wanting, but an intimidation with the job searching process that had prevented them from gaining legitimate employment in the past. It was agreed that more supports are needed for those wishing to find work. Further discussion revealed that for these individuals probation officers played a marginal role in the exit process, with most participants preferring to act independently.

When asked about any rituals that are forced upon exiting gang members, a majority of the participants in this study minimized the importance of these rituals. Many revealed that these rituals were not inevitable and that they had personally eluded this aspect of desistance. More importantly, most participants revealed that the violent exit rituals that do occur are not subjectively severe enough to deter one from leaving the gang if they sincerely wish to leave. While the 'beat-outs' and 'd-boards' may seem barbaric to outsiders, they are relatively normative to the individuals in the gang culture. Finally, most participants stated that the primary challenges they faced upon leaving the gang had been social, being either the loss of friends or their prior reputation. However, there was a unanimous sentiment that no challenges had been sufficiently significant to deter them from their decision to leave.

In this qualitative study we have sought to examine possible pathways out of the gang. In doing so we focused on the influence of external others and employment, and possible bar-

riers to offenders leaving. From a criminal organization perspective, it was evident that leaving could well be influenced by poor treatment within the gang, and tiring of the gang life. Punishments such as d-boards did not deter those interested in leaving. Gang leaders, like any business men, would likely do better in keeping their members if they provided consistently fair and well compensated treatment. Contrary to some of the desistance literature, there was an absence of specific pivotal turning points recounted by our subjects. They placed considerable emphasis on their own personal autonomy in the desistance process and, while the decision to leave a gang might be related to a multitude of factors, singular life events were not identified. Thus, the positive influence of parents, spouses or children, might be correlated to gang leaving, but this support might not always lead to a decision to exit. Employment was definitely a factor, and the ability to support oneself was considered key to leaving successfully. In summary, there were few barriers perceived by gang members in successfully exiting; they viewed leaving the gang as relatively easy to achieve if the individual will was there.

A surprising finding was the view of most subjects that their probation officers neither talked to them about leaving nor did they think they could assist them in doing so. In fact, there was a fair bit of negativity towards probation officers. This may reflect that the subjects were serious offenders and enrolled in GRASP, a program heavily directed towards surveillance and suppression. This certainly sets up a potentially antagonistic dynamic. Given that GRASP includes programming intended to assist offenders, the evident lack of therapeutic engagement may well be something that could be worked upon. Ideally, a unit with diverse goals such as GRASP does need its subjects to perceive some balance between treatment and enforcement. Discussing the negatives of gang life might be appropriate in counselling sessions.

Further research with larger sample sizes and gang members in different programs will help ensure that no trends or common issues have been overlooked. A larger sample will lend

itself to greater generalizability within the Canadian gang population and, more specifically, gangs in Manitoba and the prairie provinces. There is a need for continued research within this population. The Canadian Aboriginal gang situation is severely underrepresented in the gang literature. Given the thriving state of Aboriginal gangs in Manitoba and other Canadian prairie provinces, there is a great need for a better understanding of exit possibilities. Understanding why gang members leave and how best to facilitate this is vital information for correctional services.

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