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Going Legit: An Exploration of Formerly Gang Involved Asians

by

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Abstract

While the entering of a gang has been extensively researched, the exit of one is given little attention. In addition research examining the participation by Asians is scarce. This study utilized interviews to explore how Asians defined, entered, and exited gang involvement. Gang membership was defined in terms of Asian ethnicity, based on the media narratives that portrayed them as the primary offenders in Alberta. Membership was also defined by utilization of tattoos and participation in criminal activities (i.e. drug dealing). Asians in this study were attracted to gangs due the pull factors of financial and social autonomy, which in turn provided them with respect. They were influenced to exit gang involvement based on the culmination of experiences and thoughts surrounding family, death/violence, and imprisonment. The strategies utilized to enable these exits comprised limiting or cutting off contacts, keeping busy with pro-social activities, and tattoo concealment or removal.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my best friend. Your departure out of the lifestyle provided inspiration to myself and many others to live a better life. Before you passed, I remember you telling me that you got out the “game” because you did not want your kids to grow up without a father like you did. Although you were not able to keep that from happening and watch your kids grow up, they will always remember you as a good man who did everything for his kids. I love and miss you.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The following dissertation examines the entrance and the exit of gang involvement by Asians in Alberta. This research will look at the Western Canadian context because of the media discourses that demonstrate substantial concerns with these groups. Even with these apparent concerns, gang research in Canada is sparse, especially when involving Asians. In addition, gang research in general focuses on entering a gang, rather than on exiting one (Decker & Lauritsen, 2012, p. 51). In Alberta, "Asian gangs" have been the subject of extensive media attention. Calgary's mainstream media regularly represents Asian criminal gang wars as between two groups, the "FOB" and the "FOB Killers" (Grant & Brakx, 2013; Van Rassel, 2009), while Edmonton has the "Crazy Dragons", described by police as the largest gang in Alberta (Totten & Totten, 2012, p. 69). The fear of Asian gangs was also present in British Columbia, where these groups were perceived to be solely responsible for all gang activity in Vancouver during the 1980s (Young, 1993, p. 120).

This significant involvement of Asians with gang activity may seem surprising given the popular conception of Asians as the high achieving, successful "model" minority, who serve as a model for other minority groups in society (Ono, 2005). However, many scholars (Tayag, 2011; Yen, 2000) are critical of this seemingly positive stereotype by arguing that it is a myth, and not true of most Asian people. Yen (2000) states how this stereotype has obscured the widespread poverty of groups such as South East Asian refugees (p. 4). She criticizes the conception of the model minority, as it portrays Asians as a uniform group with interchangeable members when in reality there are significant differences between and within Asian ethnic groups. A further problem this stereotype masks is the existence of Asian gang members. If many Asians are willing to risk their freedom, safety and lives through gang involvement, they are likely facing

problems obscured by the model minority stereotype. Additionally, the existence of criminal gangs in Alberta is somewhat perplexing given Alberta's economic prosperity, as membership in criminal gangs has traditionally been associated with areas of high poverty and unemployment (Garot, 2007; McDaniel, 2012; Tita & Ridgeway, 2007). This combination of socio-economic factors and ostensible cultural characteristics should presumptively hinder Asian gang membership.

This study seeks to address two major gaps existent within gang literature. Asian gangs in general are under researched, especially in Canada. In addition, as Decker & Lauritsen (2012) observe, "analyses of gang involvement focus on becoming a gang member, rather than discontinuing membership" (p.51). The following study comprising individuals of Chinese, Vietnamese and Filipino ethnicity examines three main questions: how they define gang members, what factors influenced their entrance into gang involvement and why and how they exited from gang involvement. In essence, this thesis explores the stories of participant's entrance into and exiting of gang involvement. Examining these questions is important as the knowledge gained not only helps to understand Asian gang involvement, but may support the desistance of others.

Method

Data collection in this study comprised qualitative interviewing. Qualitative methods are appropriate as the experiences of Asians who have successfully desisted from gang involvement are essential in understanding why and how this process occurs. Interviews are an effective means of learning about experiences, activities and views of events (Bryant, 2011, p. 76). This method allows the interviewee to state their perception of social experiences and explain them. Interview structure is semi-standardized, which is appropriate through its systematic and

consistent structure that allows the interviewer freedom to deviate and probe further than a prepared set of questions (Berg, 2001, p. 70). This approach also allows the accommodation of novel directions and themes raised by participants.

Frame analysis also comprises a method in Chapter Four – Background to Gang Activity in Alberta. Frame analysis examines how individuals recognize a particular event, where each framework "allows its user to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its terms" (Goffman, 1974, p.21). In this chapter frame analysis is utilized to illustrate how newspapers portrayed and characterized gang activity in Alberta as mostly if not always perpetrated by Asians.

Study Limitations

The limitations of this study comprise three aspects: researcher subjectivity, method and sample. Researcher subjectivity relates to the similar cultural background and upbringing shared with participants. As a result, this motivated sympathy towards participants, thus resulting in possibilities of bias. Method presented a limitation as this study utilized a single researcher. Thus, the themes explored rested upon the interests and expertize of the researcher, possibly precluding or underemphasizing others. Sample size limited the study as it comprised a relatively small sample of fourteen participants. The sample size settled upon is in consideration of time and difficulty of recruiting participants. For the difficulty of recruiting participants, determination of whether someone was formerly gang involved largely rested upon rumors and gossip. In addition, many potential participants declined, usually due to fear of exposing their criminal/deviant pasts. A larger sample would have obviously strengthened the analysis of themes, or allowed the presentation of others. Study sample also presented limitations in regards to narrow ethnic focus, as this study only included Chinese, Vietnamese and Filipino ethnicities.

This is a result of those who were willing to participant and likely due to these being some of the most gang involved Asian ethnicities in Alberta. A sample including other ethnicities may have produced distinct experiences from the ones examined. For gender, the sample included thirteen males and one female. While greater gender diversity was desired, only a single female was willing to participate, therefore this study may be better described as exploring gang involvement by Asian males rather than Asians. The difficulty of attaining females may be explained by the following reasons: the difficulty of identifying gang involved females as crime/deviance is gendered as male, the greater social stigma attached, and the underrepresentation of females as gang members. As one study indicates, less than 6% of females who were incarcerated in 1999 were identified as gang members (Mackenzie & Johnson, 2003).

Defining Gangs, Race, Ethnicity and Culture

Gang membership in this study will be understood as comprising varied levels of membership and fluidity. Spergel (1990, cited in Franzese, Covey, & Menard, 2006, p. 164) describes varied levels of membership using a synthesis of theoretical and empirical literature as including core, associate, floaters and wannabe members. Fluidity comprises the ambiguity involved in gang membership. Rather than view gang membership as a concrete identity characterized by formal processes, it will be understood as a "generally a contingent process, one defined by specific activities, special relationships and specific networks at any particular time" (White, 2013, p. 20).

The terms of race, ethnicity and culture require definition, as these concepts form a central component of the study. *Asian* refers to a racial designation, with the broad grouping of multiple ethnicities. Asian comprises supposed biological similarities or differences (i.e. skin color) between groups (Southwood, 2012, p. 37). *Ethnicity*, according to Hutchinson & Smith

(1996, cited in Southwood, 2012, p. 33) refers to six features: 1) a common proper name; 2) a myth of common ancestry; 3) shared historical memories; 4) one of more elements of common culture (i.e. language); 5) a link with a homeland; and 6) a sense of solidarity. Culture is defined as "the ways of thinking, the ways of acting, and the material objects that together form a people's way of life" (Marcionis, 2012, p. 54).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this study comprises existing criminology and desistance research. Sampson & Laub's (1992) life course perspective provides a theoretical explanation of the desistance from gangs by linking it with growing up. They suggest a causal relationship between early delinquency and later adult deviant behavior through the life course as subject to life stages, transitions, and turning points (p. 65). In the life course perspective for criminality, onset begins early in life, and later becomes subject to interruptions called "turning points" (i.e. marriage, parenthood, and careers) that allow desistance from crime.

In addition to the life course are the cognitive transformations responsible for changing one from criminal outsider to legitimate citizen. Giordano, Schroeder, & Cernkovich (2007) describe this in terms of changes of emotions from adolescence to adulthood. During adolescence, youths experience positive emotions (i.e. excitement and thrills) partaking in deviant acts such as drug usage and fighting. However, these positive emotions are difficult to sustain in adulthood as they are less likely to receive any social backing, leading to the gradual diminishment of the positive emotions obtained from crime (p. 1610). Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule (2014) describe desistance in terms of identity transitions which comprise three steps: the first entails doubts about a current role, second the search for alternatives, and concludes with evaluating the disadvantages and advantages of a new role.

A central strategy of desistance is 'knifing off' (Maruna & Roy, 2007). Knifing off refers to the wiping out of a previous identity. Knifing off can occur through geographical relocation because it allows the detachment of individuals or environments that lead to criminal activity. Becoming a former gang member occurs because:

> Enduring self-change is thought to be made easier by breaking away from one's social environment and finding a new one where one is under less pressure to conform to a past identity. By starting anew in a different social milieu, one faces no such pressures to maintain a consistent identity. (Maruna & Roy, 2007, p. 105).

In addition to qualitative interviewing, an analysis of Western Canadian newspapers discussing Asian gang involvement is part of this study. This chapter provides background to gang activity in Alberta. The media narratives presented there serve to highlight the social problem and situate the context of gang involvement, which is important to understanding how participants desisted from gang involvement. Participants in this study showed that they were caught up and responded to these media representations in their efforts to desist.

Contributions

The primary goal of this research is to provide a preliminary framework that encourages further research in gang desistance. While gang membership has largely been portrayed in the media to end in jail or death, the participants in this study demonstrated this perception as misleading. The knowledge and experiences examined can support practitioners and police to understanding and facilitating desistance from gangs. As these individuals have successfully desisted thus far, the experiences they recount can provide inspiration to others considering the same lifestyle changes. In addition, recounting their stories can provide participants with personal enrichment and validation for their transitions out of gang involvement.

Chapter Summary

The existence of Asian criminal gangs has provoked fear and concern across Alberta and British Columbia (Grant & Brakx, 2013; Totten & Totten, 2012; Van Rassel, 2009; Young, 1993), but little research has been conducted to examine how/why these individuals enter and leave these groups. In addition Asian gangs have become less prominent in these contexts suggesting that significant desistance from these groups has occurred. While the primary method of confronting gang membership has largely comprised policing and imprisonment, understanding and encouraging desistance may be more beneficial. As Bulbolz (2014) argues "studies of gang exit are needed to improve existing gang intervention strategies which would reduce levels of gang involvement offending, victimization, and the related costs of incarceration" (p. 23).

The structure of this dissertation will comprise the following chapters: Chapter 2 – Literature Review, Chapter 3 – Methods, Chapter 4 – Background to Gang Activity in Alberta, Chapter 5 – Entering Gang Involvement, Chapter 6 – Exiting Gang Involvement, Chapter 7 – Discussion. Chapter 2 reviews the literature surrounding gang membership; specifically in how gangs are defined, characterized, the push and pull factors of membership, and concludes with desistance (theories, processes, strategies). Chapter 3 discusses how and why the study was carried out using particular methods. Chapter 4 provides the context of gang activity in Alberta and illustrates the perception by the media as mostly if not always involving Asians. Chapter 5 and 6 explore the stories about why participants became gang involved and how they got out. Chapter 7 begins with a summary of results and concludes with the implications, limitations and suggestions for future research. The purpose of this study is to examine those who have successfully desisted from gang involvement and how they carried this out.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter begins by outlining various definitions of street gangs and settles upon one that emphasizes varied levels of membership and fluidity, providing the foundation for how they are understood within this study. Following is an overview of street-level gangs in Canada. This chapter then examines the motivations, processes and strategies involved in gang desistance, along with theoretical explanations. These provide the basis for the questions that guided this study. As literature concentrating on Asian gangs is scarce, the majority of the discussion covers other ethnic minorities. The studies and theoretical explanations reviewed form the framework to understanding why Asians in Western Canada arguably get involved and desist from gangs. The following research provides a comparison for whether the factors and influences apply to the study sample.

Defining Gangs

In gang research, a constant area of disagreement is how gangs are defined. However, the Eurogang Network, a European collection of police and academics, has found consensus in defining gangs. Their definition has four major components "(1) durability (existence for at least "several" months); (2) street orientation (group activities taking place away from the home, work or school); (3) youthfulness (average age in the teens or early twenties); and (4) group identity that involves criminal activity (illegal activity central to the groups function)" (Van Gemert, Peterson, & Lien, 2008, p. 5). While gang researchers in Canada have attempted to follow the European example in developing and agreeing upon a multi-dimensional framework for youth gangs (Mellor, MacRae, Pauls, & Hornick, 2005; Wortley, 2010), there has not been success. One reason cited is the lack of rigorous empirical research of Canadian gangs (Mellor et. al, 2005, p. 7). As a result, theoretical literature is utilized, resulting in archetype conceptual

frameworks that only highlight general features of street-gangs. The benefit of empirical gang research as opposed to theoretical is through the knowledge of those previously involved as opposed to those outside, e.g. practitioners and police.

According to the Canadian Centre for Justice Studies (2013) a street gang is "a more or less structured group of adolescents, young adults and/or adults who use intimidation and violence to commit criminal acts on a regular basis, in order to obtain power and recognition and/or control specific areas of criminal activities" (p. 199-200). Gang membership involves: (1) existence of gang identifiers (e.g. tattoos); (2) information from a reliable source (e.g. gang members) that an individual associates with known gang members; (3) confirmation of association with known gang members through police surveillance; (4) self-admission; and (5) legal confirmation that an individual is in a gang (p. 200). The minimum standard to classify a gang member requires direct or indirect involvement in a gang crime, with two of any of the five listed criteria.

The Toronto Police Services offers a similar classification system using seven criteria to identify gang involvement: "(1) direct/indirect involvement in gang activity; (2) self-admission of gang membership; (3) information from a reliable source; (4) observed association with known gang members; (5) symbolic gang identifiers; (6) a Court finding; or (7) physical evidence of gang activity" (Wortley, 2010, p. 12). This classification, however, is criticized as these criteria are argued to be ambiguous, subjective and arbitrary (Wortley, 2010, p. 13). Wortley (2010) points to ambiguity in questioning what constitutes a reliable source. This criticism continues with the argument that using association with known gang members as evidence assumes that gang members only associate with others gang members; while they are likely to associate with others not gang involved such as family members and school-mates. The

difficulty of identifying gang members and inadequacies of current definitions is also extended due to the varied levels of membership and fluid nature of contemporary street-gangs.

Spergel's (1990, cited by Franzese, Covey & Menard, 2006, p.164) synthesis of theoretical literature describes four gang member types ranking from highest to lowest degree of involvement: core, associate, peripheral, floaters and wannabes. Core members run the gang and are active in day to day functioning. Associates consist of regular or irregular participants. Floaters are not clearly recognized as gang members, but exist across or within gangs based on their ability to broker access to special resources (i.e. drugs, and firearms). Wannabes comprise recruits eager to join the gang, but have not yet been recognized as full members.

Gang membership is also tenuous due to the fluidity of membership. This identity may not be specified in a concrete manner, but instead characterized vaguely. Gang membership largely relies on self-perception, more so than formal or visible signifiers. Bolden (2010) describes fluidity in terms of gang initiations. In initiations, Bolden found these to be mostly informal as many enter without rituals, while others may leave a gang, or join other gangs, sometimes without consequences (p. 210). Here the separation between gang members and associates is complicated as inclusion into a gang requires more than initiation rites. In addition, the ease of switching gangs illustrates that gang member status is transferable and thus more important than affiliation to a specific gang (p. 221). Fluidity in gang membership is also demonstrated because it is "generally a contingent process, one defined by specific activities, special relationships and specific networks at any particular time" (White, 2013, p.20).

Prowse (2012) presents a definition accounting for fluid gang membership based on research (using interviews) of Vietnamese gangs in Toronto, Canada with the concept of New-Age Gangs. New-Age Gangs are "a loose-knit and fluid group of associates who comprise a

subset of a street gang leader's enduring social network and who are preferentially activated in the commission of street-based criminal activity through that street gang leader. A gang identity need not form part of their collective self-identification" (Prowse, 2013, p. 9). This classification defines gang membership through networks, activity and individual identity rather than by enduring identification with an organized group. Individuals may leave a gang, join another, or may be gang members during certain periods, but not all the time. Additionally, gang membership is specified on the basis of criminal action within a gang, rather than on affiliation, perceived or actual with a group. Participants in this study will be defined as gang involved in terms of their commitment to criminal activity within a criminal group rather than in terms of affiliation with a group as this can comprise those who are just friends.

Ethnicity, Race and Culture

As ethnicity, race and culture form a central aspect of this study, it is proper to define what is referred to when utilizing these concepts. In identifying an ethnic group, Hutchinson & Smith (1996, cited in Southwood, 2012, p. 33) use six features: 1) a common proper name; 2) a myth of common ancestry; 3) shared historical memories; 4) one of more elements of common culture (i.e. language); 5) a link with a homeland; and 6) a sense of solidarity. Race is broadly defined as a social construction open to reinvention, mainly comprising supposed biological similarities (i.e. skin color) or difference between groups, which only exists between individuals conscious of these racial differences (p. 37). Culture is defined "the ways of thinking, the ways of acting, and the material objects that together form a people's way of life" (Marcionis, 2012, p. 54). This comprises nonmaterial culture (i.e. values) and material culture (i.e. clothing). Participants in this study were broadly identified as racially Asian (South-Asian), while they self-identified their ethnic groups. The significance of culture is illustrated as participants described values

associated with Asians in relation to their exiting gang involvement (i.e. filial piety - defined on page 28).

Characteristics of Gangs

The word gang member largely inspires images of criminal offenders who are "dangerous, gun-toting, crack-dealing, predatory, violent, criminal, inner city, [and] poor" (Chettleburgh, 2007, p. 25). This threatening impression of street gangs is shown in a survey of Canadians that found 70% to feel that gangs were a serious and increasing problem within their communities (Van Gemert et al., 2008, p. 192). These perceptions have in large part been driven by high-profile incidents such as public shooting murders by gang members in malls (Wortley & Tanner, 2006, p. 19).

Another prevailing image of Canadian gangs is involvement of racial and ethnic minorities. Henry & Tator (2002) examine Canadian media and find overwhelming evidence of the racialization of gangs, which show fixations on Black and Asian gangs engaging in turf wars and drug trafficking (p. 202). Ezeonu (2008) also views the variables of "race" and "ethnicity" as the most singled out for attention and discloses how police in Montreal insist that ethnicity is one of the most significant characteristics of street gangs (p. 124).

In terms of race by region in Canada, Aboriginals are most outstanding in the Prairie Provinces. They are also reported to comprise the largest group of gang members in Canada with membership estimated to be 800-1000 active members (Totten, 2009, p. 2). In 1980s Vancouver, British Columbia, Asian gangs were perceived to be solely responsible for all gang activity there due to erroneous depictions by the media (Young, 1993, p. 120). For Eastern Canada, Blacks are the racial group most associated as gang members (Wortley & Tanner, 2006; Symons, 1999).

The perception of gangs in Canada as racialized is misleading. While many gangs in Canada may contain a predominant ethnic group, most contemporary gangs are multi-ethnic (Derbyshire, 2004; Markusoff, 2004; Totten, 2008). For example in British Columbia the United Nations gang make the mixed-ethnic nature of their group explicit through their name "United" and "Nations" (Totten & Totten, 2012, p. 21). In Calgary, Alberta, the two gangs that dominated newspaper headlines for the past decade - The Fresh off the Boat, and The Fob Killers - were multi-ethnic. While these two groups were initially described as entirely Asian, they were later acknowledged to be multi-ethnic; containing Asian, White, East Indian and, Black members (see chapter 4) (Slade, 2011; Van Rassel, 2009).

According to Criminal Intelligence Service Canada, in 2006 there were 344 street gangs with 11,900 members (Totten & Totten, 2012, p. 63). These findings, however, are imprecise due to the difficult nature of defining gang membership and lack of agreed upon classification, therefore making it impossible to manufacture accurate data on gang membership. The difficulty of attaining accurate data on gang membership is extended by Totten & Totten's (2012) argument that police-based estimates cannot be relied upon. They view police estimates as likely inflated due to funding levels being dependent upon how large a gang problem is defined (p. 63). If a gang problem is perceived to be serious, this gives justification for increased funding.

For sex, American research finds female involvement to be insignificant as only 6 to 7% of youth gang members are reported to be female (Hayward & Honegger, 2014, p. 374). These findings, however, should be treated with caution as 25% of jurisdictions did not collect data on female gang membership as of 2009. These findings are largely mirrored in Canada as slightly less than 6% of females who were incarcerated in 1999 identified as gang members (Mackenzie & Johnson, 2003). As is the case in American studies, these numbers should be treated with

caution due to the scarcity of data concerning female gang membership and the dated numbers. In terms of age, research finds gangs as mainly made up of young adults and adolescents; with an average age of approximately 18, and ranging from 11 to 50 years old (Hemmati, 2006, p. v).

Tattoos and Gang Membership

Tattoos are also described as characteristic of gang membership. Atkinson (2003) describes the relevance of tattoos with gang membership surrounding the emergence of motorcycle gangs in the 1960s. In identifying those part of such groups, tattoos were among the most visible identifiers. Tattoos eventually came to signify one as a criminal and social outsider. Social outsiders such as gangs employ tattoos as a means of mutual identification. Tattoos serve as a public badge of affiliation between these individuals and disaffiliation with others (p. 164). For Asians specifically, Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) examines tattoos to assist officers in detecting gang members. THE CBSA argues that tattoos are culturally uncommon among Asians, and viewed as bodily defilement. While they acknowledge that tattoos do not necessarily mean gang membership, it nevertheless illustrates a resistance of cultural norms. The tattoos sought after on Asians largely include animals such as tigers, phoenixes and dragons (Canada Border Services Agency, 2008).

Push Factors of Gang Membership by Racial and Ethnic Minorities

Ezoeonu (2014) points to the sociopolitical history of Canada as a general source explaining gang involvement by racial and ethnic minorities. He underscores Porter's (1965) *Vertical Mosaic*, which argues that the history of Canada reveals specific groups to be bestowed privilege, power, and opportunities with those of British ancestry as most favored (p. 11). This history is argued to have present ramifications in access to power, income and status, which is stratified along racial and ethnic lines resulting in poverty and marginalization. While many of

these racial and ethnic minorities comprise professional (prior to immigration) or highly educated individuals, they still find themselves situated in poverty and poor neighborhoods. Youth in these communities often perceive these individuals as failures, and see little incentive for higher education or economic success through legitimate means, therefore membership in gangs or criminal organizations becomes an attractive alternative (p. 11-12).

Robinson & Joe (1980) carried out one of the first Canadian examinations of Asian gang members. In this Vancouver, British Columbia study, they examine Chinese gang members, recently emigrated from Hong Kong. They found factors of gang involvement by Chinese males to stem from issues of language, culture, discrimination, family and economics. These individuals had experienced great difficulty with English and adjustment to life in Canadian schools. Most respondents also had problems with their parents due to their preference for western food and dress (p. 153). Discrimination was cited as an important factor as originating not only from the broader Canadian society (see chapter 4 [background to gang activity in Alberta]), but from other Chinese who were older and Canadian-born. There was also evidence for the breakdown of the traditional sphere and function of these families. The traditionally close family unit did not exist due to the parents of these individuals working long hours; often with two or three jobs each (p. 158-159). This lack of supervision and guidance led to conflict and challenges of parental authority forming a social vacuum between the family and community, giving rise to the formation of peer groups by older children and adolescents (p. 159). The social vacuum between family and community would encourage them to join peer groups of those involved with gangs.

Young's (1993) exploration of Asian gangs in Vancouver enhances Robinson & Joe's (1980) analysis by citing Campbell's community isolation thesis. The community isolation thesis

states how integration into a new society is debilitated when migrating cultures attempt to maintain their own traditions while also attempting to acquire a new culture (Young, 1993, p. 101). Due to isolation from the greater society, gangs step in to fill the void, and recruitment is made more appealing when youths are unable to satisfy their monetary needs. Chettleburgh (2007) also asserts this as the case with other gang involved immigrant youth, but includes how it can also be related to those who have migrated from countries where they have experienced violent resistance and deprivation (p. 30). Due to these experiences, problems with acclimatization and establishment in Canada followed.

Ngo (2010) applies this analysis with more rigor in studying 30 gang involved or former gang youth from immigrant families in Calgary, Alberta. For many participants there were pre-migration vulnerabilities originating from violence, and brutality experienced in their home countries. These traumatic experiences filled many with anger and mistrust and thus precipitated their violence against others. Ngo summarizes their entrance into gangs as the:

> Gradual disintegration of their interactions with their families, schools and communities. Subsequently, the participants experienced crises of identity and belonging, which propelled them towards forming friendships with other socially disconnected peers. They became involved in social cliques, and progressed towards membership in criminal gangs. (p. 41).

Research examining the gang involvement of Aboriginals is also an emerging area of study (Deane, Bracken, & Morrissette, 2007; Grekul & Benson, 2008; Preston, 2012; Totten, 2009). Aboriginals not only comprise the largest number of gang members in Canada, but are also the most established in Canadian prisons (also temporary holding facilities), as they are the largest single ethnic group held in federal prisons with 536 members as of 2008 (Preston, 2012, p. 195). This mostly comprises the three dominant Aboriginal gangs in the Prairies: Indian Posse, Warriors, and Native Syndicate.

The disproportionate participation of Aboriginals in street gangs has largely been attributed to the legacy of colonialism and residential schooling; resulting in the elimination of their language, culture and traditions (Bracken, Deane, & Morrissette, 2009, p. 67). All of these had "devastating effects culturally, socially, economically and personally" (Deane et al., 2007, p. 127). On the basis of these structural and personal deprivations, Aboriginals face additional challenges not faced by other ethnic or racial groups in Canada.

Grekul & Benson (2008) outline a variety of factors to explain the gang involvement of Aboriginals in Canada. These comprise family dysfunction, and the search for identity, peers, structural inequality and systematic discrimination. In terms of family dysfunction, Aboriginals were pulled into gangs due to family members who were already involved. Additionally those with poor family relations were pushed into gangs due to a need for belonging, where gangs became a substitute family (p. 68). While these groups began as a group of friends hanging out, they eventually evolved into a group of wannabes and matured into a street gang as a means of protection against other groups (p. 69). Structural inequality refers to school and work. Respondents in Grekul & Benson's study cited low levels of high school completion and lacking encouragement by teachers (i.e. statements of 'you will amount to nothing'). In terms of work, Aboriginals have an unemployment rate two to three times as high as the Canadian population (p. 70). Systemic discrimination mainly refers to Aboriginals overrepresentation in the corrections system. In 2011, Aboriginals comprised 23% of Canada's federal inmate population, while only comprising four percent of the total population (Sapers, 2011).

Grekul & Benson (2006) summarize the despair of Aboriginal youth who become gang involved by stating how they have "nothing to live for" and "nothing to die for", for which gangs fill the gap for these disenfranchised and marginalized people (p. 2). The extreme immersion of

Aboriginals into the gang lifestyle is demonstrated how they are unlike other gangs in Canada as they are known to follow the standards established by gangs in the United States. These standards comprise hard signifiers of gang membership such as gang tattoos, hand symbols, and strict chains of command; which are infrequently followed by other contemporary Canadian gangs (p. 2-3).

While ethnic/racial minority and immigrant status are perceived to be central among the identifiers of gang membership, some findings show these perceptions as misleading (Gordon, 1994; Wortley & Tanner, 2006). In an early study by Gordon (1993) during fixations by the British Columbian media with "Asian" gangs, information given by correctional centers found that Asians did not comprise the majority of gang members as was perceived. The findings showed that the majority of those labeled as gang members (41 percent) were individuals of European ethnic origin born in Canada. Asians did, however, comprise the next largest group at 34 percent, although the majority of these were born in Canada (p. 3). The relevance of such findings show that counter to popular perceptions "gangs are not being imported to Canada from other nations. Rather, youth gangs are a domestic phenomenon with roots in the Canadian experience" (Wortley & Tanner, 2006, p. 30).

Wortley & Tanner (2006) highlight the finding that immigration status is not a central signifier of gang-involvement in their Toronto study of 3,393 students. They found that immigrant students (4 percent) were less likely to be involved with gangs than Canadian born youth (5 percent) (p. 29). While racial minorities such as Blacks (8 percent), Hispanics (7 percent) and Aboriginals (6 percent) were found as more likely than Whites (4 percent) to report being part of a gang, Whites did comprise the highest number of self-identified gang members (36 percent). Wortley & Tanner explain the higher participation of racial minorities in gangs as

stemming from demographic factors. They find racial minorities to have high reporting in the lower class, residency in housing projects, and levels of alienation from mainstream society. When these factors are taken into account, the impact of race on gang membership disappears (p. 31).

While common causes and processes are involved in the formation of gangs; these are far too complex to provide a standard definition that encompasses them all (Ezeonu, 2014; Gordon, 2000; Grekul & Benson, 2008; Mellor et al., 2005). As Ezeonu (2014) argues "gangs in Canada are conceptually and structurally different across cities and provinces" (p. 8). These differences are based on factors such as "the socio-economic status of the area and the ethnic and age composition of members" (Grekul & Benson, 2008, p. 64).

Pull factors of Gang Membership by Racial and Ethnic Minorities

While the previous section explored push factors influencing gang entrance, this section comprises pull factors. Pull factors are the positive aspects of gang membership that influence individuals to join. Rather than entering a gang through pressure or coercion, the seemingly positive aspects of membership influence many to seek out these groups on their own and eventually associate or join these groups themselves (Gordon, 1994, p. 6). The most significant of these pull factors are respect, status and money (Chettleburgh, 2007; Van Gemert et al., 2008; Mellor et al., 2005; Ngo, 2010; Wortley & Tanner, 2007).

Research reveals respect and status to be significant for all racial backgrounds. For those who reported this, the gangster identity was appealing because it provided respect and social status. These individuals stated that their involvement in the gang lifestyle projected fear onto others and gave them power. The power and respect offered by gang membership also facilitated sexual conquests (Gemert et. al, 2008, p. 200). While these factors are significant for all racial

backgrounds, it is heightened for racial minorities. Research from Gordon (2000) and De Laco (2006) found that gangs helped maintain ethnic pride as these individuals were part of gangs largely separated under ethnic lines. Many of these individuals, prior to joining a gang, felt ethnically marginalized and sought out gangs to be around those of the same cultural or ethnic group (Gordon, 2000, p. 51). In being part of a gang with those largely of the same ethnic background, individuals could promote appearances of fearlessness and masculinity as an ethnic collectivity. Respect is significant for Asian gang members, but as conceptualized as the cultural aspect of "face". Face is the:

> Respect and/or deference which a person can claim for himself from others. Face extended to a person is a function of the degree of congruence between judgements of his total condition in life, including his actions as well as those of people closely associated, and the social expectations that others have placed upon him. (Ho, 1976, p. 883).

Van Gemert et al. (2008) report money as the most common benefit of gang membership (p. 201). Gang members cited gang activities, specifically drug-dealing, as a lucrative means to make money. They highlighted how those involved in these activities felt there was more dignity and respect making money through drug-dealing than through low-paying jobs in the service industry (e.g. working at McDonalds).

Wortley & Tanner (2007) state how money was in short supply for most of their respondents as they lacked educational qualifications and job skills, where criminal activities filled these inadequacies. Most of these individuals claimed that if they were not able to make significant amounts of money, they would not be part of the gang lifestyle. The perception of these individuals reported that money and respect were directly correlated. To them, having money meant possessing respect and the way in which it was acquired did not matter in Canadian society (Wortley & Tanner, 2007, p. 112). Some individuals even stated that the

money they gained through illicit gang activity was a means in which to go legit. They reported how they did not want to work for someone else, and illegal gang-activities were necessary evils to “go legit” as they perceived themselves to have no other way in which to earn capital to open a business (Wortley & Tanner, 2007, p. 115). Gang members were thus lured into gang-involved lifestyles as a result of the various pull factors considered above. Following these are the causes of gang exit and an exploration of the process involved and the strategies utilized.

Desistance and Role Exit

Gang research in terms of desistance and role exit in Canada is scarce. Due to this, the following discussion largely covers gang research in the United States. Decker & Pyrooz (2011b) describe desistance as the reduction of gang membership from peak to trivial levels, with onset marked by identification and termination with de-identification with gang membership (p. 419). Associated with desistance is also identification with elements of aging; comprising pro-social activities “such as a good marriage; securing legal, stable work; and deciding to "go straight," including a reorientation of the costs and benefits of crime” (Laub & Sampson, 2001, p. 4). Desistance however, does not require that one have no contacts with former gang associates, even for those who have withdrawn from gangs for long periods of time. For many of those who describe themselves as former gang members, many may still have social and emotional ties with members of their former gang (Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2011, p. 508). Others may even have lingering identification with the role. As one ‘inactive’ gang member interviewed by Decker & Pyrooz (2001a: 7) states: “[I am] not active, but will always be known as ‘that person’ [a gang member]. I will always be a gang member; that was my life. It will always be a part of me, that mentality. I have changed a lot—I don’t see a gang member in the mirror.”

These lingering ties and feelings for the gang lifestyle indicate entrenchment and endurance with gang membership and explain why desistance may be difficult for some individuals. In desistance research, there are the following aspects: motivations, processes and strategies.

Motivations

In motivating desistance from gangs, violence was cited as one of the most common factors (Bolden, 2012; Carson, Peterson & Esbensen, 2013; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011; Ngo, 2010, Rice, 2014). In research by Carson, Peterson & Esbensen (2013) of middle-school youth in the United States who left gangs, 42 percent reported this as one of their motivations (p. 520). Included in the category of violence were 'friend hurt/killed', 'family hurt/killed' and 'I was hurt', with the last as the most common case (323 instances out of 750). Decker and Lauritsen's (2002) study of former gang members in St. Louis shows similar findings as the majority (16 or 2/3 thirds) of respondents stated that violence motivated them to leave their gang (p. 57). Most of these respondents left because of violence they had personally experienced. Unlike various media depictions, violence here is not a draw towards but a push away from gang involvement.

In one of the few Canadian studies of desistance from gangs, Prowse (2012) finds violence to be central to explaining Vietnamese gang members' withdrawal from gang life. She states how many participants eventually met a threshold of violence where they realized that the lifestyle was too much and not worth being "taken out" for (p. 28-29). Ngo (2010) also finds violence as a motivator of desistance, but as experienced by "innocents" and not participants. He reports how the death of innocents due to gang confrontations tormented some participants, causing them to examine the negativity of their activities and the effect of it upon their communities (p. 95). While factors such as violence constitute push factors or experiences

encouraging gang desistance, there are also pull factors, which comprise external factors that influence desistance.

Decker & Pyrooz (2011b) outline the importance of pull factors in exiting gang involvement. Pull factors consist of family responsibilities, e.g. children, work, the presence of a girlfriend or wife (p. 12). Of these, fatherhood figured most prominently among former gang members as a turning point in motivating gang desistance (Deane et al., 2007; Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule, 2014; Moloney, MacKenzie, Hunt & Joe-Laidler, 2009; Prowse, 2012). As Maloney, MacKenzie, Hunt, & Joe-Laidler (2009) assert, fatherhood facilitates a shift away from gang involvement and deviant activities, to an engagement with education and legitimate employment (p. 2). In these findings, participants found becoming fathers radically changing and transformational to the point of even saving their lives. Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule (2014) report how having children allowed gang members to "break the cycle", in that being a parent and husband became dominant, as it allowed them to make a role transition from gang member to family man (p. 275). As a participant in Deane, Bracken, & Morrissette's (2007) study of Aboriginal gang members testifies "[be]cause I had a baby coming on the way . . . I want to look after my kids. I want to be responsible for my kids. Let them know . . . I don't want to go back to jail" (p. 132). Moloney, Mackenzie, Hunt, & Joe-Laidler (2009) argue how the birth of a child presents the opportunity for desistance. As they assert, "successful desistance from crime may be rooted in recognition of an opportunity to claim an alternative, desired, and socially approved identity" (p. 15). Schroeder, Giordano, & Cernkovich (2010) examine the importance of family for desistance in relation to adult and child bonds. They find that "strong relationships between adult children and their parents significantly increased the odds of sustained criminal desistance for those children" (p. 568).

Family was also found to be important for Vietnamese gang members (Prowse, 2012, p. 29). In pursuing marriage and a family, they expressed the need to show respect for their wife and her family. This stemmed from the Vietnamese tradition of "face" that stresses the collective nature of actions, where one's actions are not only a reflection on oneself, but one's family. In order to respect or show face to their wife and her family, leaving the gang lifestyle was necessary. However, continuing in the gang lifestyle meant placing shame and embarrassment upon their wife and her family.

A central debate within the desistance literature is whether desistance is an abrupt or gradual process (Bulbolz, 2014; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Maruna & Roy, 2007; Rice, 2007). Maruna and Roy (2007), for instance, found gang exits to be abrupt when achieved through a geographic relocation. Most studies, however, find desistance to be a gradual process (Bulbolz, 2014; Rice, 2014). Research by Bulbolz (2014) and Rice (2014) found that desistance for gang members does not come suddenly, but spans from months, to several years.

Included in the gradual nature of gang desistance was disillusionment or "growing out of the lifestyle" (Carson et al., 2013; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011b; Ngo, 2010). Disillusionment occurs when individuals realize the toll that the gang lifestyle has taken on them and recognize the need for a new lifestyle, where pressures such as arrests, stops by police, and constant threats of victimization become overwhelming (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011b, p. 13). Carson et al. (2013) found that disillusionment with the gang lifestyle was the second most important reason for desistance. Ngo (2010) describes disillusionment as stemming from betrayal, as participants experienced being "ratted on" or being stolen from by their gang-mates (p. 95). While these individuals once viewed their gang as their family, experiences such as these caused individuals to become disillusioned with these relationships, where they took measures to detach them.

Bubolz's (2014) study of mainly African-American former gang members in Omaha, Nebraska, found that disillusionment (12 or 40% of participants), based on disloyalty and lack of social support, to be the most important motivation for gang departure (p.88). Feelings of disillusionment by participants were formed around three experiences: incarceration, victimization, and interpersonal conflict among gang members. In each of these experiences, the solidarity and brotherhood expected among gang members was broken when disloyalty or a lack of social support was perceived.

For some veteran Vietnamese gang members, Prowse (2012) found exiting the gang lifestyle was influenced by rational and economic motivations. The first and most frequent reason participants gave was aging and the desire to legitimize their activities (p. 29). These individuals felt they had gained enough respect and connections to avert extortion attempts to their businesses by gang members.

While the police and criminal justice system form the primary method of confronting gang activity, research shows it to be ineffective in influencing gang desistance. However, in the few cases it is given significance, it is described as having some impact on efforts to desist from crime (Prowse, 2012; Rice, 2013). Prowse (2012) cites how targeted police enforcement increased the chances of gang members being "taken down" by criminal prosecution, leading Vietnamese gang members to decide the gang lifestyle was not worth the risk (p. 29). Rice's (2014) study of former gang members reported that incarceration resulted in some re-evaluating their gang involvement and later leaving their gangs (p. 70-71). Incarceration involved separation from the gang, and with this separation, participants were able to contemplate who they were and found that the gang lifestyle was not worth it.

However, the finding that prison allows segregation and thus desistance from gang members should be treated with caution as prison is an environment where gangs are widespread. In 1999, 24.7% of those in American state adult correction facilities were gang members, while in Canada, gang membership is estimated to be 16% of the federal male inmate population (Correctional Service of Canada, 2009). These findings illustrate that incarceration can mean closer proximity to gang members, effectively undercutting efforts to desist from gang membership.

Moreover, more consistent findings show that imprisonment encourages gang membership rather than desistance. According to Totten (2009) the incarceration of gang members not only fails to reduce criminal behavior, it promotes further involvement into gangs (p. 14). The grouping of high-risk individuals in jail increases the chances of negative bonds, leading to even more development of anti-social and criminal behavior. In the case of youth gang members who are prosecuted, criminal inclinations may be strengthened as this obstructs legitimate opportunities (i.e. loss of employment due to criminal record) (Wood & Alleyne, 2010, p. 109).

Grekul & Benson (2008) also find incarceration to be ineffective in reducing gang membership for Aboriginal gang members. They argue that imprisonment is unsuccessful as the structural issues (i.e. poverty, unemployment) responsible for their involvement endure even after release. When released from prison, Aboriginals face further stigmatization and labelling, allowing the cycle to continue and thus resulting in increased risk of recidivism (p. 71). Stigmatization and labelling relate to the complex nature of gang involvement, as the difficulty identifying current gang members expands to identifying those who are no longer gang members. While one may declare themselves as out of the lifestyle, others may not accept this decision

(Decker & Pyrooz, 2011a, p. 14). Some individuals may stay on police files as "gang members" even if they are not. This inaccurate labelling may subject individuals attempting to desist to heightened legal scrutiny (Decker et al., 2014, p. 277).

Imprisonment is not only a barrier to desistance, it is an environment where individuals are recruited into gangs. Beare & Hogg (2013) state that gangs in prison use intimidation and violence to control the prison environment. They report how those not involved with gangs, when entering jail, often become involved by the time they are released. Many inmates are forced to join gangs as the protection offered by affiliation is required for their survival in prison (Beare & Hogg, 2013, p. 432).

Research by Jimenez (2005) of former gang members of Mexican or Mexican American descent in Orange County, California presents a finding rarely cited by other desistance studies. The majority of participants reported education as the primary motivator for leaving a gang (p. 42). Jimenez's findings are explained by the ages participants joined (at ages 7-15) and exited gangs (at ages 16-23). Finishing education as a motivator for desistance may be logical for those exiting at ages 16-23, but would likely not be as significant for those at older ages who are out of school for long periods.

The Process of Leaving Gangs

Sampson & Laub's (1992) life course perspective provides a theoretical explanation for the desistance of gangs, describing it as a process based on maturity and growing up. They suggest a causal relationship between early delinquency and later adult deviant behavior through the life course as subject to life stages, transitions, and turning points (p. 65). In the life course perspective of criminality, onset begins early in life, and later becomes subject to interruptions called "turning points" (i.e. marriage, parenthood, and careers) that allow desistance from crime.

Adorjan & Chui (2013) find that aging out of desistance interacts with life experience, maturation, individual will-power and social support networks.

Giordano, Schroeder, & Cernkovich (2007) describe desistance as based on maturity in terms of cognitive transformations. During adolescence, youths experience positive emotions (i.e. excitement and thrills) partaking in deviant acts such as drug usage and fighting. These positive emotions, however, are difficult to sustain in adulthood as they are less likely to receive any social backing, leading to the gradual diminishment of these positive emotions derived from crime (p. 1610). For those who are chronic delinquents, the positive emotions associated with "delinquency may be replaced in adulthood with feelings of regret, sadness, and depression" (p. 1612). Longer participation in delinquency results in a higher threat of jail or imprisonment and thus an obvious lack of social backing. Extended experience in these contexts make negative emotions such as regret and the lack of social backing apparent.

Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule (2014) describe these identity transitions as occurring in an unruly and irregular manner. They cite three steps in identity transitions. The first step comprises doubts about one's position in a current role. This shift consideration comprises anticipatory socialization, which are attitudinal and behavior preparation for status shifts (Merton, 1968, p. 319). Preparation for role transitions are "gradual processes, where individuals move from one role to another, and in doing so derive new identities from these roles" (Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule, 2014, p.269). The second step is the search for and weighing of alternative roles. The third stage involves specific experiences that emphasize the disadvantages of a current role versus the advantages of a new one (p. 269). Doubts included issues such as the moral legitimacy of the gang and their future with their family (p. 273). The search for new roles is a period of experimentation where new roles are tried out. This period was described as the experience of

two steps forward and one step backward (p. 274). Only over time are subjects able to convincingly portray themselves as disengaging and still require post-exit validation. However for former gang members no external validation exists. In being a gang member there may be external validators, such as through recognition by peers, enemies and police, but none exist to explicitly say that one is not a gang member. Therefore the alternative required is internal validation, where individuals identify within themselves as not gang members (p. 275- 276).

Family as motivating desistance is relevant due to the Confucian notion of filial piety and loyalty. The concept of filial piety proposes that one exists solely because of their parents, and that the family comprises a single body (Hwang, 1999). The parental role is to educate and take care of children, while the child role is to respect the superior (i.e. parents). The parent has a role of authoritarian moralism to which the child is supposed to show obedience. For Asians with strong family relations, respect for parents and family motivates desistance as continued involvement with gangs undermines these values.

While not explicit external validators, some successful indicators of gang desistance do exist. These include a lack of recidivism, successful integration into relationships, education and work. Another area was removal from law-enforcement lists as suspected gang members. However, to carry this out requires standardized criteria; something which does not exist at this time (Ross Hastings Institute for the Prevention of Crime, 2010, p. 9). The lack of external validators and standardized criteria for removing individuals as suspected gang members from law-enforcement lists both present challenges for desistance.

In terms of experiences with desistance, research finds that unlike most Hollywood depictions, gang members are generally able to leave without consequences (Bolden, 2012; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Young & Gonzalez, 2013). This contradicts the media perpetuated

idea of "blood in, blood out", which claims that one must enter and leave gangs in a violent manner (Young & Gonzalez, 2013, p. 3). Carson et al. (2013) describe the desistance process as informal and passive, with individuals simply walking away by ceasing gang associations, moving away and aging out (p. 513). In terms of these findings, rather than viewing gang membership as deep entrenchment into a criminal organization, it is more properly characterized as social networks (Bolden, 2013, p. 475). Bolden (2013) states how many of those leaving a gang were not criticized because their gang peers included friends and family. These organizations were so loosely organized, that the departure of individual members was of little concern.

In Gordon's (1994) study of incarcerated gang members, the majority (75 percent) reported being able to leave their gang at any time with no barriers (p. 111). Many of these individuals, however, stated not wanting to leave their gangs as this was the group they felt the happiest with. Age was cited as an important factor in the perception of whether one could leave a gang. While those in their early 20s stated they could leave easily as they have "grown up", younger gang members stated that it might be a problem for them, which was assumed to be a result of intimidation by older gang members.

Kwok's (2009) study of Asian gang members in Calgary, Alberta, also illustrates the relative ease of exiting a gang. Participants stated little trouble in terms of their disengagement from gangs. Part of this may be explained by the study's composition of relatively young participants (those aged 15-17), those not deeply situated within a gang, and those not embedded in these gangs long enough to be veteran members. Although most participants saw themselves as progressing to "hard-core" gang members or career criminals, some described strategies that

could halt the process. These included getting married, having a child, and experiencing violent near-death experiences.

Other research such as De Laco (2006) and Young & Gonzalez (2013) present findings stating that for those more deeply entrenched, leaving a gang is difficult. This applied specifically for those associated but not part of organized crime groups such as biker gangs (e.g. Hells Angels), based on the individual's insider knowledge and the perception of exiting as betrayal (De Laco, 2006, p. 141). Young & Gonzalez (2013) found the ability and willingness to leave a gang as based on length of participation, and the level of gang activity in a community (p. 1). They found that those involved in gangs for the longest period of time had the most difficulty in leaving, while marginal and short-term gang members had little difficulty. Sweeten, Pyrooz, & Piquero (2013) underscore the importance of gang member heterogeneity and argue that not all gang members are created equal. In terms of desistance, their quantitative analysis of 1,354 gang-involved youth in Phoenix and Philadelphia find that "gang embeddedness" is related to the duration of gang membership and patterns of offending (p. 490). Gang embeddedness refers to "individual immersion in enduring deviant social networks and recognizes that there is heterogeneity in gang membership across individuals and time" (p. 470). The deeper in which an individual is embedded into a gang has a negative relationship with desistance. For those more deeply embedded into a gang, there was more difficulty desisting.

The Strategies of Leaving Gangs

In terms of strategies, Kwok (2009) cites the cutting back of gang contacts gradually to the severing of these criminal ties completely (p. 28). Cutting back or limiting contacts with former gang friends involves strategies such as seeing these individuals only on birthdays or by focusing on other tasks. Another strategy of desistance which limits or severs gang contacts is

geographical relocation (Bolden, 2013; Gordon, 1994; Ngo, 2011; Pih, De La Rosa, Rugh, & Mao, 2008; Rice, 2014). Leaving a city or region to get away from the gang lifestyle denotes "starting over" (Gordon, 1994, p. 11). In leaving ones' native geographical setting, comes the removal of close proximity to other gang members. As Bolden (2013) argues, breaking this proximity may allow the breaking of one's psychological connection to other gang members (p. 484-485). If this break is not achieved, Bolden argues the result may be ambivalent behavior (i.e. contemplations of deviance) and a continuing cycle back into the gang lifestyle. Ngo's (2010) study of immigrant youth describes a similar strategy as "shipping off", where participants who were gang involved in Calgary relocated to their countries of ancestry to live with family. This strategy was found to be successful when participants had close supervision and access to positive relationships (role models and mentors) (p. 95). In most cases, however, this method does not seem very practical.

Maruna & Roy (2007) describe geographical relocation to achieve desistance as "knifing off". Knifing off more generally refers to the wiping out of a previous identity. Geographical relocation comprises the ritual of knifing off because it allows the detachment of individuals or environments that lead to criminal activity. Becoming a former gang member through this strategy is said occur because:

> Enduring self-change is thought to be made easier by breaking away from one's social environment and finding a new one where one is under less pressure to conform to a past identity. By starting anew in a different social milieu, one faces no such pressures to maintain a consistent identity. (Maruna & Roy, 2007, p. 105)

Research by Ugen (2000) finds that work can serve as a turning point in criminal desistance. For criminal offenders even offered marginal employment, it significantly reduced their reoffending, but this only served as a turning point for those over 26 and not for those who

were younger (p. 542). Work is significant in desistance because "workers are likely to experience close and frequent contact with conventional others and because the informal social controls of the workplace encourage conformity" (p. 529).

An additional strategy of desistance is a change of demeanor to police, from a disrespectful to respectful attitude, in order to avoid police scrutiny. Sykes & Clark (1975) explain why this is relevant in what they describe as the ordering rules of encounters, or the exchange of deference and maintenance of proper demeanor (p. 588). Demeanor is described as part of an activity which is symbolic of approval regularly shown to a recipient who is a symbol of something else. As police are viewed as the symbol of the law, deference to them illustrates an individual's respect for it (the law). In showing a lack of deference to police one implies themselves as a violator of the law or guilty of a crime. However in showing deference to an "officer he re-establishes himself as someone willing to fulfill his interpersonal obligations and membership in the moral community" (p. 588-589).

One strategy or factor given some attention in desistance studies is the existence of community supports. In Kwok's (2009) study, only a single participant stated how he was aided into legitimacy by professionals who helped him find work and developed his interviewing skills (p. 33). Rice (2014) states that community support such as probation officers, social workers, and religious authorities were helpful in that they showed concern and aided gang members in finding programs to support their desistance (p. 78). Participants reported how these programs provided needs such as housing, case management, and employment training (p. 93). They also provided identity development and emotional support. These programs afforded the support normally given by primary groups such as family, as many participants did not have good relationships with their biological families. Overall, however, community support was a rarely

cited as a factor in desistance. This insignificance of community supports suggests that existing programs in North America are either deficient or scarce.

Study Relevance

The present project will explore some of the key themes highlighted in the existing literature. This encompasses the following elements of the current study of formerly gang involved Asians: How do they define gang members or gang involvement? Why did they enter gangs? Why/how did they exit a gang? While existing classifications of gang membership are useful, rather than view gang membership in a definite or singular manner, the typology presenting different degrees of involvement (e.g. core) will be drawn upon to describe study participants. In the examination of participants' entrance into gangs, consideration will be given to whether Asians conform to push factors such as marginalization, poverty, discrimination, cultural conflict and familial breakdown and/or pull factors including respect, status, and money.

Previous research highlights five overarching themes in terms of desistance which are to be considered in relation to Asians. First, how prominent are violence, family, and incarceration as themes of desistance? Second, does desistance occur abruptly, or gradually? Third, if it is a factor, what key events initiate disillusionment? Fourth, are individuals able to leave gangs as easily as the studies indicate? Fifth, do individuals who no longer identify as gang members still maintain social and emotional ties to their previous identity?

When it comes to the strategies of leaving a gang, the literature describes two overarching themes. First is the cutting back or severing of gang contacts as the most prominent strategy and second strategies such as geographic relocation and community support. As a result of the literature, two themes arise: do Asians have unique strategies given their different cultural context, and whether race/ethnicity influences their ability to desist. As previous studies do not,

or scarcely examine the influence of ethnicity for Asians in gang membership, the current study attempts to address this gap.

Chapter Three: Methods

The decision to enter into this project did not come easily. My initial interest in the study of gangs first began during my undergraduate studies when carrying out a similar project for one of my research methods courses. While studying Asian gang members was always preferred at the University of Calgary Master's program, I doubted and was unsure whether this was even possible. Feelings of ambivalence, fear, and reluctance endured due to the delicate and difficult nature of the study. Only after being rewarded a Social Science Research Council grant did the desire and confidence to undertake this study become firm.

The motivation and shaping of this project comes from the positionality of the researcher. Positionality refers to the social position of an individual in relation to those he or she is studying (Hopkins, 2007, p. 386). In highlighting positionality, researchers reflect upon the various identities that may influence research encounters, processes and outcomes (Hopkins, 2007, p. 387). The basis of my positionality in relation to the study is that much of my time growing up consisted of experiences relating to the topic of study; including growing up with, and being friends or associating with gang members. My own social positioning and identity is thus central to explaining the motivation for this study. I am a Vietnamese-Asian male raised by a family of refugees. I experienced a relatively marginalized upbringing, with my family on welfare, grappling with poverty, and residing in public housing. As it follows, peers of mine had similar statuses, and many ultimately participated in deviant behavior and criminal activity. Most regularly got into fights or gang violence, some drug-trafficked, and others became "hard-core" gang members. While some have passed away due to the lifestyle or still endure in it, many have successfully transitioned outside to 'nine to five' jobs and have families of their own.

Becker (1967) presents a dilemma for sociologists in the study of deviance when presented with the decision of taking a side. When one expresses explicit sympathy for deviant groups, there arises accusations that such feelings have biased the work and distorted findings (p. 239). However, if the sociologist takes a stance of neutrality and one ostensibly free of bias based on the non-expression of sympathy, one still has not guaranteed impartiality. Even with training in techniques of theoretical and technical control, the researcher still cannot be sure of applying them impartially or exhaustively (p. 246). As he argues, one can be told how to avoid errors in the research process, but one cannot ensure one will use all these precautions.

I recognize the challenges of taking sides and maintaining objectivity in research. However, while researcher subjectivity influences research encounters, processes and outcomes, this should not be viewed as a hindrance to being a competent researcher. A competent researcher is one who practices reflexivity. Tsekeris & Katrivesis (2008) describe reflexivity as the essential capacity of actors to adjust to situations (p. 3). The goal of reflexivity in sociology is to enrich the sociologist with new sensitivities and to elevate his or her consciousness to a higher level. The fundamental goal for the sociologist is to deeply reflect upon their work and how it is informed through his or her social position. To be a reflexive sociologist is to be permanently focused on one's consciousness and devotion to the profession. A good sociologist they argue, does not exist in isolation, but is open to changing the self, which consequently changes one's praxis in the world. Praxis as defined by Freire (2000) occurs when there is a realization of a theory or lesson through attainment of balance between theory and practice. In the following study, reflexivity was experienced when participants were asked questions regarding policing. While I had the expectation that participants would overwhelmingly report negative assessments of policing due to many likely experiencing scrutiny from them, this was

not the case as many gave positive, albeit nuanced assessments. While they criticized police for what they perceived as harassment, many viewed such behavior as somewhat necessary and credited them for supressing gang activity. Such reports made me reassess my bias and objectivity, and encouraged me to discuss some of my findings with my advisor to encourage other or more open insights.

Insider Status

Merton (1974) describes the importance of insider status. According to the insider doctrine, the outsider has a structurally imposed incapacity to comprehend alien cultures. Unlike the insider, the outsider has not been socialized into a group, and therefore lacks the experience to have intuitive sensitivity required for empathetic understanding. This lack therefore precludes "full awareness of the symbolisms and socially shared realities; only so can one understand the fine-grained meanings of behavior, feelings, and values; only so can one decipher the unwritten grammar of conduct and the nuances of cultural idiom" (p. 15). Hodkinson (2005) also describes the importance of insider status but specifically in studying deviant groups. In deviance research, non-insiders "may have to work hard over a long period of time in order to gain the levels of trust they require" (p. 12), and may even have to resort to deception and covert methods.

Bourdieu's (1977) conceptions of field and habitus provide a theoretical understanding of my ability to successfully manage this research. Field refers to the social settings in which actors are located (Adams, 2006, p. 514). Multiple fields exist and the ones an actor tends to confront are common for those in specific social groupings (e.g. race). One's placement in a field produces and requires certain responses where the individual responds to him or herself and habit. These responses and habits refer to habitus as they are the reflection of a shared cultural context. Habitus is established from childhood and the result of direct experience, resulting in a

sense of ease in one's surroundings which is habitual and unconscious (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 79). As a result of my childhood and experiences, I have developed a similar habitus to participants which allows me to gain access, understand and navigate this environment.

Data Collection

This study carried out data collection through qualitative interviewing. Interviews are an effective means of learning about experiences, activities and views of events (Bryant, 2011, p. 76). Interviews allow participants to state their perception of social experiences and explain themselves in their own terms. The research process was guided by Rubin & Rubin's (2005) model of responsive interviewing (p. 15). This model recognizes qualitative interviewing as dynamic and iterative. Researchers utilizing this method adapt and orient themselves to participants. This includes modifications of questions to match the interests and knowledge of participants. Responsive interviewing is also employed when interviews are examined and analyzed systematically allowing the pursuit of new questions and topics (p.16). Interviews were conducted by phone or in person in a private setting agreed upon by both parties. These settings largely composed universities, vehicles and private residences.

Interviews were semi-standardized. This structure was appropriate as it is systematic and consistently structured by allowing the interviewer freedom to deviate and probe further than a prepared set of questions (Berg, 2001, p. 70). This approach also allowed the accommodation of novel directions and themes raised by participants. Interviews were recorded on a personal recording device and later encrypted and secured on a password-protected personal computer. All participants other than three consented to the recording of interviews. For these three, notes were taken during the interview. The interview guide first collected demographic information (i.e. age, marriage status), followed by 11 main questions (and nine sub questions; see appendix

C for details). These questions included asking how participants defined gang members or those gang involved, why they joined gangs, why they exited them, and the strategies they utilized to accomplish this. Interviews were transcribed and coded using QSR NVivo 10 soon after interviews were conducted in the majority of instances.

Selection of interviewing as a data collection method was also based on considerations of time, cost and simplicity. After the initial setting up of an interview and eventual meeting with participants, interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 90 minutes, with follow-up interviews conducted in many instances to elaborate answers and expand themes. Costs were minimal which largely consisted of transportation to meeting sites and small meals for participants.

Population

This study consisted of Asians who have disengaged from gang involvement currently living in Calgary or Edmonton. Despite classification as 'gang involved', this project explores the tenuous nature of gang membership as it comprises various degrees of involvement, ambiguity, and fluidity. The utilization of 'gang involved' takes a nuanced approach to this identity by addressing and embracing the ambiguities of gang membership. It affirms participant's knowledge and experience with gangs while not requiring specific degrees of involvement. Based on their interviews, participants in this study had either higher degrees of involvement as core members or lower degrees as associates.

For the ethnic component of participants, these included those who were Chinese, Vietnamese, and Filipino. No specific preference was given for participants other than identification of an ethnicity located in Asia. The focus on gang membership by Asians is not to imply a homogenous group, but to account for the mixed ethnicities comprising Asian gangs. In

addition it was not appropriate to narrow the population to a single Asian ethnicity, as doing so puts emphasis on a single group while ignoring others.

Sampling

The sampling procedure employs convenience and snowball sampling. A convenience sample is pragmatic as it consists of individuals who are easily accessible and have knowledge on the topic (Berg, 2001, p. 32). Snowball sampling is recruiting from previous participants (Berg, 2001, p.33). Convenience sampling consisted of the substantial contacts the researcher already possesses within this group. This is important because as previously stated, "Non-insiders studying deviant populations may have to work hard over a long period of time in order to gain the levels of trust they require" (Hodkinson, 2005, p. 12). Determining whether one was formerly gang involved was based mainly upon assumptions by the researcher (e.g. through rumor or gossip) or explicit disclosures (newspaper headlines). To confirm whether participants were eligible, they were asked to read an information letter on the study and asked whether this topic applied to them. The majority of participants (eleven) were recruited through convenience sampling, while a minority (three) were found through snowball sampling. Participants are gang involved in terms of their commitment to criminal activity within a criminal group rather than in terms of affiliation with a group as this can comprise those who are just friends.

The sample size consisted of fourteen participants. In terms of gender, thirteen were male and one was female. While the goal was to settle for a sample of five females and ten males, a lack of availability of female participants prohibited this. A significant sample of females would have allowed the contrasting of experiences and uncovering of additional challenges they may face in desistance. In terms of age they ranged from 23 to 30 years old. The average age was 27.35. Five participants identified themselves as Chinese, five as Vietnamese,

and four as Filipino. Two participants were married and one was divorced. Three had children, one was the legal guardian of three, and one had a child on the way. Participants were also asked to estimate the ages in which they became gang involved. The youngest age reported was 13, while the oldest was 21. In terms of exit, the youngest age was 18 years, while the oldest was 29. The average age of entrance was 15.64 years old, while the average of exit was 24 years old.

The small sample size and overrepresentation of males was based on time constraints and the difficulties of recruiting willing participants. Many more participants were approached than comprised the final sample. While many eligible participants were well known to the researcher for a significant period, declines were common. Those declining did not explain why, but it was apparent that they were concerned with the sensitive nature of the study. When successfully recruited participants were asked if they knew others who fit the profile, most stated they did, but could not find any willing due to fear. Most of those who declined were previously considered hard-core members (through gossip), some with criminal convictions, though now married with legal employment and children. For these individuals, it is possible they may have been concerned that if their involvement were disclosed, it would draw unwanted attention from either police or those still in the lifestyle. The following table summarizes the sample's characteristics:

Table 1 Participant Characteristics
Gender: Male: 13 Female: 1
Ethnicity: Chinese: 5 Vietnamese: 5 Filipino: 4
Age: 23: (1) 25: (1) 26: (2) 27: (2) 28: (5) 29: (1) 30: (2)
Age of Entrance: 13: (1) 14: (3) 15: (5) 16: (3) 20: (1) 21: (1)
Age of Exit: 18: (1) 22: (2) 23: (3) 24: (2) 25: (3) 26: (1) 27: (1) 29: (1)

Marital Status:	Married: 2 Single: 11 Divorced: 1
Children:	Yes: 3 No: 10 On the way: 1

Chapter Four comprises a background of gang activity in Alberta using ProQuest's online Canadian newspaper database through a search using the words "Asian" and "Gang". This search was narrowed to newspapers articles dating from January 2000 to January 2014 which indicated 5872 results. Attrition was further utilized by discounting articles discussing Indo-Canadian gang involvement which is regularly conflated with Asian gangs. In addition, these groups are largely characteristic of gang activity in British Columbia, while Alberta is the focus of this study. The choice of these dates for analysis is based on specific events included in this time period that show the emergence of Asian gangs as a serious crime concern in Alberta. Examples include the death of a purported Asian gang enforcer in a shootout with Edmonton police ("Wounded Gang thug Dies") and the mass trial of 36 individuals alleged to be part of an Asian drug-gang ("Lawyers in Alberta balk at setting trial date: In drug case involving 36 accused").

The choice of articles came from a purposive sample, which was mainly based on articles that presented narratives and had moralistic overtones. These are contrasted by "neutral" or "objective" articles that avoided value-laden terminology and focused on known facts, rather than on speculation. The titles of all 5872 search results were reviewed and the articles chosen

for further analysis utilized two steps. First was an examination of article titles with preference to those covering high-level crimes (i.e. large-scale drug trafficking and murder), concerned reactions by politicians, police, and reporters, or others that illustrated the perception of a serious social problem. Second there was an exploration for articles fitting the perception that Asian gangs were widespread and frequent problem. Those that best illustrated this and were detailed (relative to others) were chosen. After attrition mainly through the omission of repetitive or redundant articles, non-detailed articles, 61 articles from 11 different newspapers were left for analysis, with the majority (50 or 80.6%) coming from the Edmonton Journal and Calgary Herald. Newspapers from British Columbia were largely omitted as the gang problem there was largely characterized as Indo-Canadian. Newspapers from Eastern Canada came as insignificant as the link to Asian gangs was relatively weak as the intensity of violence by groups there appeared to be minor.

Table 2: Asian Gangs in the News: Features of a Frame

Key Word	
Asian gang/ Asian street gang	36
Asian-based gang	10
Asian drug gang	3
Asian organized crime/Asian Triad	8
Asian gang network	1
Asian groups/Asian crime groups	7
Multicultural gangs	1
Total	**66**

Data Analysis

Data analysis of interviews was carried out through the grounded theory approach using the constant comparative method (CCM). According to Tesch (1990, cited in Boeiji, 2002, p. 392-393) the comparative method consists of

> Forming categories, establishing the boundaries of the categories, assigning the segments to categories, summarizing the content of each category, finding negative evidence, etc. The goal is to discern conceptual similarities, to refine the discriminative power of categories, and to discover patterns.

When transcription of interviews are concluded, the process of open coding begins, where each passage of the interview is examined and labelled with a code (Boeiji, 2002, p. 395). Following this, different parts of the interview are examined for consistency. Following the first interview, all additional interviews are analyzed in the same manner where some codes are combined with other codes to form a pattern (p. 397). These patterns comprise themes. For example various passages discussing why participants left gang involvement were coded in the category of motivations of leaving gang involvement, where those that indicated family formed the theme of family. As family was reported the most and produced the most detailed responses, it was presented as the most important factor of leaving gang involvement. The passages that were viewed as best conveying the theme of family were then detailed in the result sections. Using the same criteria for the same question as family, death or violence became a theme, but secondary to family. In terms of analyzing these quantatively or systematically, family was reported by ten participants, while it was specifically discussed in 32 different passages. Death or violence was defined as secondary to family because it reported by 9 participants, while discussed specifically in 23 passages.

Epistemology and Ontology Perspective

The methods and methodology of this study were based on the epistemological and ontological standpoints of the researcher. Epistemology refers to questions of knowledge; specifically of how humans have knowledge and what we know (Beck, Bryman, & Liao, 2004, p. 309). This provides the grounding of what knowledge is possible and decides how knowledge is legitimate. Ontology is concerned with the nature of existence (p. 768).

The epistemology of this research is positioned from subjectivism which views life as socially constructed and interpreted, where knowledge is only obtained through explanations by social actors (Beck et al., 2004, p. 310). For ontology, this is positioned through idealism, which contends "that humans have culture and live in a world of their shared interpretations" (p.768). From the researcher's perspective, reality does not exist objectively, but based on perspective of social actors.

Frame Building, and Themes

Chapter Four: Background to Gang Violence in Alberta comprises a content analysis of Canadian newspapers where Vliegenthart & Zoonen's (2011) conception of frame building was utilized to analyze keyword usage in this evolution of an Asian gang problem. In this analysis, terms such as "Asian gang", "Asian drug gang" and "Asian-based gang" were detailed. From here I quantified the terms utilized in describing Asian gangs. In demonstrating significant concern of Asian gangs, I coded articles into themes based on similarities or difference across articles; with a theme defined as an idea that "connects different semantic elements of a story (e.g., descriptions of an action or an actor, quotes of sources, and background information) into a coherent whole" (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 59). The themes represent the emergence, evolution and diminishment of the Asian gang problem as described by the media. For example articles

comprising narratives that suggested solutions to this problem were coded and organized into the theme "Framing Solutions". In articles criticizing the characterization of an Asian gang problem, I coded and themed these as "Contesting the Racialization of Gangs and Crime".

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations comprise a central component of the research process with regards to researcher and participant safety. My personal sense of safety as the researcher was managed through my personal familiarity with the population studied, which is based on previous or long-term connections. The participants interviewed were those who had exited gangs for many years (except in two cases) and had no known ongoing issues (i.e. pending charges or convictions).

Informed consent refers to the knowledge that participation in a research project is voluntary, containing no fraud, dishonesty or manipulation (Berg, 2001, p. 56). Prior to the process of interviewing, participants were required to read and sign a consent form to ensure they were aware of any potential risks and benefits. To ensure that the identities of participants were protected, they were only required to give consent by placing an X in a box (as opposed to a full signature) and given the option of choosing a pseudonym.

Confidentiality consists of the active attempt to remove from research records anything that may indicate participant's identities (Berg, 2001, p. 57). Anonymity ensures that participants remain nameless in the final research output (Berg, 2001, p. 57). Nowhere throughout the research process were written records stating the real names of participants made. This includes all portions of the study including informed consent, transcription and data analysis. The reporting of data was also carried out in a meticulous and careful manner. This comprises the modification or removal of details such as names, locations and events, which is apparent as many quotes show heavy redaction.

Strategies for safeguarding and securing data encompass storage of research data on a password protected private computer with data encryption. This method of data security is durable based on the multiple levels of protection. To access this data first requires physical access to the computer which requires breaking into a private setting, second the password to access the operating system of the computer and third the encryption certificate, or else the data is not accessible. For hardcopy data such as consent forms and research notes; consent forms will be located in a locked cabinet only accessible by the researcher, while research notes will be shredded after they have been recorded digitally.

Chapter Four: Background to Gang Activity in Alberta

The Purpose of this chapter is to introduce the social problem that has ostensibly been defined as "Asian gangs" in Western Canada through an examination of mainly Albertan newspaper articles. These narratives provide important information regarding the context of gang involvement that is crucial to understand when considering the processes through which participants in this research were able to desist from gang involvement. It is not only their personal experiences with gangs, but these media narratives that frame gang identity and the social context to which gang-involved members must respond in order to orient their efforts to desist from crime. The substantive chapters that follow, which more specifically examine experiences entering and exiting the gang, are directly shaped by the past depictions of gang activity outlined here.

In this exploration, I demonstrate that the association of Asians to supposed gang activity comprised a fear narrative. This fear narrative arguably has elements of racism as Asians are not only linked with gang activity, but gang activity in itself is characterized as Asian. This follows Goffman's (1963) conception of "tribal stigma" (see below), where Asians are broadly defined, shamed, and contaminated as gang members based on group association. Sacco (1995) describes how the media help shape the public consciousness regarding crime; where media constructions of it are regularly distorted, e.g. exaggerating the actual threat posed, or the relationship between criminal offending and minority group membership (i.e. portraying minorities as more involved than actual statistics state) (p. 143). In this section I explore the construction of contemporary Asian gangs in Western Canada. This exploration comprises three periods: the emergence of these groups as a primary crime concern, an evolution in media narratives where the multi-cultural nature of crime was acknowledged, and eventually a diminishment where race and

ethnicity are no longer the most salient theme. Concluding this chapter is the linkage to desistance. This content analysis highlights the media discourses of Asian gangs in the Western Canadian context and highlights some of the challenges facing ex-gang members in their efforts to desist, as they attempt to separate themselves from the stigmatizing labels accorded to them by the media.

Frame Analysis

To help demonstrate how these newspapers constructed Asian gangs, I utilize frame analysis as introduced by Goffman (1974). He describes frame analysis as how individuals recognize a particular event, where each framework "allows its user to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its terms" (p.21). Entman (1993) offers up a modernized conception of framing, which comprises making salient certain aspects of a perceived reality, while relegating others in order to highlight a particular definition of a problem (p. 52). These frames define problems, propose the cause, make moral judgments, and suggest solutions for these problems. Vliegenthart & Zoonen (2011) describe the process of how a frame comes about as frame building (p. 102). In building a frame there is the presence or absence of certain keywords, catchphrases, metaphors, photographs and charts (p. 106). Frame effects consist of the consequences of these frames (p. 102).

For the analysis of papers that follow, the frames analyzed magnify gang membership and violence by Asians. They obscure the participation of other groups, such as Whites and racialized gangs, and present crime (mainly drug trafficking and homicide) as involving primarily Asians. Using these frames, the newspapers highlighted mainly propose punitive measures (e.g. deportation). In terms of frame building, the word Asian is repeatedly linked to certain activities such as shootings and drug trafficking. These frames engender the perception

crimes such as these are mostly if not always instigated by Asians. Frame analysis explores the ways in which Asian males involved in gangs are described. News articles thus rarely addressed the wider social contexts of gang involvement, nor investigated the 'back stage' areas (i.e. examining the experiences of gang members and the social contexts of their involvement) where gang identity is formed, and potentially resisted.

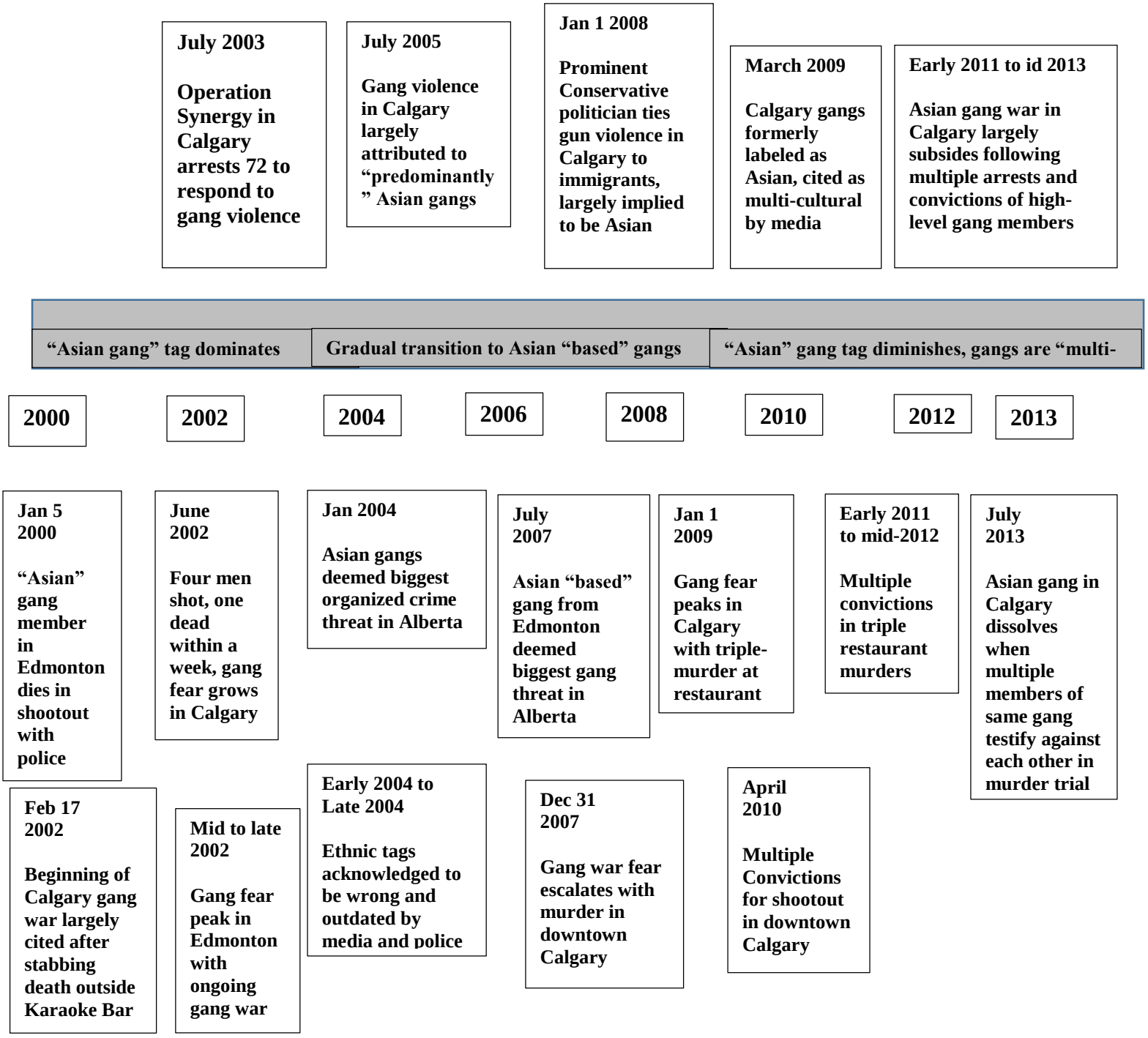
Table 2: Asian Gangs in the News: Features of a Frame

Key Word	
Asian gang/ Asian street gang	36
Asian-based gang	10
Asian drug gang	3
Asian organized crime/Asian Triad	8
Asian gang network	1
Asian groups/Asian crime groups	7
Multicultural gangs	1
Total	**66**

An aspect of frame building is the presence of key words. In constructing gang membership by Asians as a societal problem, newspaper articles utilized a range of keywords, with Asian gang/street gang as the most prominent, appearing 36 times. Asian-based gang followed in prominence with 10 instances. Asian gang network and multicultural gangs tied for least instances at one. Through the usage of the term Asian gang, it promotes an assumption that only Asians individuals are involved with these groups. In using Asian-based gang, it implies these gangs as mostly comprised or led by Asians, but acknowledges that all members are not

necessarily Asian. A keyword observed in only a single case, multicultural gang, comprised the only instance in which an article associating Asians to gang activity made an explicit statement through a keyword that these groups were not entirely composed of Asian individuals. One single article ("The evolution of Calgary's deadly gang war" (Van Rassel, 2009)) comprised the only article that used a keyword that explicitly framed gang problems as not mainly comprising Asians. Other articles often made short declarations or passing references that other ethnicities were/are involved. Table 3 presents a timeline illustrating the emergence, evolution and diminishment of an Asian gang problem in news sources, utilizing specific gang crimes or events in Alberta that highlight these themes. These boxes below provide a history also using formal events by the police and government and provide brief summaries from newspapers.

Table 3 Timeline – Background to the Asian Gang problem in Alberta



Calgary's Gang Conflict

The following section describes the gang conflict in Calgary between two rival gangs based on media reports and disclosures of some of those involved in the Fresh off the Boat (FOB) and the Fresh off the Boat Killers (FK). Before these groups were visible to the public as engaged in a gang war, they comprised a single group, but split due to unknown reasons. While prior animosity existed between the two groups, the start of this conflict is largely attributed to a killing outside a downtown karaoke bar on Feb, 2, 2002. The conflict which initially began with fist fights, escalated to the use of weapons such as machetes, knives and eventually firearms which would lead to the deaths of over two dozen people from 2002-2009. While both groups were initially labelled as "Asian", they were always multi-racial and became even more inclusive as they merged with groups from other races. This is apparent as one of the major sources of information on these groups came from a gang leader turned informant who is White. This individual was not only an original member, but one of the primary recruiters of their gang. The event that put primary focus on this conflict was a triple-homicide at a restaurant on New Year's 2009 where an "innocent bystander" was killed. While back and forth retaliation would follow this event, it would eventually subside in the next few years. Police would lay charges and the courts would successfully convict many members from both gangs for multiple shootings such as the three murders on New Year's 2009. In addition, members of one gang would testify against each other in court, leading to its eventual dismantlement as this included a leader and a senior member (Elliot, 2013; Grant & Bakx, 2013; Hixt & Elliot, 2013; Martin, 2013; Slade, 2015; Van Rassel; 2013).

An Introduction the "Asian Gang Problem"

The first newspaper article well suited to illustrate the rise of a Asian gang problem, was written in early January, 2000 in the Globe and Mail, discussing an Edmonton trial of 36 alleged to be part of an Asian drug gang (Mahoney, 2000). This event is significant because it was one of the first usages of the 1997 federal anti-gang law (banning membership in a gang) and comprised of a massive trial requiring a special courtroom. This article utilized extravagant terms such as "kingpin" and "cocaine-dynasty" which portrayed the image that these individuals comprised a large scale and sophisticated group that comprised a new threat never seen before.

An *Edmonton Journal* article the following day highlighted the issue of Asian gangs through the reporting of an incident where a man labelled as "Gang Thug", purported to be part of an Asian-based gang, died in a shootout with police (Gregoire, 2000). Following the death of this individual, the author quotes police fearing revenge by alleged comrades of the deceased gunman. The police report incidences of intimidation through "hard looks" by drug-dealers and by members of the dead man's gang. No explicit threat or verbal declaration that one is a comrade of the gunmen is given however. In addition there is not even evidence that these "hard looks" are a result of this incident. One officer goes on to state: "Maybe someone else would like to make a name for themselves, and we are easier to pick off than you think, it's something that's always in the back of your mind, and this kind of pushes it forward". The officer's comment illustrates the belief of not only vulnerability, but fear of a possibly imminent attack by supposed Asian gang members motivated by revenge or attempts to gain reputation.

The Fear of Asian Gangs Spread

The Asian gang problem seemingly originating in Edmonton expands to Calgary and British Columbia based on further newspaper analysis. The expansion to Calgary comes through a

Calgary Herald article reporting the suspicious death of an Asian male found dumped in a roadway (Harris, 2000). While there has not yet been any official statement regarding the cause of death, or whether it was gang related, the author nevertheless proposes a link to gang violence. Harris discusses Calgary's growing Asian population and associates it with an assault the last month prior that "may have been gang-related". The article follows this up by a Criminal Intelligence Service of Canada representative ranking Calgary in the top five as plagued by organized crime. Based on the linkages being made between all these themes, the implication is that a growing Asian population is principally responsible for or, at the very least a major factor of Calgary's ranking as a top five city plagued by organized crime.

Some articles are more explicit in asserting that Asians are responsible for rising crime in Calgary with headlines such as "Police fear Calgary is new front in gang war: Slaying suggests Edmonton battle is expanding" and "Vietnamese gang wars escalate: Calgary, Edmonton, B.C. Police join forces". These headlines illustrate Asian gang violence as a concern not localized to specific cities, but stretching across Western Canada and viewed so threatening it required a coalition between different police agencies. A subsequent article pushes the fear narrative further with a graphic description stating "Police in B.C., Calgary and Edmonton are tracking a trail of bullets and blood to stop a Vietnamese gang war in Western Canada that is escalating -- and threatening public safety". In confronting this now transnational and leading crime threat to public safety, is the participation of politicians and police.

Confronting the Asian Gang Problem

For those most significant in confronting the Asian gang problem, these comprised politicians and criminal justice officials. In January 2000, a special unit of the Edmonton police called the "Asian gang" unit was shut down. The existence of a police unit specifically utilized for

confronting Asian gangs makes clear the concern of a racialized threat. The shutdown was not popular and received criticism from Edmonton Mayor Bill Smith, who expressed alarm at the public disclosure and dismantlement of this special unit. In his criticism he stated: “It's pretty obvious to me that the bad guys haven't left town and will only be encouraged by news that the street-level gang activity suppression team set up last year is no longer operating, the criminals will say ‘the heat is off” (Chambers, 2000). The same article quotes Edmonton Police Chief John Lindsay, who blames the dismantlement on the city who repeatedly refused his requests for more funding. He expresses his criticism by stating: “I've been concerned about Asian organized crime all year. It's one of the reasons why we put a great deal of effort into trying to attack the problem very vigorously.”

The concern by criminal justice officials is also evident in another article which details institutional methods in confronting the so-called Asian gang problem (“RCMP demands tougher gang laws: Current legislation is letting kingpins slip away”). In this, the Commissioner of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police argues that changes in laws are needed to confront Asian organized crime (Bronskill, 2000). In addition he also makes specific reference to the trial of 36 alleged Asian gang members in Edmonton. The changes he proposes are for “new investigative techniques and to protect vital information and evidence”. While the meaning of “new investigative techniques” can only be speculated upon (likely lowered thresholds for warrants and surveillance) as this discussion came from a secretive House of Commons Committee, he does clarify what comprises the protection of vital information and evidence. This includes their concern regarding the legal requirement of full disclosure of evidence, which they argue as complicating law-enforcement and tipping off criminal organizations under investigation. While the argument is not explicitly stated in the article, it can be legitimately assumed they support

denying full disclosure. Asian organized crime is perceived to be so threatening that laws demanding transparency and the conveyance of knowledge required for adequate legal representation should be changed.

Others confronting the Asian Gang Problem

While politicians and criminal justice officials may wield the most power in confronting this problem, there are others who are vocal with their concern. Of all the articles examined, the most sensationalist is one from the *Edmonton Journal* titled "Getting caught in the crossfire, Innocent bystanders could get hurt by 'kamikaze' hotheads: U of A criminologist - Gang Violence" (Williams, 2002). This article equates Asian gangsters to suicidal Japanese soldiers in World War II. The article quotes University of Alberta criminologist Keith Spencer, who makes broad speculations that Asian gangsters in Edmonton "want to make a great public display, to be fearless and crazy… We've seen clearly that they really don't care about the safety of anyone else around them, let alone their own safety." In addition he argues that these "Asian guys … have changed the nature of crime a lot". This illustrates to the extreme the concern with Asian gang members, which is shown in a stylized and stereotypical fashion: stylized based on the metaphor that describes Asian gangsters as "Kamikaze hotheads", and in a stereotypical fashion based on the implication that Asian gang members or "Asian guys" all supposedly possesses this kamikaze mentality. Continuing the examination of these media representations of the Asian gang problem, are the framing solutions proposed to confront it.

Framing Solutions

Framing involves the presentation of solutions to problems. For the problem of Asian gangs, one argument proposed is decriminalization. In an article titled "Make Edmonton gangs the real Outsiders: Surest way to squelch the shootings is to steal their profits" the solution proposed is

decriminalization and regulation of morality defenses (e.g. drug usage) (Babiak, 2002). As a result of this change, these groups would leave Alberta to "get jobs in fast food restaurants in Toronto, where they belong". In addition the article portrays these individuals in a stereotypical manner: "They wear ostentatious silk shirts and put those glowing blue lights on their souped-up Hondas and Toyotas. Their grammar is atrocious".

The mocking and disapproval of their supposed fashion and style choices demonstrates an us vs. them attitude. Babiak (2002) ridicules of what he perceives to be the choice of clothing and vehicles by Asian gangsters. He goes on to criticize their supposed lack of grammar expertise and implies that the only job they would be capable of outside drug trafficking, would be work in fast food restaurants. These individuals are portrayed as a homogenous group, extending their stigmatization beyond criminality to a lack of style, linguistic incompetence and occupational uselessness. He proposes a hegemonic vision of "worthy citizens" in Alberta, which obviously precludes these groups as he portrays them.

Another solution proposed by an article by Roberts (2000) was deportation ("Citizenship abusers must be deported"). This article illustrates the narrative that gang violence is principally performed by Asians, but adds how these Asian individuals are neither Canadian nor Canadian citizens. He also goes on to add: "If they were not born in this country I believe they should be deported if they are convicted of serious crimes… I think many Canadians feel our immigration laws are much too lax and are being manipulated by international and terrorist criminal organizations." In arguing deportation for those not born in Canada, the author rejects their citizenship and equates them with terrorist organizations. The author acknowledges that law-abiding citizens (other Asians) may be experiencing discrimination based on the stereotypical categorization of Asians as gang members, but nonetheless sees this as only "unfortunate".

While the previous articles were not sympathetic to these racialized portrayals of Western Canada's Asian gang crisis, this is not the case for all articles, which I turn to next.

Contesting the Racialization of Gangs and Crime

While the construction of gang and crime as Asian was durable, this did not come without opposition. Some writers enacted media reflexivity, or the journalistic awareness of competing representations and opposition through rational retorts (Adorjan, 2010, p. 170). Many of these came from those in the "Asian community", evidenced by their Vietnamese or Chinese surnames (i.e. Trinh, Ngo, Cong, Tsang). One article in particular argues that the dismantlement of the so-called "Asian gang" unit in Edmonton was justified (in opposition to the Police Chief and Mayor) as the labelling of drug or gang activities as Asian is unfair, discriminatory and hypocritical (Trinh, 2000). The writer argues that the linking of cultural backgrounds to these types of crimes is hypocritical and inappropriate as the same racial criteria is not applied to others, such as notorious killer Cliff Olson or to the most well known gang in Canada, the Hells Angels, which is largely occupied by Whites. They state how these stereotypical categorizations of Asians have had troublesome consequences to those sharing an Asian background, with their family included. The author reports: "My neighbours have quietly become suspicious of my existence, my good employment opportunity was diplomatically turned down and my children at school have begun to sense completely different looks and treatments by their teachers and classmates". If such experiences of racism and prejudice against Asians are shown to endure, these would likely present challenges to Asian males attempting to desist from gangs. I return to these issues later in this dissertation.

Writers outside the "Asian community", Morningstar (2000) and Ballantyne (2000), have also expressly criticized the racist portrayal of Asians in the media from their recognition of the

racist discourses surrounding gang activity. Morningstar reports how suspicions against the Asian community were at the turn of the century at an all-time high, as he views Asian customers getting little or no service at businesses. Ballantyne disagrees with the regular association of Asians with a gang problem as he points out that racialization does not follow when crimes are committed by people from Europe or South America. He also criticizes the Asian tag as it is ambiguous and conflates many ethnicities together: "Last time I looked the Asian countries, China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, were also joined by the other Asian countries, India, Pakistan, Burma, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Israel, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, even parts of Lebanon". As the criticisms continued that recognized the inaccuracy of representing all gang activity as Asian, media representations began to evolve and exposed the participation of other races.

Media representations of Gangs Evolve

In media representations of gangs, Asians were framed as the primary race involved in gangs while the participation of other groups were underemphasized. Even in newspaper articles where non-Asians comprised victim or alleged-perpetrator, these events were still framed along racially Asian lines. For example an article describing a drive-by shooting in Calgary ("Gang member admits Southcentre shooting: Attempted murder count withdrawn") gives a name indicating African origins, but nevertheless retains an 'Asian etiology' by stating how the incident was the result of "friction between two Asian street gangs" (Slade, 2004). Another article discussing the shooting death of an alleged Asian-gang enforcer quotes a police officer as stating: "These individuals don't care about the possibility that they're going to hurt innocent bystanders. That's our major concern" (Walter & Reid, 2002). The Asian overtone to this event becomes contested, albeit faintly, in a later article by Kent (2004) it is later revealed that a White male was

responsible for this killing. The gangster label however remains attached to the deceased, and not to the White male.

While these articles showed explicitly that gang related violence was perpetrated by non-Asians, these details are given little consideration, as the most salient aspect is the Asian element. Dominant discourses discussing Asian gangs, perceived all gang crime to be instigated by or committed by Asians, regardless of whether there is concrete proof otherwise. In the later evolution of the gang issue (late 2004), the media do begin to recognize this disparity, through "Ethnic labels for gangs outdated, report says" and "Cops remove ethnic tags from gangs; Organized crime 'not ethnic problem'". In the first article police are quoted as saying that crime groups are increasingly multicultural, and that terms such as "Asian crime groups" are outdated. It is outdated because "Calgary police have observed a white male leader of a cell of a local 'Asian' gang" (Markusoff, 2004). The second article recognizes the inaccuracy of previous depictions of gangs as an ethnic problem in quoting Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) Chief-Supt Soave who states how they have discontinued referring to crime along racial lines because it has fed into the incorrect public perception that organized crime is an ethnic problem: "It's not an ethnic problem and once we accept that it is a Canadian problem we will have moved one step closer, not necessarily to defeating organized crime, but at least toward stopping its expansion" (Derbyshire, 2004).

As criminal justice organizations began to recognize gang crime as multi-cultural and the media circulated these changing perceptions, a gradual transformation transpired, where the media representations of gangs that primarily focused on Asians would diminish (beginning sometime around 2009). This is visible through the less frequent usage of keywords such as 'Asian gangs'. There would also be explicit acknowledgement that many Whites were involved

in these activities. In addition, while the Asians in these groups were previously characterized to be foreigners, they came to be acknowledged as Canadian born. For example, in a newspaper discussion of two groups reported to be involved in a gang war in Calgary, the author states: "FOB and FK have long since grown into multicultural gangs with many Canadian-born members and many whose parents aren't immigrants" (Van Rassel, 2009). Another article illustrates the mixed racial makeup of these two groups, as it states "Both are multi-relations - Asian, White, East Indian and, in some cases, black" (Slade, 2011). As the media came to repeatedly recognize the multi-cultural element of gang crime in Western Canada, the involvement of Asians with gangs as the primary focus began to diminish.

Gang Activity Versus Reality

In Calgary, gang violence from 2002 to 2009 was largely attributed to two gangs labelled as Asian. In time, however, the multi-cultural aspect began to emerge where Whites began to form the most visible race involved, as many were arrested and convicted of high-profile crimes such as murder. For example, one article titled "Gangster started life of crime as teen; Informant traded immunity for information" reports how a white male 'gang enforcer' was the main recruiter for an Asian gang in jail and responsible for multiple-murders (Slade, 2013). In another article that describes the same individual among a group of three other Whites, it reports how they were being charged for seven homicides (Van Rassel, 2013).

The misleading framing by the media obscures reality by bringing into focus the participation of Asians in gang crime but downplays the involvement of others. The obscuring of reality also extends to the perpetuation of Asians involved in these crimes as foreign or born outside Canada. Statistical evidence provides the reality in articles such as "Despite public perceptions" and "Public clings to urban myths about minorities and crime, poll shows". Bridge

& Fowlie (2006) outline these inaccurate perceptions through a poll of 8,431 Canadians that reported 45% of respondents blaming Asians/Orientals as the group most responsible for crime in their communities. They contradict this viewpoint in an interview with Vancouver Police Inspector Kash Heed, who states how the majority of crime committed in the lower mainland is committed by Whites or those born in Canada. Of 600 drug traffickers in Vancouver whose national origin was checked by police, 435 were North American. In Foy's (2008) *Calgary Herald* article, he criticizes statements by Conservative Candidate Lee Richardson that imply a link between Asian immigration and increasing gun violence. To oppose Richardson, Foy refers to a Department of Justice study that found Whites to comprise the largest group of jailed B.C. gang members. Fletcher (2009) also provides evidence to illustrate how Asians are not as involved with gangs as perceived in detailing an RCMP assessment of gang activity in 2005. Of 108 groups documented, it found "one quarter motorcycle gangs, nine percent Asian triad-related, nine per cent Indo-Canadian, eight per cent Eastern European, and the remaining third independents, mostly White". In analyzing this 2005 assessment it would appear that Asians actually comprise the *second smallest* group involved in gang activity, with Whites as the largest.

Asian Gang Members and Asian Canadians conflated

Exaggerated fears of crime establish boundaries between those who are constructed as legitimate members of society and those outside, where deviant outsiders get pushed outside even further from moral boundaries (Cyr, 2003, p. 27). While Cyr's discussion of gangs argues that they can be identified using traits such as clothing and gang signs, Asian gang members in Calgary are reported to not follow these traditional identification methods. In discussing two gangs alleged to be in conflict here, Sgt. Erickson, who is stated to have extensive experience in identifying members of two Asian gangs, reports that: "The two groups are unlike the Hollywood portrayal

of gangs, in which they have a visible hierarchy and have certain matching clothing, paraphernalia and tattoos" (Slade, 2011). Based on these lack of visible traits, it becomes ambiguous of whether one is a gang member or the deviant outsider.

While police and gang researchers draw from experience and knowledge to form their perceptions of gang membership by Asians, the media and general public possess little if any of these. Based on this, they are left to obtain their perceptions of Asian gang members through more arbitrary means, such as constructing their own or accepting stereotypical definitions from others (such as Babiak's 2002 characterization of Asians wearing ostentatious silk shirts and glowing blue lights on their souped-up Hondas and Toyotas). Because identification of Asian gang members is ambiguous, stereotypical, and broad, perceiving these groups cultivates tribal stigma.

Goffman (1963) describes tribal stigma as stigma transmitted by common lineage (or what is characterized as) and transmitted to all members of a group (p. 13). Those stigmatized are often perceived as not even human, for which society has animosity, discriminates against and reduces their life chances (p. 14). In Moore's (1985) analysis of Chicano Gangs, he argues that stigma need not even come from criminal activity, but "involvement" with gangs is enough (p. 43). He argues that the word gang alone "conjures up stereotypical images that are misleading at best and destructive at worst. Certainly not all groups of young people are violent, gun carrying drug dealers" (p. 44). Zatz (1987) also criticizes these broad characterizations by arguing how the social imagery of gang members, as violent gun carrying drug dealers, is more problematic than their actual behavior (p. 130). Tribal stigma applies here in that not only are Asians stigmatized as gang members, but extends to characterizations of Asians as violent gun carrying drug dealers.

Linkages with Desistance

As the media has regularly demonized Asian gang members as evil, totally irrational and lacking any positive characteristics, it is probable that Asians in these groups would have difficulty in desisting, based on these negative depictions of their previous identity. As Moore (1985) & Zatz (1987) assert, the symbolic imagery of gang members is more important than actual behavior, indicating that stigmatization may persist even for those who have exited gang involvement. The result of collective negative symbolizations for these is the increase of these individuals' marginal status and further isolation from legitimate social institutions (Cyr, 2003, p. 31); presenting circumstances detrimental to desistance.

The solutions offered by the media for gang membership by Asians are restricted to policing, more punitive laws and deportation. The restriction to these methods illustrates a viewpoint that these individuals are beyond redemption and can only be dealt with through incapacitation or extinguishment. Desistance from this position is impossible because the narrative presented characterizes these individuals as irrational, immoral, and essentially insane with no regard for their own lives or the lives of others. In addition, the media has given little consideration to examining the structural and social factors responsible for gang membership by Asians beyond passing references to desiring respect (Ngo, 2000; Williams, 2002) and money (Williams, 2000; Poole, 2004; Woo, 2010). The media in this analysis of papers narrowly focused on individual factors, implying the belief that Asians who participate in gang membership suffer from collectively held pathologies. As these portrayals and perceptions dominated during the period when the participants for this study were actively involved in gangs, it is not surprising that their efforts to desist from gang life were challenged.

The purpose of this study is to examine those who have successfully desisted from gang involvement and how they carried this out. These interviews will illustrate how narratives comprising Asian gangs have shaped participants' perceptions and those of others regarding the context of gang involvement. Participants reported how these media narratives labelling Asians as gangsters supported participant's entrance into the lifestyle as these representations gave them legitimacy. On the other hand, these media representations of Asians as gangsters were detrimental to their desistance as these labels showed endurance. The interviews describe these difficulties and the strategies they utilized in order to manage them.

Chapter Five: Gang Involvement and Legitimacy

This chapter demonstrates how participants defined gang members and how and why they became gang involved. Race was viewed as significant in terms of Asians being perceived as gang involved for this characteristic alone. Legitimacy involved employing visible tattoos, and authenticity comprised participation in criminal activity. In terms of how participants became gang involved, this was facilitated through race/cultural similarity and connections from friends, family and role models. Responses illustrated that participants felt a lack of pressure towards their gang involvement and nearly all entered willingly. In terms of push and pull factors for involvement, these included the need to fit in, low self-esteem, financial and social autonomy and respect.

Self-identification

Self-identification is appropriate as gang involvement includes varied degrees and fluidity. Participants largely implied degrees of involvement as core and associate members. Spergel (1990, cited in Franzese, Covey & Menard, 2006, p. 164) describes core members as those who run the gang and are active in day to day functioning, while associates consist of regular or irregular participants. Varied degrees of involvement was illustrated by implications of high level drug trafficking, although most participants implied their activities to consist of bar fights and minor drug-dealing. Fluidity, as explained by Bolden (2012), involves gang without rituals (p. 210), which applies to the participants in this study; their gang involvement was largely accidental and came gradually. While some did actively seek to join a gang, most already had gang involved friends which inspired them to slowly drift into the lifestyle.

Bjerregaard (2002) describes the advantage of self-identification in gang research as it allows researchers "[a] greater variety of activities and structures to be represented and increases

the chances of making generalizations" (p. 38). Self-identification is relevant because it was the method in which participants established themselves as formerly gang involved in this study.

Participant's definitions were similar to the Eurogang Network's of street gangs which comprised durability, street orientation, youthfulness, and group identity (Van Gemert, Peterson, & Lien, 2008, p. 5). Durability was shown as participants stated their gang involvement to range from lows of three years to highs of over a decade. Street orientation is shown by their involvement mainly on the "street", in public establishments such as bars or out working drug lines. Youthfulness is demonstrated by participant's initial involvement in the lifestyle as young as thirteen, to exits mainly in the late twenties. Group identity was illustrated by participant's mutual identification as gang members or as gang affiliated individuals.

Participants ranged in age from 23 to 30 years old (average age was 27.35). The youngest age of entrance for a respondent began at 13 years old, while the oldest was 20 years (average of 15.64). In terms of exit, the youngest age was 18, while the oldest was 29 (average of 24).

Defining Gang Involvement

This study began with the question 1) How do you define a gang member or someone who is 'gang involved'? Responses to this question comprised the following: Asian, Asian with tattoos, and participation in criminal activity. Being Asian was a visual identifier of gang involvement, which was legitimated by employing visible tattoos (such as full arm-sleeves, or tattoos from the bottom forearm to the top of the shoulder), and authenticated through participation in criminal activity. To explain the relevance of race, participants stated that Asians were perceived as the group most involved with gang activity in Alberta. This perception did not require actual involvement with gangs or criminal activity but visibility as Asian. Thus Asians who acquired visible tattoos were legitimating themselves as gang involved. Participants reported employing

tattoos because their gang peers had them, and it declared them as gangsters. Authenticating the gangster label required participation in criminal activities such as drug dealing and physical violence as a group or to the benefit of one.

Participants reported the ease of perceiving gang involvement. Some observed others to be perceived as gang members (i.e. by police or peers) when they were not because of physical proximity to those who were. Gang involvement was also reported to sometimes rest upon rumor or gossip. Further authentication of the gangster label came through long term involvement in criminal activities which meant rising up the gang hierarchy and building a reputation. Making the newspaper because of an arrest and charge was one way in which ambiguity of gang involvement could be resolved. Participant #4, when asked about the relevance of the news for ones perception as a gangster reports it to give authenticity and stigma: "Being in the news makes you notorious, it brings some fame and face to people that do respect that [gangsters] and makes you look like shit in front of normal people (laughing)". Participant #5 also reports the significance of the news to authenticating the gangster identity, but adds how it also rests upon the seriousness of the crime:

> Being in the news gives a sort of credibility depending on how or why you were in the newspaper. You can be perceived as a goof [someone without credibility] or someone who is a bigger gangster depending on the bust or why you were in the news. Because then people realize what you're actually doing. Whether it be how much drugs you got busted for or for how violent your crime is.

So while recognition in the news for criminal activity does offer authentication of the gangster identity, the degree depends on seriousness of the crime.

The following section discusses participant's perception of the stereotype that views race alone as sufficient for identifying gang membership. To be Asian was to be gang involved. This stereotype was challenged as they reported the involvement of other ethnicities. They provided

some validity to the stereotype, however, as they disclosed the extensive gang involvement of Asians in Alberta.

Asians

Participants reported that race/ethnicity was a central aspect of gang membership in Alberta, as Asians were the ethnic group most clearly identified as gang members. When participant #2 was asked why Asians were stereotyped as gangsters, he referred to a past Asian gang problem in Calgary: "Because Calgary doesn't have a good track record when it comes to Asians, there was an Asian gang problem." Participant #11 discusses the origin of the so-called "Asian gang problem" through his knowledge of the emergence of Asian gangs in the late 1990s in Alberta which began from individuals who were mainly Chinese and Vietnamese:

> Ok so back in the day, <gang leader> and <gang leader>, my <info removed>, other guy, six other guys, I think they are ones who originally started the crew out in Edmonton, they were really young, 13, 14, 15, 16, they were basically the starter of the whole gang thing, and it all escalated and everybody departed, my <info removed> departed to <location removed>, someone departed, it became a war between <gang leader> and <gang leader>, fighting, it's all because of money, they felt they couldn't split, they wanted to go separate ways.

This disclosure reports that one large Asian gang began in Edmonton and later split up to other cities, when the leaders conflicted over money. The same participant goes on to report how these groups branched outside the province to cities such as Vancouver. Participant #3 also refers to the significant gang involvement of Asians, as he reported the largest gangs in Calgary to be occupied by Asians: "It depends where you are, but in Calgary the biggest gangs in Calgary were the Asians, in Calgary connected with the <gang name> or <rival of first gang>." Participant #4 also refers to the significant gang involvement of Asians, but states how this began to diminish after the death and incarceration of various gang leaders (also mentioned by participant #11):

> There was a strong Asian gang influence in the early 2000s from the <gang name> and <gang name>. Yeah I don't remember which one ends up becoming part of the <Asian gang in Edmonton>, until <gang leader> got shot and <gang leader> got locked up.

Participant #4 reports exploiting the stereotypical notion of Asians as gangsters in his recruitment as it gave him greater legitimacy. While his gang leader was Asian, most other members were White. The participant reports how his status within this gang was high because his Asian ethnicity gave him more legitimacy, even though many of the White members of this group participated in more of the criminal activities. The Asian element was given notoriety because Whites were not perceived as gangsters in the gang landscape of his city.

Participant #5 reports how these stereotypes had negative ramifications as they influenced police practices, resulting in Asians being singled out for questioning at places such as clubs regardless of actual gang involvement or criminal activity:

> If you go out to the clubs, you'll see uh, gang unit, you could go out, [see] students who are just colored, they are not gang involved, they're not drug dealers or they're not even you know fighters, uh, they will still harass them just because they are Asian.

Participant #6 reports how the negative perceptions of Asians as gang involved extended to their experiences at school for other Asian kids even if not gang involved because they displayed high social status:

> If you were Asian, had a nice car, had some money, automatically you were profiled [as gangsters], there were school kids, school kids that weren't who had rich moms and dads and still got harassed, I saw them getting harassed [by police] just as much as me.

While participants reported the extensive involvement of Asians with gangs, they also challenged any homogenous identification of gang membership in Alberta as only involving Asians. Three reported their gangs as multi-racial, while two discussed the involvement of other racial or ethnic groups. As Participant #4 previously stated, his gang was largely composed of Whites. When referring to the multi-racial/ethnic makeup of their gang, participant #7 reports:

"A few select White people, Hispanic, but mostly Asian, and a small blend of other ethnicities." Participant #7 also challenges the stereotypical notion of gangsters as Asian by referring to other non-Asian ethnicities he knew were involved: "Uh I think it's just the stereotype, there's also like the Black gangster community, there's the Italian, and there's the Russian, but in Calgary the Asian community is usually known."

Participant #11 reports how non-Asian ethnic groups with significant gang involvement do not receive the same degree of attention as Asians: "[There are] Romanian gangsters, I think you hear nothing about them, there's spics [Hispanics], there's the Hells Angels [mostly Whites], there's a lot of different races, I think Lebanese gangs are pretty big in <city name> too." When participant #2 was asked about the relevance of race in his gang involvement, he stated how membership was not limited to any race but required loyalty to the group: "No not at all, cuz the people who we grew up with and the people we hung out with [gang friends] were multi-cultural, anyone was accepted as long as you were faithful." While being Asian served as a visible signifier of gang involvement, this status required further legitimacy. The employment of tattoos served this purpose.

Asian with Tattoos

Atkinson (2003) explores the origin of tattoos and their perception as a taboo with the fear surrounding the emergence of motorcycle gangs in the 1960s. In the 1960s these groups were portrayed by the media as outlaws terrorizing and pillaging local communities. To identify those part of such groups, tattoos were among the most visible identifiers. Tattoos came to signify one as a criminal and social outsider. Tattoos were eventually borrowed by radical or dissident youth subcultures, where deploying the tattoo was "part of rejecting class-based social norms, values, and beliefs" (p.41). Social outsiders such as gangs employ tattoos as a means of mutual

identification. Tattoos serve as a public badge of affiliation between these individuals and disaffiliation with others (p. 164). Participants reported tattoos as serving to mutually identify them as gang members, and demonstrate their resistance to the norms of greater society (e.g. following the law). Their experiences with peers and law enforcement showed awareness of these projections that desired identification as gangsters or social outsiders.

Participants reported that visible tattoos on Asians gave legitimacy to gang involvement. This perception is shared by the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA), in their handbook on tattoos; used to assist officers in detecting gang members. For Asians, it states how tattoos are culturally uncommon, and viewed as bodily defilement. While the handbook acknowledges that tattoos do not necessarily mean gang membership, it nevertheless illustrates a resistance of cultural norms. The tattoos sought after largely include animals such as tigers, phoenixes and dragons (Canada Border Services Agency, 2008). Ten participants reported currently or previously having tattoos. When asked what type of tattoos they had, these mainly comprised dragons. Participant #3 reports how Asians obtaining tattoos meant labelling themselves as gangsters due to the significant Asian gang influence:

> I mean the biggest gangs in Calgary were the Asians, so if you were an Asian with a tattoo you were stereotyped as a gangster and so by knowing that, and most people knowing that, by getting a tattoo, you were basically labelling yourself a gangster.

Participant #5 got his first tattoo at age 14 to symbolize solidarity with a group: “I got it when I was 14, me and three others got it in the same spot to symbolize brotherhood for life.” Obtaining a tattoo in the same place at the same time with these friends and future gang mates symbolized mutual identification as up-and-coming gang members. Participant #3 also reports how the first tattoo he acquired was facilitated through friendship with someone gang involved, which consisted of a dragon: “I had a buddy who was involved with the stuff, ok um and he's

like I'm going to get you [a tattoo], lets gets you a tattoo, alright, of obviously a dragon on the arm." The participant's usage of "obviously" when referring to a dragon tattoo suggests that it was taken for granted and therefore well-established as the tattoo symbolic of gang membership by Asians. Participant #7 reports how his acquisition of a tattoo, also a dragon on the arm, served as a means to legitimate his identification with a gang and as a gangster: "I first got it when I was in my early 20s and I was hanging out with those people [gangsters] and generally and I think a lot of them had tattoos, I got it to say I was a gangster."

Participant #8, who also had tattoos, but not ones signifying gang involvement, stated that tattoos in combination with dyed hair further legitimated the gangster identity: "When I was younger, when I wasn't as wise as I am now, I would be like, if you have [full arm] sleeves then you know, dyed hair or whatever, you are a gangster." Participant #4 reports how his employment of tattoos served to exemplify deviance and resistance to norms: "I got them because I didn't want to waste my life and my time fighting with norms. It lets them [others] know I'm not here to fuck around."

According to participants, receiving a tattoo was part of the process of getting initiated into the gang lifestyle and served to legitimize their identity. While all participants did not employ tattoos, nearly all reported awareness of its significance to gang involvement. The type of tattoos utilized were narrowly focused and comprised the types the CBSA probed for when attempting to identify gang members. Participant #4 when deeply involved with the lifestyle stated proudly displaying his two full-sleeve tattoos (from forearm to the top of the shoulder); one of a dragon, and another of a phoenix in public. Participant #3 also publically displayed two-full sleeves, one of a dragon on one arm and a snake and tiger on the other, but reporting hiding these from his parents. Participant #1 had three visible tattoos, one on the neck (of Asian

characters) and two full arm sleeve (both dragons), but was in the process of getting his neck tattoo removed. While participant #7 reported a full-sleeve dragon tattoo, he had it removed a few years prior (during their exiting of the lifestyle; see the following chapter for further details). Tattoos were employed to show a mutual identification with a subculture (Asian gangsters) even if the tattoos acquired were not specific to a gang. The tattoos participants attained were instead general to all Asian gang members.

Participants also reported how the presence of tattoos for legitimizing gang membership resulted in reactions that confirmed these perceptions. Participant #3 reports how a family member criticized him when he became aware of their tattoo because he viewed it to signify gang involvement:

> I told someone [about getting a tattoo] and that someone told his sister, and then his sister told my sister, and then she basically freaked out. And said like what do you think you're doing, you can't, you think you are part of a gang, what are you going to do, end up dead or in jail.

The presence of tattoos on Asians also legitimized the perception of gang involvement from the viewpoint of law enforcement. Participants reported how the surveillance and reactions of police became magnified when Asians had visible tattoos. Participant #2 reports how groups of Asians with tattoos encouraged heightened responses by police at the club: "When there's a group of Asians that have tattoos then that's when they [police] start going crazy, guys with tattoos, but at the same time guys bring it upon themselves doing that." When questioned as to why police had these reactions, participant #2 argues that Asians with visible tattoos were publically stating they were gangsters and encouraging these reactions: "When they [Asians] have tattoos, they feel like gangsters, like nothing can happen to them, they feel invincible, they don't care about the cops." When participant #1 was asked why his friends were singled out for

police questioning, he agreed with the viewpoint that Asians employing visible tattoos invited police scrutiny: “Being Asian with tattoos probably has a lot of things to do with it [being questioned by police], because they think everybody with tattoos are involved with [gangs], there is more highly chance of getting singled out.” At the same time he criticizes these police reactions as excessive because not all tattoos on Asians are gang tattoos, but believes police to perceive them as so, but not on White males as they are viewed as art on them:

> They think everybody with tattoos are involved with [gangs], of course it all depends too right, they probably look at [tattoos on] Whites as art, but they look at Asians with tattoos, especially full sleeves, it’s just like you know as their gang mark, like when it’s not.

While eleven participants largely perceived tattoos as denoting gang membership, three argued how societal perceptions (or what they perceived as) to be changing. Participant #8 reports his perception of tattoos as changing in the past few years, where it once legitimized gang involvement, but was now acceptable for non-deviant groups:

> Like back, if you asked me maybe 2 or 3 years ago I would have been like yeah you know I have tattoos and this guy has tattoos, this guy has [full] sleeves he’s labelled as a gangster, blah blah blah, now that I'm older and I see the world in a different light. A tattoo is only artwork that’s on your skin, like, like a lot of cops have sleeve, you know, priests have tattoos.

Participant #9 also views the perception of tattoos as changing because they are becoming more common, and refers to the past negativity of them:

> I think the times are changing, just like now it’s becoming more accepted. It just became more common to get a tattoo, TV shows coming out with people getting tattoos, I think that, I think when, I think it has to do with the way they brought us up, tattoos bad, you know.

Participant #10 while viewing tattoos as signifying gang membership, felt comfortable displaying his at work. This comfort was allowed through his long-term employment and perception of himself as a good employee. He also stated how this job was a professional

occupation for which a degree was required. However if he did not perceive his credibility at work as sufficient, he would not display it there as this meant implying gang involvement.

To explain why visible tattoos on Asians were perceived as gang related, this comprised their relatively permanent nature, the taboo, and the influence of media (e.g. movies). Participant #8 explains the gang association of tattoos through their relatively permanent nature: “I think the fact that a tattoo is permanent, it gives off the illusion you know, you must be pretty gangster to tattoo something on your body, show it off in public.” Participant #3 discusses the gangster association of tattoos as originating from societal perceptions of it as a taboo: “Tattoos back then, still and actually kind of does, it does define you as a gang member it’s such a taboo right and society that’s what they label it as.” Two participants attributed the perception of tattoos as gang related from Asian gangster movies. Participant #9 states how tattoos legitimized gang involvement because of the Japanese and the Yakuza (Japanese mafia): “Yah like, here’s a good one [explanation], getting tattoos arrived from Japan and the Yakuza, in the movies and all that bullshit, you know what I mean.” Participant #10 agrees that legitimization of the gangster identity by employing tattoos was influenced by the media: "It’s mostly common for gangsters to have tattoos, because of the media, back then and now, from movies and other gangsters, to be a gangster you get a tattoo to fit that.”

Participants reported tattoos as a means to legitimize the gangster identity and establish group identification. Because they observed gangsters in movies or their peers/friends (who were gangsters) as utilizing tattoos they imitated these individuals to gain credibility. Tattoos in themselves were not just important, but significant in terms of size and type of tattoo. Tattoos from forearm to shoulder were clearly visible when wearing a short sleeve shirt. The type of tattoos mostly comprised dragons. While the utilization of tattoos provided a visible means to

legitimate Asians as gang involved, authenticity required other means. Tattoos comprised "looking gangster" but did not comprise "being gangster". To be gangster required engagement in criminal activities.

Participation in Criminal Activity

Participants reported that authentication of gang involvement meant partaking in criminal activities, largely including drug dealing and physical violence. All fourteen participants reported drug dealing central to gang involvement, where most implied but did not explicitly report past participation. Participant #9 stated how gang involvement meant selling drugs or being around people that did it: "You are more involved in drugs, you are um, you are selling drugs or doing it and uh, associating with people that do it right." Participant #11 reports the specific drug of relevance to be cocaine and refers to drug dealing as "running a phone"; which entails receiving phone calls on a cellphone and meeting customers for their drug requests.

Participant #8, when asked what gang involvement entailed, reported it as not necessarily requiring drug dealing, but included other illegal activities such as: "Extortion, robbery, anything illegal to make money, even bank robbery if it came down to it, you could be part of uh, uh, robbery gang or something, or drug gang." Participant #2 refers to drug dealing as associated with gangsters, but includes firearms trafficking: "People that deal with drugs and guns, is what I consider a gang member, that uh that produces it or sells it."

When referring to drug dealing, participants were cautious in their responses. While the majority implied previous drug dealing, they did not explicitly admit it. Instead they referred to making money through illegal means and discussed it generally as activities related to gang involvement. In addition only a single participant made specific reference to an actual drug (cocaine). These responses showed that even outside gang involvement, participants were still

guarded in their responses and the vernacular they used. They were intentionally vague and projected these activities to include others and not themselves in most instances.

All participants other than two reported violence as a central activity of gang involvement. Participant #4, when asked what a gangster was, reported them as someone willing to use violence as a means to resolve disputes and maintain respect: “People who handle problems on their own, usually through violence, [because it’s] needed to maintain respect, and they will not back down or let things go.” Participant #8 reports how authenticating gang involvement meant escalating levels of violence which first begin with fights and eventually to murder:

> Yeah like oh, we wanted to be like those guys you know [gangsters in movies], gang fights with machetes, colored hair and all of that shit and then eventually everyone matured and moved on to actually making money and killing each other as opposed to just group fights, knife fights and stuff.

Participant #8 reports how employment of violence did not just authenticate individual gang membership, but projected group identification: “You have to prove to the world you know, you guys aren't jokes [weak], you guys aren't to be fucked with.” Participant #1 states how the presence of gang friends meant indifference to consequences and willingness to participate in physical violence: “When I’m out, if I'm out with those group of friends it’s just like you know, nothing matters, you don't care if anything happens, fighting, bar fights, whatever, might happen.” Participant #3 reports that violence through shootings were a significant measure of gang involvement but downplays the significance of stabbings as they may not always signify gang involvement:

> One of the main ones is shootings and stuff like that, I think, if it involves guns, then yeah, maybe even stabbings, you hear about that, but I mean people get stabbed over a fight, doesn't mean they’re involved in a gang, some of them just might have a knife

right, but I think trafficking or anything to do with arms, so like guns and stuff.

While Participant #8 discusses violence as central activity to gang involvement, he reports that gangs do not necessarily need to engage in violence but require actions to the benefit of the group:

> It doesn't necessarily have to be just uh, a gang where you gotta do violent things like shootings, stabbings, or killing. Anything can be representative of a gang, you could just say it's a group of people that partake in illegal activities, you have to be more loyal than the regular person would be, you would have to be more willing to, to help out the cause as opposed to you know, doing things for yourself, and your, you have to represent your group, the group you're in the gang you are in, whatever the hell you want to call it.

Participant #8 reports how it was not necessarily earning money through illegal means or utilizing violence that made the gangster identity authentic, but engaging in these as a group, which built solidarity:

> You're part of an organization that you know, would call themselves a brotherhood, they stand up for each other, they rep each other [fight for each other], they help each other make money illicitly, so they participate in illegal activities as a source of income.

Participant #5 also reports gang involvement as requiring group solidarity through supporting each other in fights or making money, which illustrate the notion of family:

> So you're hanging out with them, you're working together with them, you're having problems together, you are a unified unit, you have to be doing something for the group, depends on what kind of activity, doesn't matter, could be selling drugs, could just you know be getting into fights, you know or doing whatever but yeah.

While violence was reported to be significant of gang involvement, two participants expressed disapproval of it. Two participants claimed their gangs were relatively non-violent and avoided confrontations. Participant #6 states how his gang existed for monetary purposes and not for notoriety: "We weren't out there to be the toughest guys or the scariest guys, we were just a bunch of friends out to make money together, like we weren't getting into altercations or anything." Participant #4 also reported that violence was not central to his gang. While his gang

did participate in violence it was to a low degree and defensively, and he claimed they were not violent in comparison to other gangs.

Participation in criminal activities such as drug dealing and physical violence served to not only legitimate gang involvement, but make it authentic. While Asian ethnicity and possessing tattoos comprised "looking gangster", engaging in criminal activity signified actually "being" gangster. These activities were not defined individually but to the mutual benefit of the group. By participating in these activities as a group, or to the benefit of one, respondents not only authenticated themselves individually as gangsters, they also authenticated the group as a criminal gang. Through these criminal activities, participants built group solidarity where they shared the problems (e.g. fights) and benefits (e.g. protection) of gang involvement. While these traits legitimize and authenticate gang involvement, the following section discusses the ease of perceiving gang involvement. Even physical proximity to gang members was sufficient to stereotype gang affiliation and rumor and gossip also played an influence. In addition violence as a condition of membership was rarely mentioned. So while violence was significant in determining gang involvement, it was not necessarily required.

Ease of Perceiving Gang Involvement

Responses illustrated the ease of perceiving gang involvement. Some participants indicated that involvement was easily perceived, even for those peripherally related to criminal activity, who are stereotyped and assumed to be involved. Participant #5 reports the ease of these stereotypes and assumptions occurring when friends were mistaken as part of their gang, when they were not, because they were out with them in public:

> There's been a lot of times where people have been mistaken for being with our group and uh, all they are is just our friends that we just go party with sometimes but they're not

affiliated with us at all.

Participant #5 describes those involved in a gang in comparison to those who are just friends, which covers awareness or unawareness of the group's activities:

> They won't be in on the operations of your group, uh, they won't know the ins and outs of what you do every day, what you are doing at night, they are people just hanging out, they won't know everything about you.

Participant #3 also reports the ease of perceiving gang involvement as individuals could be labelled based on anecdotes: "It's mostly word of mouth honestly, most of the time you wouldn't know if they were [gangsters], I think the majority of people [gangsters] would already know, or they know of that person, or they hear of people right." Participant #3 reports that concrete identification of gang involvement could be accomplished if one was known to participate in criminal acts through public disclosures in the newspaper, if one already had suspicions of gang associations: "There are bigger names [gangsters] that people know about, because they have done stuff [criminal activities] before, whether it shows up on the news or not, especially if you know they are connected to <gang name> or <rival of first gang name>." In the following sections participants discussed how they became gang involved and the reasons for their involvement.

Becoming Gang Involved

Table 4

Factors of Gang Involvement

Race/Cultural similarity	3 (21% of participants)
Need to fit in / low self-esteem	2 (14%)
Friends, family and role models	12 (85%)

Financial and social autonomy	10 (71%)
Respect	11 (78%)

Participants reported race/cultural similarity and friends, family and role models to be factors for entering gang involvement. Race and cultural similarities drew participants to gang involved individuals or comprised those who they later would form their gangs with. Why participants became gang involved comprised push and pull factors. Push factors were not reported in detail and formed only slight responses by participants. These included the need to fit in and low self-esteem. In terms of pull factors, participants reported financial and social autonomy, respect and fun. These pulls factors are largely consistent with previous studies that find respect, status and money to be most significant factors in joining a gang (Chettleburgh, 2007; Mellor, MacRae, Pauls, & Hornick, 2005; Ngo, 2010; Van Gemert et al., 2008; Wortley & Tanner, 2007).

Race/Ethnicity and Cultural Similarity

While ethnic background was reported to be important in the labelling of one as a gang member, only three participants stated that ethnicity had an explicit influence to their involvement with a gang. Participant #8, when asked whether being Asian was significant to his involvement, reported it to be a contributing but not major a factor because many Asians already had gang associations:

> I wouldn't say it's a major factor but, it's a contributing factor, because we grew up in an area that wasn't so good, I would say at least 50 percent of Asian people I knew at the time were related [associated] to gangs in one way or another.

Participants reported association with gang involved individuals as not exclusive to being Asian, but a combination of both. Participant #5 explains how he associated with Asians who later became gang involved because they were similar to them and comprised who he grew up with:

> Yeah I mean we tend to go towards, together to the same race, uh it just worked out that way when you're younger you uh affiliate yourself with group members who are similar to you or have similar interests, I would say race plays a factor in that.

Participant #10 states that because he already knew Asians who were gang involved, the similar cultural context/interests and communities he grew up in helped connect them with these individuals: "The Asian culture, food, language, the gang movies, rap music, growing up in poor or bad communities." The importance of ethnicity in terms of the desire to be around individuals of similar cultural and ethnic background is found to be significant in previous research (De Laco, 2006; Gordon, 2000).

While previous research of similar ethnic groups outlines the importance of push factors (those which push individuals into gang involvement) (Ezoeonu, 2014; Ngo, 2010; Robinson & Joe, 1980, Young, 1993), these were not as salient for participants in this study. Push factors in previous research of racial minorities included social and economic marginalization, problems with acculturation, and disintegration of interactions with family, schools, and communities.

Fitting in and Low Self-Esteem

Only two participants reported push factors as influencing their gang involvement which comprised fitting in and low self-esteem. Participant #4 stated how his entrance into the lifestyle came from emotional vulnerability based on conflicts and separation from his regular group of friends. He later joined a gang in order to fit in and fill the void in their social relationships. Participant #10 reported similar self-esteem issues and stated the most important factor for his involvement as needing to fit in. As many of his friends were already gang involved, becoming gang involved facilitated this fitting in. For the majority (twelve) of participants, pull factors were more significant than push factors, with these comprising friends/family and role models.

Influenced by Friends, Family and Role Models

The majority of participants (twelve) reported their involvement with gangs as influenced by friends, family or role models. Participants reported the comradery and solidarity with friends as encouraging their gang associations. Participant #2 reports how his gang involvement came through friends he grew up with, who were also viewed as family: "[It was] Influenced by the people, my friends that I grew up with when I was young, I was just comfortable around them knowing we had each other's backs, they were my second family." Participant #8 reports how his friendship networks eventually led him to those already participating in criminal activity:

> I would be good friends with somebody and they would be doing something [criminal activities] or they're part of something [a gang], and you know, since we're such good friends, I'll start hanging out with their friends, and then we become friends.

Participant #5 illustrates how his entrance was a gradual shift as his friendship network eventually became a gang as a means of protecting himself from other groups:

> When I was younger, uh and we all started to grow up with each other and um, I wasn't directly involved at that time [in gang activity] but then uh, I got into problems with certain people and my friends had the same problems with that same group of people so uh obviously the smart thing to do is band up together and uh protect each other.

Participant #7 states how his gradual shift into gang involvement first started with interest in the money and later transformed into supporting an inter-gang conflict even though he was not part of it when it began:

> The people that I eventually met, that led me to connections to other people [gangsters], and slowly it became not just about the money, but became more about like representing your side, and I didn't even know what I was representing because I wasn't even friends with those guys back when it [the gang war] all started.

In terms of representing the gang, this likely meant fighting for the gang, affirming membership, and being involved in conflicts with rival groups. Participant #11 reports his introduction into the gang lifestyle as unintentional and facilitated through family:

> I think after five years <info removed>, I found out <info removed> was a gangster. I think the only reason why I could say that so openly, so freely is because our house got raided [by police]. You can say that it's just based on like, it was crazy I would say, I did not know. Naive, I did not know I was too young to know anything. I just thought the world was like you know. I didn't know the world could be like this. It was an eye opener for sure.

After being raided and finding out their family member was a gangster, participant #11 undertook the gang lifestyle willingly as he became aware of the power he now yielded, illustrated by statements such as: "If you fuck with me, you're dead." Family was also related to gang involvement for participant #8 and participant #12, who stated having family members in the same gang. Participant #8 had a younger brother, while participant #12 had an older brother in the same gang.

Participant #2 reports role models as part of his gang involvement as he looked up to a friend's older brother who drew him into the gang lifestyle:

> I was just attracted to it, I had a friend's older brother that was part of it, and we just looked up to him thinking this could be us, so our role models weren't great role models but they were our role models.

Participant #9 also refers to role models when becoming gang involved because seeing these individuals engaged in these activities meant they were as easy and acceptable: "Well you see other people doing it [criminal activities], so it's influenced by your surroundings from other people so it's like, so you think it's easy, you kind of grew up with it right, so you think it's ok." As participants had good and close relationships with these individuals, they reported a lack of pressure (coercion or forced) to their gang involvement.

Entering Gang Involvement Lacked Pressure

Only one participant of fourteen reported their gang involvement as involving unwillingness. Five participants explicitly reported feeling no peer pressure and believed entering gang

involvement was a choice. Participant #8, when asked whether there was any pressure in joining a gang reported: “There was no pressure, it’s a choice.” Participant #5 also reports there to be: “None at all, it was completely my choice, I was never forced into it.” Participant #6 reported actively seeking individuals out to get into the lifestyle: “I made up my mind myself and found people in order to get me into it.” Participant #7 also reported his gang involvement to have no pressure at all, but adds it as based on common interest and friendship: “There was no peer pressure at all, there was just we had a common interest, it was making money, it was making easy money fast, when you have common interest you become friends.” Participants reported a lack of pressure to becoming gang involved, because not only did these individuals comprise friends, they were also attracted to the financial and social autonomy gang involvement provided.

Financial and Social Autonomy

Ten participants reported financial and social autonomy to be an important factor in their gang involvement, while three stated it as most important. Participant #9 when asked whether the notoriety of gang membership attracted him into the life, reported that it did not, and that money motivated him: “It’s not cool it just wasn't, like I never did see it as cool, I just did it to make money right.” Participant #5 states seeing no point in working a minimum wage job, if he could make more money doing illegal activities: “Yeah I mean it was a good source of money especially when I was younger, you know what’s the point of working a minimum wage job when you could be making way more money doing illegal stuff.” Participant #2 also reports the pull of easy money as an influence for him and his friends:

> Would you rather make 13 dollars an hour at McDonalds for 8 hours, or make a couple runs and make a couple hundred dollars in few hours, obviously you pick the easy one,

most of my [gang involved] friends, we never worked at fast food.

This finding is consistent with Van Gemert, Peterson, Lien (2008), who found one of the factors of entrance into a gang to be an unwillingness to resort to low paying service jobs at places such as McDonalds and motivated by the lucrative money attained through drug dealing.

When participant #7 was asked to describe people who were gang involved, he argued that it entailed autonomy as the lifestyle allowed partying whenever because of the lack of work commitment: “They definitely don't live the same life a legit person would, they could go party almost every night and not have to show up to work at 6 am the next day you know.” Participant #6 when asked why he became gang involved confessed that laziness and easy money motivated them: “Um laziness and not wanting to get a real job working nine to five, and not wanting to work that hard if I did have to work, easy lifestyle, being able to do whatever I want, when I want.” Participant #2 also reports financial autonomy as a motive, but adds fun as observed from a friend’s older brother who was a gang member: “Well being a young kid with that much money, you’re on top of the world, they’re having the time of their lives when they go out, having so much fun.”

Participant #11 describes financial autonomy in terms of how it projects respect: “For a lot [gangsters] of course the main thing would be the money, the more money, the better right, the more luxury things you get, the less problems you encounter, because you feel like you're unstoppable and untouchable.” Participant #11 also relates to financial autonomy as the gang lifestyle allowed spending large amounts of money with no fear of it running out:

> Imagine going to a restaurant and say going to the Keg, how is it possible between three people to spend 3000 dollars, and you are just sitting there talking eating and drinking right, how about that every single night, that’s just money they piss away.

Financial Autonomy Brings Respect/Face

Because of the financial autonomy through easy and quick money the gang lifestyle offered, it projected respect. Secondary to money, twelve participants reported respect as motivating their gang involvement. Six participants stated that respect was most important to their initial gang involvement. Participant #2 reported his attraction to the gang lifestyle as relating to action movie heroes, as he viewed gangsters as uncompromising as they did not back down from others in conflicts: "I like action movies and these people would never back down to nobody, I love that, I respected that, I was a small guy and I didn't want to back down to nobody."

When discussing respect, three participants made reference to the Asian concept of face, which was previously described by Ho (1976) as the respect and/or deference which a person can claim for himself and others (p. 883). The gang lifestyle projected face or social deference, as participant #8 previously reports, being a gangster gave off the perception that you should not be messed with: "Yeah, you have to prove to the world you know, you guys aren't jokes [weak], you guys aren't to be fucked with and blah blah blah."

Participant #3 reports the appeal of face and respect as well, but also in terms of wanting people to fear them as it was their main motivation to becoming gang involved:

> The power, to be feared actually was probably one of the biggest things, It wasn't really the money, for some people it is, of course, but I mean, that's just an easy way of making money, but I think it comes down to respect, face, being feared.

As participant #11 previously reported, he viewed himself to have this power as they state: "If you fuck with me, you're dead." He also reports enjoying the face/power and respect they held:

> I like that power if you were to ask me the truth, I like that power for sure. Fame, what did I say to you earlier, fame, power and respect. That's the reason why we were in it the beginning. But I guess that sense of power, my voice alone could either bring good or bring bad.

Participant #11 suggests holding high levels of face in their reporting of underlings who were required to do whatever he wanted or there would be consequences:

> If I needed anything, for example if I was at home and I needed to get money to get money from the bank to pay for a phone bill, I'd call these little kids up [low level gang members], they have to like listen to <information removed>. Or else you know, it's just one of those rules. It's the whole loyalty thing, if someone tells you jump, you gotta jump, right, or else.

Although only one participant explicitly mentioned face for this question, five others mentioned it in other discussions. This would demonstrate that many were consciously aware of it even if it was not explicitly mentioned. Participant's reference to face demonstrated that they enjoyed the deference/respect/fear the lifestyle inspired. They could project an image of someone to be obeyed and not opposed. Disobeying or challenging ones' face had consequences, which was largely implied to be physical violence.

To gain this respect, participant #3 implies criminal activity at high levels, as he reported the eventual outcome of these to be jail or death: "If you were someone who wanted respect, you were going to have to earn respect from members by doing something [criminal], but everything you do has consequences of course, either you get busted or you're dead on the street." Participant #11 explains how advancing in the lifestyle required long term commitment to criminal activities such as drug dealing, stealing or physical violence:

> If you're really interested you'll climb your way up by doing small things such as running a phone [drug dealing] or like you know if anybody wants you to do dirty work such as oh um, stealing, um, beating up someone up, doing all that kind of dirty work that's how you gain more, you're at a status, you're at a level, you're at the low level and it just grows from there right.

Participants reported that gaining or maintaining face required participation in more and higher level criminal activities. Those who implied high levels of face had relatively longer gang involvement than others and also more serious participation in criminal activities. For example,

one participant who implied a leadership role in his gang had served a long-term jail sentence for serious crimes. Others at seemingly high levels also reported being raided (by police). Even though participants referred to respect/face in retrospect, participants still conveyed their regard/enjoyment of it. Because it was conveyed in retrospect, they obviously did not hold the same quantity they possessed when gang involved. This illustrates how the pull of respect/face in gang involvement was/is so significant.

Conclusion

The following findings illustrate participants entering gang involvement largely through their own agency, with 'push' factors not as significant as previous research on other groups (Ezoeonu, 2014; Ngo, 2010; Robinson & Joe, 1980, Young, 1993). While factors such as poverty, family/cultural conflict, and problems with acculturation were reported as factors for Asians in previous research (Ngo, 2010; Robinson & Joe, 1980, Young, 1993) participants here did not detail or give any relevance to these.

These findings might be explained by the characteristics of participants. Participants in this study demonstrated relatively high levels of social capital. Only two participants made any reference to poverty, and none to family/cultural conflict. In terms of implying high levels of social class, most participants made reference to education. One participant had a degree, while three others were in the process of finishing theirs. Six others stated that they had educational accreditations past high school.

When reporting money as a motivator of gang involvement, participants did not discuss this in terms of lacking it or not being able to attain this through legitimate means, but rather were interested because it was quick, easy and they were lazy. Research by Wortley & Tanner (2007) is similar as they report gang members as motivated to join by a lack of money, but

contrast as this resulted from low educational qualifications and job skills, which was not the case for participants in this study.

While family conflict was experienced by participants when their involvement was implied or discovered, they did not report this as the cause of their gang involvement. Problems with acculturation were not a factor, likely due to the obvious assimilation or integration of participants into Canadian culture. Twelve stated being born in Canada, while all were Canadian citizens except for one. Even for participants who were not born in Canada, all had lived in Canada for the majority of their lives. All participants also demonstrated English fluency and competency as all interviews were conducted in English without the need of a translator. Based on these characteristics, participants did not have to acculturate and were well ingrained into Canadian society and culture.

It would appear that that Asians in this study were largely pulled or seduced into the gang lifestyle. The lack of push factors would appear to promote and aid participants' later desistance from gang involvement. As participants entered into gangs largely – and allegedly – through their own free will, the same process was largely involved in their exit of it, which will be explored in the following chapter.

Chapter Six: Exiting Gang Involvement

Table 5 Factors of Exiting Gang Involvement	
Family	10 (71% of participants)
Death or violence	9 (64%)
Jail, imprisonment and criminal record	10 (71%)
Financial and social autonomy	10 (71%)

In the examination of gang membership, the factors involved in entering are extensively researched, while the exiting of it is only an emerging area. Depictions of gang members in the media perceive them as in the lifestyle for life or with the "blood in, blood out" notion that asserts that exiting requires violence (Young & Gonzalez, 2013, p. 3). The participants in this study contradict these notions as they all (other than one) exited the lifestyle relatively easily, without the requirement of violence.

Gang membership is viewed as a major and growing problem by the Canadian public (Van Gemert, Peterson, & Lien, 2008). This problem extends to prisons where prison gangs are reported to be a growing problem (Correctional Service of Canada, 2009). The growth of gangs in prison illustrates that policing and imprisonment are limited in confronting gang membership as it extends there. Understanding why and how individuals leave gang involvement may provide knowledge for reducing gang membership as other methods have proven to be limited. This study is important in that it fills a scarcity of knowledge in two areas: desistance research in Canada generally, and gang involvement by Asians. As Albertan media representations showed

significant concern regarding Asian gangs in the late 1990s, which later diminished about a decade later, it is sensible to examine why individuals previously part of these groups have exited.

The reasons participants give for leaving gang involvement are largely consistent with previous desistance research, and mainly comprised family (Deane, Bracken, & Morrissette, 2007; Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule, 2014; Moloney, MacKenzie, Hunt & Joe-Laidler, 2009; Prowse, 2012) and violence (Bolden, 2013; Carson, Peterson & Esbensen, 2013; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011; Ngo, 2010, Rice, 2014). Desistance from gangs in this study included the following themes: family, death/violence, and jail/imprisonment, and maturity/wanting a future. Of these, family in itself was reported as most important for leaving gang involvement. Participants discussed how they left the lifestyle to keep their families safe and supported, desired to start one, or to show respect to them. In terms of death and violence, this was based on fears to themselves or their family. While they previously expressed approval of violence as it authenticated their gangster identity, they eventually became disillusioned with it. Jail and imprisonment motivated desistance either from personal experience, or from the threat of imprisonment. As participants reflected upon their experiences with family, violence and jail, they gained maturity and wanted a future outside the gang lifestyle. By gaining maturity, participants realized continuing in the gang lifestyle meant no future other than jail or death. The motivations for exiting the lifestyle did not exist exclusively, but were sustained through interactions with each other. For example while family was important, jail also motivated desistance as being incarcerated meant one could not support their family.

Family

Most participants (ten) reported family as the most important motivation for exiting gang involvement. When asked why he exited the gang lifestyle, participant #3 stated that family was the first trigger and reported how leaving meant showing respect for them:

> When I thought about it [my gang involvement] when my parents came [to Canada], especially worked their butts off in Asia to get us to come here so we could have a good life, they didn't come here to raise a friggin gangster right. And so I think that if you have respect for your family and you actually care about your family, then you usually follow their wishes kind of, you know.

Participant #11 also reports respect for family as a motivation after he was raided and his involvement was publically disclosed in the newspaper:

> The ones that you would not want to probably disappoint the most is your family, your parents. Yah wait till you go on the newspaper [after being arrested], or you call them for bail money, you are fucked, they look down on you too, it's an Asian thing too, <unknown Cantonese word>, you lost face, yeah you are now like the black sheep of the family.

The respect for family participants reported illuminates the Confucian notion of filial piety and loyalty. In filial piety, the parental role is to educate and take care of children, while the child role is to respect the superior (i.e. parents) (Hwang, 1999). The parent has a role of authoritarian moralism to which the child is supposed to show obedience. Participant #3 came to realize that participating in the gang lifestyle meant not showing loyalty and respect to his family. In exiting the lifestyle he felt the re-establishment of his loyalty to family. Participant #11 reports filial piety, but adds the concept of face (respect). Because he were raided (by police) and publically outed as a criminal, he not only lost face personally but extended this loss to his family as filial piety conceives them as one body.

Participant #5, when asked what most motivated his exit of the lifestyle, reports family in the eventual realization that the gang lifestyle was a risk to his safety:

> My family [was most important], and uh, the safety of me and my family obviously, uh, that was the biggest factor I mean, when I was heavily involved in the gang war, I didn't care, I didn't think about the consequences and you know I really didn't care but as you grow older you realize that you're not only endangering yourself but the people around you.

Participant #1 relates to family in terms of wanting to start one, as continuing in the lifestyle meant drifting away from them:

> You just maybe you know, you just want to settle down to get out of it, so maybe you want to have a family, so some people start to think about that too right. The whole thing [most important], I'd have to say family. I didn't want to lose them, I didn't want to stray too far away from them.

In this disclosure, participant #1 projects into the future with anticipatory socialization. Anticipatory socialization comprises attitudinal and behavior preparation for status shifts (Merton, 1968, p. 319). Here the participant demonstrates preparation for a role transition (as not a gangster), which are "gradual processes, where individuals move from one role to another, and in doing so derive new identities from these roles" (Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule, 2014, p.269). While in the gang lifestyle, he was incapable of projecting a positive future and instead lived in the moment and allure while young. As he grew older and matured, the projection of a positive future gradually came.

Participant #4 reports realizing the importance of family after being incarcerated as his family was supportive, while most of his gang-mates were not: "My family [was most important], they were there for me and visited me in jail when many others did not, and I did not want to put them through it again." This response again demonstrates filial piety where family constitutes an inseparable entity, and where family members are obligated to help other family members when experiencing any trouble (Hwang, 1999, p 179). Familial obligations are

demonstrated by both parties: by the participant's family in providing social support in jail, and by the participant's response of not wanting to put their family through that conflict again.

Schroeder, Giordano, & Cernkovich (2010) examine the importance of adult and child bonds in relation to desistance. They find that "strong relationships between adult children and their parents significantly increased the odds of sustained criminal desistance for those children" (p. 568). As participant #4 had a strong relationship with his family, he was assisted in sustained criminal desistance as he reported himself to be out of the lifestyle for five years.

Participant #2 relates to the importance of family, but includes children, as he was the legal guardian of three. By seeing the negative outcomes of those in the lifestyle, he realized these were things he did not want for these kids and were now focused on this responsibility:

> Uh cuz, to that point, you see so many things that happened to all the people you looked up to, where they've gone and you do not want that for your kids. I have to make decisions not just for myself but my family, my decisions will affect how the kids will be in the future.

Participant #11 relates to children and a career in exiting the lifestyle because he wanted something their children could be proud of:

> I wanted a career for myself, an image for my kids to look up to me. Something more for my children so they can look up to me as a role model now, because I feel like I'm the only one person left that's normal in their life because their whole family [other side the family] is so fucked up.

By having a career, it gave him legitimacy out of the lifestyle and provided a positive image his children could look up to. A career gave external and internal validation of no longer being involved in the gang lifestyle.

Participant #7 was motivated by his girlfriend (later wife) and child to exit the lifestyle as he feared losing them if becoming incarcerated. He reports how increasing police scrutiny and arrests of his gang's inner circle meant the same result would follow him:

> As we were making the money people kept getting busted for criminal activities and those people getting busted, people that were getting busted happened to be closer to me and as each one kind of kept getting busted that was more closely related to me so it just felt like I was going to be the next one in line and also um. I had a long-term girlfriend. She wanted me to get out, get married, have a kid, which we do.

He goes on to state how having a child caused the perception of him as a gangster by his peers to be detached: "That part of me [gangster label] sort of just dropped off and no one really sees me as that person anymore, it fell off, it dropped off and fell off naturally."

Moloney, Mackenzie, Hunt, & Joe-Laidler (2009) describe how the birth of a child presents the opportunity for desistance. As they argue, "successful desistance from crime may be rooted in recognition of an opportunity to claim an alternative, desired, and socially approved identity" (p. 15). As a child introduces a new identity as a father, participants made full investments as family men and detached their role as a gangster. Fatherhood also encourages desistance from the changing of outlooks and priorities (p. 8). The responsibility of children presented constraining effects and exerted social control. It also resulted in personal and emotional transformations, where "new fathers become calmer, less impulsive, less prone to violence, and are more able to resist temptations to get caught up in the vagaries of gang life" (p.9).

Death or Violence

Nine participants reported death or violence as motivators of gang desistance. Participant #3, who reported low-levels of gang involvement stated how stories of gang violence escalating to shootings and killings were enough to influence him to quit:

> And you hear it just got worse, and especially during those times when we were at that age, you were hearing about people getting shot, people dying, it was pretty normal. People were scared right and it's like sometimes you just never know if you were the next one if you did something.

Participant #4 relates to violence in terms of threats in the jail context. After being incarcerated he states how his gang did not have a "favorable position" in jail. By favorable position, this likely meant being outnumbered or wielding less power than other groups in jail. Because of this, he reported worrying about constant threats of violence from other inmates or gang members in jail.

Participant #5, who reported long-term and implied hard core involvement, describes disillusionment when asked about violence in the lifestyle: "Problems will keep occurring if you stay in that lifestyle, you get scared for your life, you don't want to be sent to the hospital obviously for something really stupid, that played a major influence in my mind." In terms of violence for something "stupid", he stated how this could simply consist of shared looks and exchanged words in public: "Usually just people stare at you and it will piss people off [perceived as disrespect or a challenge], then we would go ask what their problem is and a fight would start." Participant #8, who reported long-term involvement in the gang lifestyle, reported his eventual disapproval of it based on the serious outcomes experienced by his friends:

> It's not worth it. Guys I've been close with growing up, some are dead, some are in wheelchair's, you know, some are in jail, they'll never fucking have a good life, unless you want to, unless that's your definition of a good life.

Participant #2 reports violence in relation to a specific experience of getting into a fight at the bar where he was bottled: "Getting bottled in the face at the bar, if the damage was more serious, than having a scar in my eye, could have been blind." After this experience he contemplated how it could have been worse, and could have had longer term ramifications other than a visible scar: "I wouldn't be able to see, wouldn't be able to work, wouldn't be able to see the kids grow up, I would have to live through my ears." From this experience, he realized how

the gang lifestyle almost resulted in a future where he could no longer work or see his kids grow up.

Participant #11 refers to violence in terms of threats against a gang involved family member and fears others might be after him and his kids:

> Violence is like for me that's the biggest [motivator] one for me for sure. Because you have to understand too that other people [not police] were after my <family member> too right. So I'm always also looking out for other people that might be trying to come after me and my kids.

Participant #13 reports violence as the primary influence of his gang lifestyle exit based on police relaying intelligence of death threats to his life:

> I had Gang Suppression come to my house and say that someone wanted to kill me. I didn't think it was serious at all until I asked around later and found it was true. The officer gave me a duty to warn, meaning that they had probable intelligence that my safety was compromised.

Participant #1 describes how the threat of death or violence is something always on the mind of someone in the gang lifestyle, which was something he no longer wanted: "It's always going to run through your mind, if their involved [with gangs], they passes away, and like dies and this part is always going to be around you know, you don't want to be that person [paranoid]."

Similarly, participant #14 reports how the threat of violence continues to pervade his thoughts as he still eventual encounters with individuals who were after him:

> I always have this shadow in the back of my mind of whether I'm going to get jumped [beat up] or stabbed or even killed. It's very stressful, and I'm tired of looking out the window every time a car passes by and looking behind my back or whoever is behind me when I'm driving. Eventually I'm going to run into some people that I have beef [a problem] with me. Sometimes I don't even know who's beefing me or who is going to be after me. That's the worst kind of beef when you don't even know when or who is even watching you or wants to get you.

He considers the threat so serious, he is considering moving out of the province.

Violence motivated participants to leave the lifestyle in terms of disillusionment, either from the threat of it to themselves or their family. The gang lifestyle caused participants to be paranoid. While engaging in violence was acceptable and desired in the lifestyle as it authenticated the gangster identity, it now served as a motivation for participants to leave. Ceasing participation in violence and no longer feeling this as an imminent threat validated one's identity outside. While five participants did express some concern that violence could occur under certain conditions (e.g. seeing previous gang rivals), these concerns were not significant (other than in one case) as most had been out of the lifestyle for years and the gang wars they had been part of were over. Paranoia in gang involvement not only originated from threats of physical violence, but from fears of being arrested or incarcerated. Five participants experienced being arrested, raided or had convictions resulting in imprisonment. While three participants were arrested and charged, three others beat all or most of their charges. Two of those who were arrested and charged would serve their sentences in the community, while another would serve a long term jail sentence.

Jail, Imprisonment and Criminal Records

Table 6

Charges or Criminal Records

Criminally Charged	5 (35% of participants)
Criminally Convicted	3 (21%)
Served time in penitentiary	1 (7%)

Ten participants discussed the threat of jail and imprisonment as motivating their exit from gang involvement. Five participants reported being arrested, serving jail time, or having criminal

records. Participant #11 reports the constant paranoia of police surveillance, and fears of everything being taken away from him because it was all obtained from illegal activity:

> You don't have that sense of freedom in terms of that, you always feel like you have an axe over your heard. You're always looking over your shoulder to see if anyone is following you, or like you know, you are in constant paranoia. You feel like you're insane and you're always, you're just not normal. They're gonna basically take everything away from me. Like my house, my car. If they find out, if the cops like bust you and arrest you, they can pretty much forfeit anything if they feel the money is, it's all from proceeds of crime.

Participant #7 felt that his arrest and imprisonment would have been imminent if he did not get out of the lifestyle, as many of his gang associates had already been arrested:

> As we were making money people kept getting busted for criminal activities and those people getting busted, people that were getting busted happened to be closer to me and as each one kind of kept getting busted that was more closely associated to me so I just felt like I was going to be the next one in line.

Participant #5 was also motivated by the threat of imprisonment due to other friends being arrested and serving long sentences: "I watched a lot of friends go to jail and uh, luckily I never went to jail, but I would not like to go there and find out what it's like."

Participant #6 reports the threat of imprisonment as the most important factor motivating his desistance after he was arrested and raided for drug dealing. Although he was able to beat all his charges and avoid prison, being raided showed him that imprisonment was a constant possible consequence of the lifestyle. Participant #4 did not see imprisonment as a threat but as reality, as he had just finished a considerable jail sentence and stated that if he continued in the gang lifestyle and went back to jail, he would likely be there until age 40 due to previous convictions. Because of his long term experience in jail, he was deterred from the lifestyle as he imagined the future would guarantee re-incarceration. Participant #1 states how being arrested made it easier to tell others he wanted out of the gang lifestyle: "Yeah it was just after being

busted it was just a lot easier to say I don't want to be a part of it no more." While he was arrested and raided for drug dealing, he beat his most serious charges and was only given a fine for simple drug possession.

Participate #8 reports no longer wanting to engage in crime as he no longer wanted the stigma of a criminal record and was in the process of getting a pardon:

> I want to get my life around like, I'm actually, I'm starting, I have started the process of getting a pardon so, I don't want to be charged with any other, any other offence anymore, it's a waste of time and money, I'd rather be a law-abiding citizen.

The displeasure of a criminal record and the desire to get a pardon by the participant illustrates external means to authenticate his identity out of gang involvement or as a criminal, because a record maintains this stigma. The enduring stigma of a criminal record was illustrated by his reporting of two experiences. One was how his awareness that certain jobs were precluded by virtue of his criminal record, and how running his name through the police system showed an advisory/warning. A criminal record and police advisory showed that while he perceived himself to no longer be gangster or criminal, external signs suggested otherwise.

Participant #12 also reported a similar experience showing a lack of authentication of his identity as not criminal/gang involved when a security check was ran after applying for a job. He reported being escorted out of the premises following the application and speculated that it had to do with information that stated or implied his previous involvement in the criminal lifestyle. These experiences describing the stigma of a criminal record shows that it creates difficulties in transitioning out of a gang lifestyle as it sustains the criminal/gangster label. For those participants without a criminal record, however, explicit signifiers of gang involvement did not endure.

While previous research finds that imprisonment does not reduce but promotes further involvement into gangs (Grekul & Benson, 2008; Totten, 2009; Wood & Allyne, 2010), participants in this study did not report this. This may be explained by the characteristics of participants. Most stated or implied low-levels of gang involvement. For those that had high levels, most were able to exit the lifestyle before explicit authenticators of involvement transpired (e.g. being raided or gaining a criminal record). Additionally for those who were raided or arrested, most were able to beat their charges or get most dropped. Participants also appeared to be aided by social networks, illustrating strong family relations. As Schroeder et al. (2010) argue, "Strong relationships between adult children and their parents significantly increased the odds of sustained criminal desistance for children" (p. 568). Four reported their families as supportive of them after being arrested or incarcerated and some indicated feeling ashamed for putting them through it, illustrating the relevance of Asian culture in terms of filial piety and face.

Rather than resulting in further entrenchment into the gangster lifestyle, jail or being charged encouraged participants to exit as three participants saw their "true family" as not the gang, but their "original" biological ones. If participants did not report strong family relationships, it is possible that findings would be more consistent with previous research that indicate incarceration as promoting gang involvement (Grekul & Benson, 2008; Totten, 2009; Wood & Allyne, 2010). Realizing the importance of their families was accompanied by disillusionment from prolonged experiences with or threats of violence and incarceration. Through this, participants matured and showed the desire for a future.

Maturity and Desire for a Future

From the interaction of experiences with family, violence, and jail, came maturation and the desire for a future outside the gang lifestyle. Participant #8 described himself in the past as a trouble maker: "When I was young, I was always a trouble maker and you know, trouble, it was just petty trouble, and it got bigger and bigger." When asked for the most important reason for exiting gang involvement, he reported a change of attitude, which showed disapproval of the dishonest attitudes he previously held:

> Most important was, I don't know it's, what I believe in, my personal values and my integrity. I don't like to fuck around with people and doing that shit is not the most honest business, honest profession or job whatever the hell you want to call it, there's a lot of, a lot of dishonestly into being a gangster, and that's against my personal beliefs and values.

By growing older and maturing, all participants in some manner reported disapproval of the criminal and dishonest nature of the gang lifestyle no longer acceptable and viewed the individuals (gang friends) within as untrustworthy: "Like I said, I grew up and I realized what was actually important to me, not making money the quick [illegal] way representing this [the gang] and this because in the end, you only have yourself" Participant #11 also criticizes the notion of loyalty in a gang:

> This whole brotherhood, all this all for one, one for all, bullshit only lasts so far. When someone gets busted, everybody bails and you sit there, so where are all my bros that been there for me, no, no, no, no one got your back.

In reflecting upon his future, participant #8 expressed the desire for a family, without the paranoia of people constantly looking for him, as was characteristic of the lifestyle:

> One day hopefully I'll raise a family and kids and all that good stuff, maybe, just live a regular lifestyle, not just fucking always looking behind your back because of some enemies or some cops or whatever, or whoever might be after you.

Participant #5, who implied hard-core involvement (by stating he was part of a gang war), reported now being able to see the consequences of his actions, something he was incapable of when younger:

> When you are younger you just don't care as much. I know that when I was younger I did not think of any of the consequences that would happen with what I would do. When you grow older you start to look at your older friends [gangsters] in your life and you start to wonder, you don't want to live a life of looking over your shoulder all the time and I definitely don't want to do that anymore.

In the past participant #5 reported only attending school to sell drugs or visit friends: "I skipped a lot when I was in junior high and high school, I would barely go, and if I went I would just be there just to sell stuff [drugs] or just hang out with friends." He now mentions school and the desire for legitimate employment as motivating his desistance:

> Uh well, the reason why I left was because everything was settling down, we didn't have as much problems as we did when we were younger, and I realized I wanted to actually have a legit job, finish my school and get a good job, going downtown, working an office job, live a more safe life .

Participant #9 states how the lifestyle outside gang involvement not only gave him peace of mind, but earned him more money in legitimate employment than when dealing drugs: "I had too much to lose, I know, I know for sure because I would never go back, it's just like childish you know what I mean, I just, I'm making good money [in my legitimate job], why would I go back making less money for more risk." Participant #3, who estimated his gang involvement to have ended relatively early (about 3 years), stated how he was glad to have left the lifestyle early based on its dangerous and criminal nature:

> [Most important reason] For me it was yeah, my own future right, and I mean it took a while to finally realize what I wanted to do, but, I was pretty happy that I wasn't involved with that stuff later on [gang war escalation]. And not have to worry about watching you know looking over my shoulders, you know, having to freaking deal drugs to make money and stuff like that.

Participant #11 also makes reference to risk and reports it as most influential to his exiting of the lifestyle as he was pleased to no longer feel fear anymore:

> [The most important reason was] To have my sanity back, I think that's the most important thing. The sense of freedom. Feeling like no, nothing. I didn't do anything wrong like. Pinch me if you like, if you come arrest me now, I'd be like on what grounds, I didn't do anything right. But if I was arrested before, I couldn't do anything, couldn't say anything, I'd just keep my mouth shut. Right and. Like you know, obviously I'd be scared, but now I'd be like I have nothing to say because I'm innocent and I think that's like the biggest thing, the sanity and freedom.

Participants showed that they did not age out of the gang lifestyle naturally, but did so from the accumulation of experiences that showed that no future could exist in it other than death or incarceration.

Aging out of Crime

Sampson & Laub (1992) argue desistance is based on maturity and growing up. They describe criminality as beginning early in life and being subject to interruptions by "turning points" such as marriage, parenthood and careers (p. 65). Adorjan & Chui (2013) find that aging out of desistance interacts with life experience, maturation, individual will-power and social support networks. Participants aged out of crime from experiences with violence and the criminal justice system (or the fear of it), which made them disillusioned and contributed to their maturity. They showed individual will-power in that they undertook means to get out of the lifestyle through their own agency, although sometimes with the support of family.

Giordano, Schroeder, & Cernkovich (2007) describe desistance as based on maturity in terms of cognitive transformations. During adolescence, youths experience positive emotions (i.e. excitement and thrills) partaking in deviant acts such as drug usage and fighting. These positive emotions however, are difficult to sustain in adulthood as they are less likely to receive any social backing, leading to the gradual diminishment of these positive emotions derived from

crime (p. 1610). For those who are chronic delinquents, the positive emotions associated with "delinquency may be replaced in adulthood with feelings of regret, sadness, and depression" (p. 1612). Cognitive transformations were apparent for participants as they initially experienced positive emotions in the criminal lifestyle of gang involvement, but later found these to start diminishing as they grew older. These positive emotions could not be sustained as they not only received little social backing in adulthood, but were met with increasing levels of opposition. Opposition originating from other criminals or gang members who wished to do them physical harm, and the police who wanted (or did) to imprison them. As participants were chronic delinquents, these threats started to become more apparent and significant for them. As Giordano et al. (2007) correctly assert, these threats started to lead to feelings of regret, sadness, and depression.

Following why participants exited gang involvement was the manner in which it occurred. The form in which gang exits occurred largely mirror previous research that find gradual experiences to be more prominent than abrupt ones (Bulbolz, 2014; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Maruna & Roy, 2007; Rice, 2007).

Gradual and Abrupt Exits

Of fourteen participants only two stated their exits occurred abruptly. Participant #6 reported knowing he would leave the lifestyle after being arrested: "Basically it was abrupt, when that happened [being arrested] it quickly came to an end." This abrupt departure is explained by the participant's disclosure of always planning to get out eventually:

> For me I kind of always had a plan if something happened [i.e. being arrested], so I could get out of it at one time, but, it was kind of an educated guess for it for me, in order to make the <inaudible> for me, so.

This response is likely explained by the participant's disclosure of being involved strictly for the money and lacking attraction to other pull factors such as family/belonging and respect/face shared by other participants. Participant #10 also refers to an abrupt exit and states how it was an "over-night and quick judgement, I did not see an end or a future [other than death or jail]." In terms of a future, he stated how drug dealing would not give him any useful work experience and the money gained was of limited use as it comprised proceeds of crime. His abrupt exit may be explained by his high social status. Of the sample, he was the only participant with a degree and in a professional occupation. In addition his parents were successful business owners. His high social status likely allowed him to evaluate the lifestyle better than others because he had many other opportunities, thus enabling a quick exit of the lifestyle.

For the rest of participants, their form of exit was gradual. While participant #3 had a relatively short duration of involvement in comparison to other participants (3 years), it was still gradual. This was initiated when a family member expressed anger towards him when he suspected the participant's gang involvement (after learning he had a tattoo), although he did not listen initially:

> Well it took a while, first I didn't listen, right, but I mean, when you just think about it more, that's when you realize, oh shit, what am doing with my life, nothing, (laughs). Within two or three years, even when I got out, I still talked with those people [gangsters], I didn't get involved in working for them, even though they offered it.

Participant #9, who estimated his gang involvement to be nine years, reports how the main challenge he experienced was keeping to his commitment of staying out of the lifestyle: "The biggest challenge was committing to myself to get out, that was the hardest challenge." For him the thought of leaving the lifestyle culminated for: "Couple years, thinking about it, you are always thinking about it right, right and then it just like, everyone is always like yeah I want to

get out and then, something happens and then you are forced to get out." By "something happening" or being "forced to get out", these are likely references to violence or incarceration as he later states the lifestyle as meaning: "You are either going to get killed or go to jail, history proves that." Participant #5 describes his exit as gradual and eventually realized the lack of value in the lifestyle after years of contemplation:

> Gradual, yeah definitely, uh, you live and learn you know and uh and as the years go by when you are in that gang environment you start to learn and realize you know, life is way more important than just you know being the baddest in the city or whatever you are trying to be.

Participant #7 reports how his gradual exit was influenced by increasing scrutiny by the police of his gang's inner circle, as this produced the fear of eventually being taken down by police:

> It was very gradual, one of, one of my friends got busted and it was kind of like oh that kind of really sucks, be careful, and then another one of our friends got busted then it was like ok maybe just start thinking of an exit plan and so it was very gradual and then uh, a few more got busted, maybe like half a dozen.

Participants were able to reflect upon the gang lifestyle after their long term involvement. For the majority (12 of 14) thoughts of leaving comprised multiple years in the assessment of risks and benefits to the lifestyle. The benefit of easy money no longer presented themselves as a benefit because they realized this so called easy money was not easy because the risk was imprisonment. The respect and face they once desired became less important as the cost was victimization or death, not only for themselves, but their families. A secondary theme of exiting was the ease.

Ease of Exit

In terms of exiting, participants reported this to be relatively easy as is reported in previous research (Bolden, 2012; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Young & Gonzalez, 2013). Participants reported how the ease of exit was enabled because many of their gang mates consisted of friends,

those who they had grown up with, and in some cases family. This is also stated by Bolden's (2013) research that reported many of those leaving a gang were not criticized because their gang peers included friends and family (p. 475). Participant #8, who also had a brother in the same gang, states how his exit was going well and the notion of blood-in blood-out (i.e. the perception of violence required to leave a gang) inaccurately reflected the lifestyle:

> I would say, it's going well and it's, I'm not saying I'm a long-time fucking og [original gangster] or anything, but I would say if you really wanted to get out of that lifestyle it's not as hard as like the <city> police gang unit portrays it to be. They think it's just like you go, you get out and you have to kill them [gang mates] or whatever, you're going to have to kill your bosses, your bosses aren't going to let you go just like that, I would say it's easier than the police say it is.

He goes on to imply that even original/veteran gangsters would not have as much difficulty as perceived by police. Although the participant does not describe himself as an 'original gangster', he does acknowledge friendships with those who are, illustrates long term involvement (13 years) and the existence of a criminal record serious enough to produce a police warning when his name was run through the system. Based on these characteristics, one could judge him as deeply involved or as a veteran gang member even if he did not describe himself this way. This participant also goes on to state that gang friends should not only be sympathetic if one wishes to leave the lifestyle but help them out:

> Well they should be understanding but you know if they were your true…true brothers they'd help you get out, they wouldn't guilt you into staying or they wouldn't guilt you into doing something illegal, anything that could get you into trouble.

Participant #5 agrees that gang friends should be supportive if wanting to exit the lifestyle as it was the case for him: "Um so, our crew, we were all really close friends, so once you let one person know you don't want to be involved, I mean everyone knows and there's no problem with exiting that lifestyle." Participant #4 also states how the decision to leave gang involvement was

easy, but adds how his exit was made easier after prison: “My friends were understanding, they knew what I had gone through, I did time [substantial jail time].” This understanding is explained by the disclosure of how the participant “took the rap”. In taking the rap, while his gang consisted of many individuals, he was one of the few to get an extensive jail sentence, while others who were involved got off free or with lesser sentences. The peer support reported by participants may only be typical in instances where involvement in a gang was with those one had grown up or were friends prior to joining, which was the case for many if not all participants. They either started their gangs with their friends, or joined ones with individuals they were already friends with.

Participant #3 makes reference to the degree of involvement as a factor of whether exit is difficult, as it is easier if less involved: “I don't think I was deep enough to want to keep going, you like, you sometimes have your foot in the door, you were able to back out, maybe that’s probably why, but I wasn't deep enough to know, or what I would have done if I was, you know and so.” Participant #2 also views it as difficult for those deeply involved although he himself was not:

> I would tell others I got out, I would give them, I would be completely honest saying it’s not going to be easy depending on how deep they were into the situation, it might be the hardest thing ever, it’s either you’re going to try, it’s either you’re going to die in your situation or die trying, I would just tell them to die trying in getting out.

Participant #1 states that original gangsters or veteran members would have the most difficulty exiting because they fail to lose the past gangster mentality that is sustained in the younger years: “Getting out, I'd say it would be worse, the ones that are like, are still like kind of trapped in their younger days.” Participant #11 reports how those with long term involvement

and at the top of the hierarchy would be unlikely to quit the lifestyle as they needed to do very little, but benefitted the most:

> Someone's that's been in the game for 30 years, how do you tell them to stop, he'd be like, I have an empire already, I have a lot of minions, why would I quit now, I don't have to do nothing but eat expensive food and everything is paid for.

The viewpoint by participants that those with the longest length of participation or embeddedness (immersion) into the lifestyle would have the most difficulty is consistent with previous findings (Sweeten, Pyrooz, & Piquero, 2013; Young & Gonzalez, 2013). For friends he knew to be gang involved for a long time and at the top of the hierarchy, participant #11 reports not even attempting to influence these friends out of the lifestyle because of their deep entrenchment, and only advises caution:

> If someone has been in the game for a long time, I wouldn't say quit and live a normal life, no, they're too far in and too far up to quit, but they should just stay careful. I honestly that's honestly all I can say. Save money for the rainy day [such as getting arrested]. But everything is just low pro, just stay careful. That's what I tell my [gang involved] friends, I don't judge them or anything, and I just tell them to be careful.

Participant #8, while stating ease of exit, shares how some of his former gang mates tried to drag them back in by referring to their prior "brotherhood":

> It's easy like I said, but there are going to be times when your associates are going to guilt-trip you to kind of help them do whatever [criminal activities] because they'll try to say some shit like you know, we're brothers you gotta help me out, do this, do that, or else I'm going to screwed and I can't do this myself, but if you're a strong enough person, then you can just say no, if they're a true friend then they would understand .

This response indicates that sometimes direct violence does not always coerce individuals into staying in the lifestyle, but "guilt trips" by gang friends who still have expectations of friends to support them.

Participant #13 was alone in reporting a difficult exit because of lingering gang involvement, as a result of past actions:

> I would say that my "departure" from gang involvement isn't really a departure. You don't get to decide whether you leave or not. It is always going to follow you some way or somehow everything you did in the past will always have repercussions. I learned this the hard way and I can't turn back around anymore so now it's just doing damage control really. So having that my departure could be tomorrow, a week from now, or ten years or even never. I learned that I don't get a choice in this kind of stuff.

The distinct response of participant #13 may be explained by two characteristics: his relatively young age in comparison to other participants and recent departure from the lifestyle, which was only a few months. While most participants in this study were in their mid or late 20s, he was in his early 20s. In addition most participants estimated their exit to be multiple years, while he stated his as recent.

As the following responses indicate, other than in a single case, exiting gang involvement was relatively easy and even supported by participants' gang friends. While three made reference to hard core or original gangsters as having the most difficulty in leaving the lifestyle, none reported this as applying personally. The following section comprises the strategies participants utilized to exit of gang involvement.

Strategies to Leaving Gang Involvement

Table 7

Strategies to Leaving Gang Involvement

Limiting or cutting off contacts	10 (71% of participants)
Keeping busy/finding legitimate employment or school	8 (57%)
Changing attitudes	3 (21%)
Tattoo concealment or removal	4 (28%)

Participants exited gang involvement by limiting or cutting off contacts, keeping busy with

activities such as legitimate employment and school. The limiting or cutting off of contacts mainly comprised not talking (or talking less) nor hanging out with individuals who were *heavily* gang involved (as opposed to those still involved but to a lesser extent). Participants limited or cut off contacts by either going out less, avoiding certain places, or certain places at specific times. A single participant reported a geographical relocation to another city, while another still had this under consideration. Other strategies included attitude changes, removal/concealment of tattoos, and contemplating the future.

Limiting or Cutting off Contacts

Previous findings show the cutting back or severing of contacts completely to be an important strategy supporting desistance (Bolden, 2013; Gordon, 1994; Kwok, 2009; Ngo, 2011; Pih, De La Rosa, Rugh, & Mao, 2008; Rice, 2014). Cutting back or severing contacts removes physical proximity to other gang members, and may allow the breaking of one's psychological connection to these individuals (Bolden, 2013, p. 484-485). Ten participants stated that limiting or cutting off contacts was a strategy used to desist from gang involvement. Of these only a single participant employed this through a geographical relocation (to another province) because it meant a fresh start but was also detrimental because it resulted in feelings of loneliness:

> When you step out of that circle you have to seclude yourself from everybody, you have to isolate yourself, so let's say, your group of, your circle of people, for me my group of people were more so in <city name>, what is it that you do, you move to a different city and you start fresh and then you're in a foreign, not a foreign place but if you're in a city that you haven't been back to for such a long time, you feel really disconnected, you feel really lonely, you feel really sad.

While geographical relocation separated him from the negativity of gang associations, it also meant losing some relationships he viewed as positive:

> You're used to a circle of a lot of people you knew who were kind, that protected you on a daily basis you, that kind of catered to you. They pretty much they helped me a lot. I'm

> very grateful to them because they were really nice people but at the same time. When I left that left everything was gone.

Participant #13 contemplated a geographical relocation to another province but had not yet made any concrete plans. While he already limited contact with those who wanted to do him physical harm by avoiding certain places, this was insufficient as he believed these individuals would be encountered eventually: "I also have to avoid certain places to avoid certain people, but I figure how long can I even do that for, eventually I'm going to run into some people that I have beef [conflict] with." This contrast to other participants was previously explained by this participant's relatively young age and recent departure from the lifestyle.

For other participants geographical relocation was not significant as they remained in their cities of residence. Participant #6 reports utilizing limiting or cutting off of contacts as a strategy he utilized after being arrested: "So you gotta first separate yourself and then eventually tell them [that you want out] and then kind of quit contacting them for a while, till things calm down." Participant #8 advises not hanging out with certain people as much because these influence engagement in deviant activities, illustrating maturity as it mirrors a response parents tell their children:

> Don't hang out with certain people as much, like if you're always with them then you're going to be prone to doing whatever [criminal] activities they have planned for the day and it's going to be harder to say no when you're with them all the time, so just maybe avoid hanging out with them altogether or minimize your time together.

While participants recommended limiting or cutting off contacts, most reported still being friends with those gang involved. Participant #6 states: "I don't associate myself as much with those people, I'm still friends, I still talk to some people that are involved, but I don't see as many people as I used to or talk to them." Participant #10 reports still being friends and regularly hanging with gang involved individuals, but did not participate in all of their deviant or criminal

activities. While he states willingness to help friends out in fights, he reported not going out of the way to start them. Additionally, while he had friends who still dealt drugs, he did not need to involve himself as he had a full-time job. The finding that participants still associated or held friendships with gang involved friends is consistent with previous research that found many former gang members maintain social and emotional ties with members of their former gang (Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2011, p. 508)

Participant #5 reports limiting his appearances in public settings (e.g. bars or clubs), as a strategy to stay away from gang involvement:

> The best way to manage it is to stop partying, especially going downtown, uh, hanging out with the people who are more heavily involved you know, try and keep away, uh I still and try and maintain a good relationship with them [former gang friends], but I won't uh party with them all the time.

This strategy did not specifically comprise avoiding those gang involved, but those "heavily involved", likely hard core members or those most active in criminal activity. By "good relationship" this meant talking to them when seeing them, but not going out of one's way to intentionally hang out with them.

Participant #6, when asked if he avoided bars or clubs, stated he did not, but was selective of who these places would be attended with and if someone unwanted was encountered (obviously meaning gang involved) it would not matter: "Um no I'll go there with friends but, but I'll just choose with who I go with more specifically, but if I run into somebody I run into somebody [gang involved individuals], it doesn't really matter." Participant #7 reports not avoiding public establishments (bars or clubs), but leaving prior to close as he viewed this time to be when fights started, or in the case of parties did not attend at all if certain individuals (gang involved friends) were present:

> Go home before 2 am, that's when shit gets sloppy (laughing), go home before the lights turn on, an hour at least, at least an hour, when a fight breaks out its home time, just make sure one gets out okay, and also see who's going to be at the party or the event I'm going to, and if it's the people I don't want to be seen with [specific gangsters], then I don't go.

Participant #3, when asked if he still hung out with his gang friends, stated so, but less than before, and describes the specific type of gang involved individuals participants were likely avoiding, which are implied as hard-core members:

> Not as much, cause some of your people, those who you are friends with, they're, I wouldn't say their involved, but they are still friends with some of those people, right, I mean, it doesn't mean you can't hang out, but there are some people you hear about that are much bigger in the gang scene [hard core members] you know you shouldn't be hanging out with them, so you don't hang out with them, so for me, the bigger names, like, I knew some people that knew them, but I wouldn't hang out with those people.

Participant #5 reports that limiting contacts by not going out as much was not only to avoid his former gang friends, but gang members from rival gangs:

> If you're out and about anywhere in the city, you never know if you are going to run into an enemy, past enemies you had before, and you never know what they're thinking, they don't know that you're out of that lifestyle and obviously if you have problems with that person they might and try do something to you, that would be the only problem I come across these days, I try and limit my contacts with seeing the other side.

The limiting or cutting off of contacts comprised a method that avoided the pull or drag back into gang involvement. Following this strategy, participants reported keeping busy by participating in legitimate employment and school, which were utilized to manage boredom and socialize them into conventional activities.

Keeping Busy and Finding Legitimate Employment or School

Keeping busy was a strategy reported by eight participants. This method helped participants manage boredom, which influenced slips back into gang involvement. Participant #4 reports trying to stay busy because all the free time drags one back into the lifestyle: "I try to keep busy, when you are not busy you have a lot of free time and that free time allows you to get back into it

because you have nothing else to do." Participant #8 argues that breaking the routine of illicit behavior requires finding something to stay busy, as boredom encourages thoughts of venturing back into the lifestyle:

> You been around that kind of [criminal] activity since you were little, it's very easy to get back into that kind of illicit behavior, but if you have a job, or have a hobby or you're volunteering or whatever, you are going to keep your mind out of that stuff, you aren't going to be so bored and you'll be able to maintain a law abiding life.

Participant #2 when asked how he kept busy, reports utilizing sports and engagement with family: "I participate in a lot of family activities, I coach sports, um, I try to get into more activities with the kids, just to keep me busy, my parents are divorced, so my weekends I like to rotate [hanging out with them]." Participant #5 reports how keeping busy with legitimate activities such as work or school helps avoid those gang involved as it reduces the possible time spent around them:

> You need something to keep your mind busy, keep you away from the friends, group members or gang members who are still heavily involved, best way is to limit that contact, uh just keep working, going to school or whatever, whatever keeps you busy you know, just stay away from that lifestyle.

Participant #11 reports keeping busy through work and school as these allow pro-social interactions, and also adds how these authenticate the non-criminal identity:

> [What establishes me as no longer gang involved] I think for sure it's just trying to make little accomplishments to build to where I am. Like just constantly going to work, trying to make money, you know just keep myself busy. Just be around more positive people, I'm trying to better myself by going back to school.

When referring to "more positive people" these were described as: "Not gangsters, more hard working people, who are not part of the other [gang] world." In explaining why being busy was important, he reported how being unoccupied would generate thoughts of making money illicitly and his current struggles with decreased income:

> I think, if I wasn't busy, I would sit there and start to think ways to make money faster [illegal ways], you know like, find a short cut to get by with life because I told you the money is the struggle because I don't know how anybody in a normal world, could actually make that money [legitimate money] and get by with that.

While keeping busy through methods such as work and school initiated pro-social networks and behavior, it also provided authenticity to ones' role as no longer gang involved or criminal. When participant #10 was asked why school was relevant, he reported the desire to get a legitimate job and project a positive image for his kids to look up to:

> I did it [got out of gang involvement and went into school] to better my life, I thought, I thought, yeah I went back to school so that I can find a way to make, you know, a career for myself, have an image for my kids for my kids to look up to me.

Work as a Turning Point

Research by Ugen (2000) finds that work can serve as a turning point in criminal desistance. For criminal offenders even offered marginal employment, it significantly reduced their reoffending, but only served as a turning point for those over 26 and not for those who were younger (p. 542). Work is significant in desistance because "workers are likely to experience close and frequent contact with conventional others and because the informal social controls of the workplace encourage conformity" (p. 529). Participants utilized this method to desist from gang involvement as it not only kept them too busy to do criminal activities, but also presented them with pro-social interactions. By keeping busy and employing activities such as work and school, participants illustrated a change of attitudes that demonstrated conformity and respect.

Changing Attitudes

In terms of changing attitudes, three participants reported this as a strategy supporting their desistance. These comprised losing the cocky and aggressive attitude characteristic of the gang lifestyle and showing respect and deference to others (e.g. police). Participant #5 described his

attitude when gang involved as cocky or what he labelled as “heat bag”: “During that time I was involved I was way more, I guess you could say cocky, I would just guess a lot more, we say heat bag, a better term would be trying to look more intimidating.” The reason for acting cocky or as he stated heat bag was to gain or maintain face: “When you’re involved you know you, you want to be the most bad guy in the area, you don't want to lose it [respect], it’s more of a face factor, you don't want to lose face.” The gang lifestyle meant creating a ruthless aura or gaining face/social deference in interactions. The rigid manner in which face was viewed is shown in the previous disclosure that fights could start based on a stare because this was perceived as disrespect: “Usually just people stare at you and it will piss people off [perceived as disrespect and lack of deference], then we would go ask what is their problem and a fight would start.”

As they transitioned away from gang involvement, participants reported the importance of being respectful and losing the attitude that viewed everybody nearby as potential enemies or threats: “Be more respectful, you just got to realize not everyone is out there to get you and not everyone is trying to be the most baddest guy [not trying to disrespect you or gain face on your behalf] in the area” (Participant#10). Participant #10 also rejects aggression but adds how he still maintained the “group mentality” (e.g. helping friends in fights): “[I] Don’t start fights, [I] don’t act aggressive, I still have the group mentality but [I] don’t look for trouble.” Participant #7 shares the previous attitude change to not victimizing others but states now rejecting the group mentality of participating in group fights:

> Whenever we used to go out, we just would always represent our crew [fight for the gang] you know, we would rep, now when I go out, or whenever I do, I see shit breaking out, I just fucking leave, I just I just, don't want to expose myself to that.

Participant #11 also reports disapproval of the aggressive gangster attitude and states how it mainly originates from younger gang members who only have regard for their own status:

> Those who are rowdy and those who start shit [fights], I think they're the stupidest ones if you ask me for the truth, they're just asking for attention, you are just inviting it to happen [trouble]. The young ones especially, they're just so young, they're like, they're stupid. We been there, we do little stupid things. It just fucks with your future, your employment.

In addition, he illustrates maturity from his experience as he reports how such behaviors will jeopardize the future, especially in future employment. Participant #8 also shares the disapproval towards younger gang members' desire to gain face through aggression, and adds their belief that these individuals lacked the loyalty of more senior gangsters:

> I don't think these guys are as loyal as they should be, I would say the lower guys [recruits], it's [their involvement is] for their own personal image, they can represent whoever the hell, whatever side they want and you know go, showing off to girls, being bad, stupid shit like that. The older guys I respect, they're true gangsters, they'll fight for each other, they'll die for each other, these younger guys are just doing it for face.

While the following responses show maturity and disapproval of how younger gangsters authenticate their identity through aggressive violence, the same participants reported how they themselves utilized the same methods in their entrance into the lifestyle. As participant #8 previously stated: "When I was young, I was always a trouble maker."

Participant #7 reports attitude changes as a strategy of desistance but in terms of conformity and showing respect: "Changing your attitude, oh that's the hardest, so you are so used to being closed off, you are so used that attitude of empowerment [lack of respect for others] and uh, um, what is it, status, you just gotta let that go." In contrast to his present attitude of conformity, he discusses his past behavior in police interactions where he showed little respect for police by giving "short, single word answers, not even a conversation, but now if they [police] were to speak to me now, I'd be open to having a conversation with them." He reported being more open to speaking to police in order to show respect and that there was nothing to hide.

Participant #8 also reports how he changed his attitude and demeanor to police by being more cooperative, but still maintained some secrecy:

> I act differently now, yeah well cuz now I don't have anything to hide right, before [when gang involved] I would lie, and lie, and lie about where I worked, what I do, who I hang out with, but now, but now I'll tell you the truth, pretty much the truth, not the complete truth, but I'm not going to be lying to the extent that I used to lie to the cops.

Participant #5 reports now avoiding trouble, showing respect to police and explicitly telling them he was out of the gang lifestyle, because of being on the radar in the past:

> [I] Definitely, I don't get in trouble with the police anymore, so my interactions with them is very minimal, when I do interact with them I just try to tell them I'm a student and I'm out of that lifestyle. Just be more respectful, show them that you aren't a problem or a threat.

In showing respect and deference to police, participants were attempting to illustrate themselves as no longer gang involved criminals. In the past however, they would be non-cooperative with police because they had something to hide or bore an attitude of non-deference to police because they viewed them as the enemy. Participant #2 reports no longer viewing the police as the enemy because his priority now was to the safety of his kids who police were expected to protect: "Now since the kids, since I'm all about the kids, I have to trust on the justice system [police] to protect them."

Deference to Police

Sykes & Clark (1975) may explain why deference to police was employed by participants as a strategy of desistance. In what they describe as the ordering rules of encounters is the exchange of deference and maintenance of proper demeanor (p. 588). Demeanor is described as part of an activity which is symbolic of approval regularly shown to a recipient who is a symbol of something else. As police are viewed as the symbol of the law, deference to them illustrates an individual's respect for the law. In showing a lack of deference to police one implies themselves

as a violator of the law or guilty of a crime. However in showing deference to an "officer he re-establishes himself as someone willing to fulfill his interpersonal obligations and membership in the moral community" (p. 588-589).

While in the gang lifestyle, participants did not show deference to police because, as outsiders, they did not respect their position or the law. In exiting the lifestyle, they viewed deference to police as an instrument to show respect for the law and their reintegration into the moral community. Following the authentication of their identity as part of the moral community through changes in attitudes and behavior that expressed conformity and respect, participants also reported removal or concealment of tattoos as a strategy of desistance.

Tattoo Concealment or Removal

During their gang involvement participants reported obtaining and displaying tattoos to legitimate their gang involvement as it provided visible means of denoting their affiliation. As a strategy of desistance it logically followed that many participants would engage in efforts to conceal or remove tattoos. Six participants had visible tattoos, while ten reported having them. Participant #7 stated how he first got a tattoo when becoming gang involved and later had it removed during his exit as he believed tattoos conformed to the gangster stereotype:

> I took my tattoos off, yeah when I first got it I was in my early 20s and I was hanging out with those people [gangsters] and generally and I think a lot of them had tattoos and then when I hit 24, that's when I started looking at the tattoo and was like it was kind of dumb and I fell into the typical [Asian gangster] stereotype, so that's when I started taking it off.

Prior to having it completely removed (as it took multiple treatments), he reported still experiencing police scrutiny, such as at a musical event, where he was asked: [Police] Asked me why I got it removed and I said I didn't like it anymore." When asked why police questioned him, he believed it was: "Because they saw me with other tatted up Asians, and they thought I

was a gangster." Even though this participant no longer identified with the gang lifestyle and utilized a visible method to show he was not, his proximity to other Asians with tattoos likely prompted police to suspect he was involved. The police suspicion of criminality was confirmed when being asked if he could be searched, for which he complied.

Participant #1 stated how he had just begun the process of having a visible tattoo removed and believed it to be the reason why he had been singled out (recently and in the past) for questioning by the police's Gang Suppression Team at public establishments. As his tattoo removal was incomplete because it required multiple treatments in an area not easily concealed, he stated turning his body to conceal this tattoo when encountering police patrols or the Gang Suppression Team.

Participant #4, who had visible tattoos on both forearms to his shoulders, reported concealing his tattoos around "normal people" but was comfortable keeping them visible around others, likely friends or those gang involved: "I hide them around normal people because it's not who I am trying to be [not trying to be gangster] at that time." Of all participants viewed physically, this respondent was the most heavily tattooed. Participant #7 explains his tattoo removal as motivated by his perception of it as denoting gang involvement regardless of the context:

> It [tattoo] changes everyone's perception around you, it doesn't have to be at the bar or you get IDed by g-unit [gang suppression team], you could just be at uh the mall with your t-shirt on and obviously the first thing they will look at is your tattoos and then they'll look at you, so it changes the perception and you fall into the [Asian gangster] stereotype.

Participant #4 agrees that tattoos influence prejudgment and states why he concealed his on a regular basis: "[I hide them] Because I don't want people to judge me [as a gangster] right off the bat based on how I look." He stated that he conceals his tattoos most of the time when at work or

school, but was becoming more comfortable over time, showing them as he became more familiar and embedded into these settings. Participant #7 discusses concealment of tattoos when moving into a professional occupation, and states how his lack of tattoo gave him internal validation as no longer a gang member: “I was moving into a professional occupation, even though I wore long sleeves at work it made me feel I wasn't part of it anymore, a big part of it was how I felt.

As Atkinson (2003) argues deploying the tattoo was “part of rejecting class-based social norms, values, and beliefs” (p.41). They are also utilized by gangs as a mean of mutual identification, and badge of affiliation with these individuals (p. 164). As participants exited gang involvement, they removed or concealed their tattoos to show they were no longer gang affiliated, and did not reject social norms, values and beliefs. They also did not want tattoos to mutually identify or affiliate them as gang members.

While tattoo removal can be utilized to remove tattoos, there are issues due to cost and time. Participant #7 reports his tattoo removal as costing over $2000 CDN, and taking over 60 weeks: “It took 10 sessions over $2000 in total. 1 session per 6 weeks but I took longer breaks due to recovery speed and pain factor (laughing).” Participant #1, who was still in the process of removal, reported their total cost as $1400 CDN, and planned for a total of nine treatments spanning a year. So while tattoo removal is a possible strategy of desistance as it removes a visible identifier perceived as gang affiliated, it is neither a cheap, quick nor painless process. Beyond tattoo removal and concealment, participants reported further challenges of leaving gang involvement.

Challenges of Leaving Gang Involvement

Table 8 Challenges to Leaving Gang Involvement	
Perceptions of police harassment	9 (64%)
Legal employment	5 (35%)
Supporting friends in fights	4 (28%)

While most participants reported the leaving of the gang lifestyle as relatively easy, challenges were not absent. These comprised perceived harassment by police, limited job opportunities, obligations to back friends up in fights and loss of status/income.

Perceptions of Police Harassment

Relating to police, nine participants reported experiencing recent police scrutiny as perceptions of gang involvement endured. Participant #1 states how he and his (Asian) friends are sometimes singled out for questioning at settings such as restaurants and acquire social stigma from these interactions:

> Let's just say, let's say, you're in a restaurant full of people, you get singled out, your group gets singled out by them and they come in and just bothering you guys and start asking questions, of course everybody else around is ok well, stay away from these guys, when from the beginning you weren't bothering anybody.

This scrutiny came from a specialized police unit called the Gang Suppression Team who visibly denote their membership through their clothing that clearly states "Police Gang Suppression". As a result, others viewing these interactions would speculate that the individuals being questioned by police are either gangsters or suspects. Participant #2 describes police scrutiny from these

interactions as an invasion of his privacy, as he views his group of mainly Asian friends occasionally getting IDed by the Gang Suppression Team at the club:

> If you go to the club they have this gang unit, just I think it's stupid how they just go in there and start IDing everyone, you might not even look like, you might not be a gang member, but if you even have the same hair style in your group they will ID you and I think that they need to know their limits when it comes to that. Because people don't like cops, but if you're going to invade their personal space, they're just going to hate cops even more. When there's a bunch of, a group of Asians that have tattoos then that's when they start going crazy.

Participant #5 reports experiencing the same scrutiny by police, which he views as a lack of respect, but added how this was also a result of police knowing him personally from their past gang affiliation:

> [Police question me] Because I'm affiliated and honestly, most cops will still remember you from back in the day, they will treat you uh with no respect, uh, they, they can be really big, I don't want to say the word, they can be mean to you, but not all cops are like that, just generally most of them can be uh pretty tough on you.

He goes on to report, however, viewing others he knew not gang affiliated nor involved in criminal nor deviant behavior being scrutinized, strictly because they were Asian:

> If you go out to the clubs, you'll see uh, gang unit, you could go out, [see] students who are just colored, they are not gang involved, they're not drug dealers or they're not even you know fighters, uh, they [police] will still harass them just because they are Asian.

Participant #5 describes confronting the Gang Suppression Team angrily after experiencing this sort of questioning on multiple occasions, for which police apologized for, but then proceeded to ID others who were Asian:

> [I said] What the fuck you guys harass me every single time I'm out and it's the same people [officers] who ID me all the time. I go to school, stop harassing me every time I'm out. Then they said oh sorry and then just went to ID my other friends, who were Asian.

The same participant goes on to state how questioning by the Gang Suppression Team continues to the present, even by the same group of officers who apologized after their complaint.

Participant's challenges in exiting gang involvement also extended to issues with legal employment.

Legal Employment

Challenges in terms of employment were apparent, but participants stated how they were able to manage these difficulties through referrals. Participant #1 stated how it was easy to find a job, even with a criminal record because he had friends who owned businesses and offered them full-time jobs:

> Well it's uh it was actually fairly easy to find a job, my ah the main [close] friends that owned companies and stuff they were able to get me in you know, people I know were able to get me in their work place and give me a full-time job.

While participant #4 reported being turned down for jobs because of a criminal record, he was eventually able to find those that allowed it, and gained one with the help of a friend:

> [It was] Difficult as I had a criminal record. I got turned down for jobs I wanted. But there were always jobs available. I tried to get a job at a charity which didn't go well. I took a job through a referral by a friend at a place where they did not check for criminal records, but [I] was looking at jobs that don't require experience or record checks like the trades, labor jobs, oh and I could do bar jobs too.

Participant #11 was assisted in legal employment by individuals he knew specifically because of his legal troubles and involvement in the gang life style:

> My boss actually knows my background very well, so. So only because I needed his assistance before, I'm a <professional occupation> and I work in a <work removed>. Yeah my boss knew very well, actually my <occupation removed> was the one that knew about my, about my, situation more, and he basically asked his friend, which is my boss to help me out and I was explaining how I lost all my stuff [after being raided]. So his friend, which is my boss, so he kind of said, come in, and that's pretty much how I got my job.

Participant #8, when asked about challenges in legal employment, reported that while a criminal record limited opportunities, it was not much of an issue because it mainly limited participation in areas of no interest:

> I would say so yea, I can't apply for a lot of jobs I could normally work at, just limits me to what I can do, I can't ever work for the government, or the police force if I ever wanted to, but I would never do that.

Participant #12, even though only having a juvenile record, was explicitly shown he could not apply for certain jobs when being escorted out of the premises following a security check after a job interview. As he previously reported, he speculated that something in the security check implied or identified his previous criminal involvement.

While five participants had criminal records, those that did not were able to keep their past affiliations or criminal activities secret. Participant #2 states: “They do not know what I've done in the past, when I got an interview I try to be as honest as possible, but I’d keep some stuff [criminal involvement] behind that would prevent me from obviously getting the job.” The lack of a criminal record precludes employers from acquiring explicit signifiers of past criminal or gang involvement. The finding that participants, even some of those with criminal records are able to manage legal employment may be explained by their relatively high socio economic status. One participant obtained a degree, while three reported working towards theirs. Seven participants held careers or professional occupations. A relatively high level of social status is also implied by a lack of mention of poverty by all participants except two cases, which was reported in the distant past, for which they nevertheless stated that growing up impoverished was not a major factor to their gang involvement.

Supporting Friends in Fights and Loss of Status/Income

The expectation of helping friends out during fights was reported by four participants. Participant #1 reported feeling peer pressure to engage in fights if in the presence of the “older guys”, or those who are/were original or veteran gang members:

> There's peer pressure [to stay involved], you know, usually it's always those older guys [veteran gangsters]. When I'm out, if I'm out with those group of friends it's just like you know, nothing matters, you don't care if anything happens. Fighting, bar fights, whatever, might happen.

Participant #4 reported the pressure of supporting friends if there during a fight: "I was obligated to help my friends out in situations [fights] but could only do so much given my situation [parole]." While on parole, being caught by police for fighting would have likely led this participant to re-imprisonment. Participant #10 also reports maintaining the group mentality and reports willingness to aid his friends if present when a fight broke out. Participant #5 also reported pressure to helping friends out in fights but in relation to not wanting to see them get hurt, while for others it might be for maintaining face: "The pressure backing up friends in fights for me was because I genuinely wanted to help my friend in a fight, For some it would be pressure to not look like a fake or goof."

The previous responses illustrate that participants are still willing to engage in violence if it meant supporting their friends. While seven reported attitude changes that disapproved of violence, the changes were more in terms of disavowing aggression or instigations. If they participated in fights it was acceptable if it was done in support of their friends (defensively), and not desired for gaining status or notoriety. The willingness to fight even though participants were out of the gang lifestyle may illustrate that fighting in general does not necessarily denote gang involvement. Fighting was still reported to be acceptable for seven participants, even though they transitioned into conventional activities such as legal employment and school that encourage conformity. For example participant #4 is in university and has a legitimate job, while participant #4 recently finished his degree and is now working in his field of study.

Three participants reported the loss of status as a challenge in exiting of gang involvement. Participant #2 reports missing the renown of the lifestyle, but eventually becoming used to the loss of it: "At first it was difficult because I love the limelight, it took a long time to get used to the life, but I'm comfortable now, it's just a daily routine." Participant #4 found gaining status outside the gangster identity challenging, but understood his past lifestyle as a gangster was over:

> It's more difficult to gain status now as opposed to before. My status as an Asian male made it harder to depart. I lost status and respect based on the stereotype of Asians as gangsters [this stereotype gave them respect and status]. There was the need to maintain respect which is difficult now that I had to leave behind that identity.

Participant #11 was challenged by the loss of income, as he had never worked before and could no longer maintain his prior spending habits:

> I've never worked a day in my life, so I don't know how to feels to receive your first paycheck, it's only a thousand dollars you know what I mean and you're going to school, you're like wow, how am I supposed to get by with this much, how do normal people do it, I would burn, I would always spend $5000 a month on nothing, whereas now as I can barely make $2000 and I pay for everything and its hard. I'm talking about mortgages and car payments and just buying good food and expensive things, I used to eat out every day, like three times a day, you know it's just like different. Money was water for me that's why, I don't know, it was different. I have my pros and cons to these things.

Participant #6 states how the transition was first difficult due to the loss of income, but had friends outside the lifestyle that supported him:

> Um, for the first little bit it was difficult, um, especially the loss of income and everything, it becomes a challenge and tempts one to dive back into it, but I also have other friends that are legit, who will help me to transition me.

Participant statements of missing the status and income the gang lifestyle offered, illustrate the pull of these factors. While responses demonstrate minor temptations by these factors, the maturity and transformations of identity they established meant they would likely

never go back into the gang lifestyle. As police were central components in the entering and exiting of gang involvement, participants were asked to evaluate policing.

Evaluations of Policing

Participants were asked "How would you evaluate policing in general regarding perceived gang activity or perceived gang membership?" Although most participants made accusations of racism and harassment by police, four assessed police as doing a good job confronting gang activity. While participant #8 continually expressed hostility towards police, he credited them with eliminating an Asian gang problem, and viewed the scrutiny experienced as somewhat necessary:

> Oh, in hindsight I would say they are doing a pretty good job, they eliminated the serious Asian gang problem that we had and now its onto to like other gangs, but being part of it you know, them harassing you at certain establishments and writing down who you are associating with and what you are doing, it seems at the time just a nuisance but now you can see that they did it for a reason and obviously it's working because the Asian gang problem isn't as crazy as it used to be.

He goes on to state that while gangs do still exist, police were able to quell the violence, and gave them a rating of B:

> Yeah, now they did a pretty job, well, obviously not that good because there's still illegal activity, there's still gangs around, but they were able to suppress the violence and a lot of the violent activities and they prevented a lot of violence from happening, so I'll give them like, I said they deserve a B.

Participant #7 also assesses police positively, and reports them as capable in confronting gang activity: "Um, I think they're doing a pretty good job, I mean they're not going to stop it [completely], but they did suppress, like a pretty crazy war that did happen." Participant #9 gives an even more positive assessment of police, and adds how he viewed this competence as originating from informed police intelligence:

> I think that they're on top of it, I mean, I think they know who's who [gangsters] and, and uh I think they, I think that it's easy for them to find out who's who and targets and they wrote down that, they have like, rats and like you know what I mean snitches and like all that stuff, if you look at it over the last ten years right, nothing really is crazy is happening on a daily basis like it was ten years ago [gang wars], so I think they have it on.

Not all participants, however, had positive assessments of police. Participant #4 reports his displeasure of police in their targeting and demolishment of his former gang, because he viewed his gang to be non-violent in comparison to other gangs, and dismantling them meant another, more violent group would take their place: "[I view police] Negatively, police need to focus on those who are violent rather than our group which was not, need to be violence focused, when you take down one group another group pops up which may or usually is worse."

Participant #3 also gives a negative evaluation of police, but bases his on the belief that police were indifferent to gang violence until innocent bystanders became victims:

> From what I heard, the cops are like if the gangs are shooting each other, we might as well just let them do that kind of thing, until bystanders got caught or hurt, and it has happened before right, but I didn't hear anything about them, you know taking action or anything after that, but you mean you still do hear about people getting busted right, but it's usually connected with trafficking and arms, rather killings, I haven't really heard the cops busting people for killings unless they [the killers] turn themselves in.

Participant #11 gives a negative assessment of police after experience being raided. He viewed their tactics as excessive and brutal:

> When they raided my house, it was not necessary to put a rifle to my <family member> face, not even one feet away from their face, it's not necessary, it's not necessary to use excessive force on my <family member> who is only <age>, like nicks him in the face, kicks him, you know it's not necessary. It's not like we are all violent. If they feel they are in danger because of us, then use excessive force, then you know do something like to protect yourself. You know it's a natural reaction you now if someone punches you. But you don't use the back of your gun and break someone's nose, or kick someone's ribs in, or kick them in the balls so they go on the ground.

While he was not opposed to police using force against those resisting arrest or posing a threat, he reported how police utilized it upon non-threatening family members. He goes on to discuss viewing police intentionally and unnecessarily vandalizing their household:

> Do you [police] really need to go through the diapers to rip the diaper boxes and rip everything that's been sealed up and toss it all over it house. Break every TV to see if there's something inside. It's not necessary to grab every plate and smash all of them on the ground.

Evaluations of policing by participants varied as both positive and negative. Responses were nuanced as four participants who gave positive assessments of police in their confrontation of gang violence, also viewed them negatively for what he viewed as harassment and racial targeting of Asians. Others gave negative assessments of police based on what they viewed to be a lack of focus on violent groups, indifference to gang violence and excessive use of force.

Contemplating the Present and Future

When participants were asked "If you were able to give advice to someone still involved with gangs, that wanted to exit, what would you tell them?", responses comprised the theme of contemplating the present and future. Participant #6, who was arrested but eventually beat his charges, mentions jail, and views long term imprisonment as an eventual outcome of the gang lifestyle: "Think about your life and the choices that you are making, is it really worth it to go behind bars five or ten years, is it worth what you have in the short term [respect and money]." As participant #6 was arrested by police and had friends serving long sentences in jail, he realized how the so-called easy and quick money gained through the lifestyle did not last long and was temporary.

Participant #1 also makes reference to the temporary nature of the benefits in the gang lifestyle: "Just think about your future and if everything you are doing right now, will still be

there in the end." As was the case with the previous participant, he was arrested for criminal activity, and beat most but not all of his charges. Participant #11 refers to imprisonment as an outcome, but adds how finishing a jail sentence meant starting from the bottom of the gang hierarchy and later difficulties in the form of challenges from other gangs:

> Afterwards you spend so much on lawyers, to still get a criminal record, come out and restart, and while you are in jail for four years, you restart, how do you restart, you start from ground zero again, you think all the shit you used to earn is yours now? There's always going to be a younger crowd [of gangsters] that's going to come and take over. Everybody is out to be on top. It's a competition all over again.

These responses adds how an individual's position in the hierarchy was always tenuous, and if high in the hierarchy, there came constant threats by younger groups who will, in theory, eventually take the top position. Participant #11 goes on to add how the end of the lifestyle was hopeless as the respect and excitement it seemingly projected was temporary:

> It's not really worth it in the end in that kind of life, just for a short time of pleasure, like. What I mean by short time of pleasure that you know have that fame for just that short amount of time.

Participant #9 reports how one should realize how death is an eventual outcome of gang involvement and that life outside should be considered:

> I think they should look at other opportunities or, I see its hard, some people are stuck right, hard to get out of that, it's hard because of that environment or thought process, I just think you should evaluate your life and how you want to die right and it's just like if you want to die that way so be it. But if you don't you got to get out, right, it's just money so, just like, your better than that, but it's, do what you gotta do basically. Uh, find exit strategies and then [realize] there's more to life than that lifestyle I think.

Participant #10 mirrors the argument that one should realize how death is imminent if continuing the lifestyle and that a real life does not exist in the gang lifestyle: "It's a good decision to exit, they should understand the risk, life is more important, there's better out there for people, get an education, get a good job, just gotta keep doing it." Participant #3 advises individuals to question

whether the gang lifestyle is worth it, but adds how others should consider whether they want a legacy as a gangster or drug dealer:

> Is it really worth it, is it really worth being in jail or dead. I mean now the thing it's easier now [to exit] gangs as it's quieted down [end of the gang war], it's a lot more quiet now. Right so I mean the people who are involved now, they're only in it for the money, so is it really worth getting busted for, so then you can't work a real job, do you plan on doing it until your 50, 60, 70, or your kids going to think what did grandpa do. He was a fucking drug dealer. I guess it comes down to family and stuff, I guess it depends on your values, but the question is, is it really worth it.

This statement can be linked to the notion of filial piety, as the family here is viewed as one body, where the image portrayed to family is important. Participant #3 argues that one should consider whether they want to dishonor their family with the legacy of being a drug dealing gangster. If someone cared about honoring their family by leaving behind a positive legacy, then they should desist from the gang lifestyle. Participant #7 states how exiting the gang lifestyle requires finding passion in something as it is easy to relapse:

> I would tell someone, they have to do something that their passionate in, cuz if they're just going to go to school to think that they're going to quit, they're going to relapse and go back into the gangster world, because they're going to be like fuck this, this sucks, cuz I don't know what I'm here for.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed why and how participants exited gang involvement. In reflecting upon their experiences they were also asked to evaluate policing as this party had a significant influence on their gang involvement and desistance. In addition because they had successfully exited out of the lifestyle and made identity transitions as no longer social outsiders, they were asked to give advice to others who wanted to exit the lifestyle. The responses advised these individuals to look to the future and see that the gang life was not life at all. The so called fame,

fortune, and money it introduced was only short term and temporary, where lingering within would inevitably result in imprisonment or death.

Chapter Seven: Discussion and Conclusion

Gang research has traditionally focused on becoming a gang member rather than on exiting membership (Decker & Lauritsen, 2012, p. 51). Asian gang research is also scarce due to the relatively recent presence and social/cultural barriers to access (Tsunokai & Kposowa, 2002, p. 42). In addition, there is a lack of rigorous empirical gang research in Canada (Mellor, MacRae, Pauls, & Hornick, 2005, p. 7). As a result Canadian scholars tend to borrow extensively from American research even though "Canada is conceptually and structurally different across cities and provinces" (Ezeonu, 2014, p. 8). The current study addressed these multiple deficiencies in gang research, but puts most significance upon the exiting of gang involvement. This research comprised three main elements of gang involvement by Asians. First was how participants defined someone gang involved. Second, how and why these individuals entered gang involvement. Third, how and why participants exited gang involvement. The following chapter summarizes participants' responses to these questions. Study implications comprise the knowledge these findings may have for practitioners and police to support gang desistance. Limitations include the shortcomings as a result of researcher subjectivity, method and sample composition. This chapter concludes with recommendations for future research, mainly in regard to the shortcomings of this study.

Summary of Findings

Participants in this study first defined someone gang involved. Responses largely replicated previous research (e.g. group identity that involves criminal activity), but lacked the technical criteria utilized by groups such as the police (e.g. confirmation of association with known gang members through police surveillance) (Canadian Centre for Justice Studies, 2013; Mellor, MacRae, Pauls, & Hornick, 2005; Wortley, 2010).

Defining Gang Involvement

Participants reported gang involvement to comprise the employment of tattoos and participation in criminal activity, but added the significance of being Asian. Asian ethnicity was relevant because participants were perceived to be the group most gang involved in Alberta (i.e. based on the media coverage of gang activities in the recent past – see chapter four). Tattoos served as a visible means of legitimating the gangster identity, related to the popular linkage between Asian and criminal identity. As Atkinson (2003) argues, tattoos evidence a sort of self-branding and are often related to "rejecting class-based social norms, values, and beliefs" (p.41). They also serve as a means of mutual identification. The tattoos employed mostly consisted of Asian dragons on the arm which were not specific to a gang, but to Asian gang members in general. Authentication of the gangster identity was carried out through participation in criminal activity; mainly drug dealing and physical violence. While gang involvement did not require participation in these activities as a group, it did require them to be committed to the benefitting of one. Some participants reported the ease of perceiving gang involvement even for those peripherally related to criminal activity. This involved friends being stereotyped and assumed to be involved because of physical proximity to those who were. Ease of perceiving gang involvement also extended to rumor and gossip which meant unsubstantiated claims were sufficient rather than any actual proof of gang involvement (i.e. criminal record). These rumors and gossip, however, could be validated if an individual was publically 'outed' in the newspaper for committing a "gang related crime".

In addition, participants defined gangs as operating through varying degrees of involvement (Franzese, Covey, & Menard, 2006) and fluidity (Bolden, 2010; Prowse, 2013; White, 2013), conforming to results from previous research. Ten participants stated explicitly or

implied that they were associate members (i.e. regular or irregular participants). A few (or four) were implied as 'core' members, or those who run the gang and/or are active in day to day functioning. Fluidity is evident as participants reported joining and exiting gangs with no formal rituals (Bolden, 2010, p. 210). This fluidity was also apparent as their gang involvement rested more on the basis of criminal activity within a group than on affiliation with one (Prowse, 2013; White, 2013). In other words 'running with' a gang was insufficient, gang involvement required participating in gang activity.

Becoming Gang Involved

Gang involvement by participants was influenced by race/cultural similarity, friends, family and role models. 'Push' factors included the need to fit in and low self-esteem, while 'pull' factors comprised financial and social autonomy, respect and fun. Race and cultural similarity drew participants to gang involvement because individuals with these similarities were easily accessible and included those already part of criminal groups. While similar research shows the salience of push factors (Ezoeonu, 2014; Ngo, 2010; Robinson & Joe, 1980, Young, 1993), participants in this study did not illustrate these characteristics. Participants only made vague references to fitting in and low self-esteem, where gangs were utilized to fit in or fill this void in self-esteem.

Friends, family and role models were crucial to participant's gang involvement. These groups comprised those people with whom participants would either form or join gangs. While these informal peer groups did not initially begin as gangs, the solidarity, protection, and loyalty they offered, influenced mutual bonding. Participants' transformation to gang members or as gang involved came gradually. Most reported a willingness, if not eagerness, to become gang involved, experiencing no pressure to do so. Pressure was not needed as participants were

attracted by multiple pull factors. The most frequently reported pulls were financial and social autonomy. Gang activities such as drug dealing allowed easy and quick money without the requirement of waking up early or a regular nine-to-five work week. This financial autonomy also projected respect – thus reinforcing one's links to gang membership – because it allowed luxury and the flaunting of money. Unlike previous research, participants did not report money as motivating their involvement due to a lack of educational or job skills (Wortley & Tanner, 2007, p. 112), but rather due to the ease of attainment. Secondary to this was the lure of respect or, more specifically relevant to Asian culture, face. Face is the "respect and/or deference which a person can claim for himself from others" (Ho, 1976, p. 883). Participants discussed respect/face as the ability to show others they should be feared and not antagonized which was a product of the gangster identity. Gaining this respect/face required long-term commitment to criminal activities such as fighting and drug dealing, leading to moving up in the gang hierarchy.

Exiting Gang Involvement

Following how and why participants entered gang involvement, they were asked what factors influenced their departure. Findings were largely consistent with previous research that mainly comprised family (Deane, Bracken, & Morrissette, 2007; Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule, 2014; Moloney, MacKenzie, Hunt & Joe-Laidler, 2009; Prowse, 2012) and violence (Bolden, 2013; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011; Carson, Peterson & Esbensen, 2013; Ngo, 2010, Rice, 2014). Family was the most important motivation for participants leaving gang involvement. This was related to the realization that the lifestyle was damaging or threatening these relationships. While in line with previous research, findings were also specific to this group of Asian participants. For instance five participants echoed the Confucian notion of filial piety and loyalty. Family members should be committed to each other, to helping each other out, and children should obey

parents (Hwang, 1999). These participants reported that they came to realize how their gang involvement shaming their families, and was a source of disrespect and disloyalty - filial piety holds that the actions of one member reflects upon the entire family. This finding is also mirrored by Prowse (2012) who reports Vietnamese gang members desisting from gangs after marriage in order to show respect for their wife and family (p. 29). Family motivating desistance was also related to the presence of children. The prospect and responsibility of parenting inspired the "recognition of an opportunity to claim an alternative, desired, and socially approved identity" (Moloney et al., 2010, p. 15).

The threat of violence, towards both the individual and the family also motivated gang desistance. While violence was acceptable to participants in their entry into gang membership as it authenticated their identity, the benefits of it began to diminish as they got older. The paranoia originating from the threat of violence also extended to fears of incarceration. Participants reported incarceration as motivating their departure in the fear of going 'back inside'/being charged again or as seen in the experience of others. For those who had already served prison time in their gang involvement, continuing in the lifestyle was perceived to inevitably lead to re-incarceration, or incarceration for those not yet imprisoned. While previous research finds incarceration as promoting further entrenchment into the lifestyle (Grekul & Benson, 2008; Totten, 2009; Wood & Allyne, 2010), this was not the case for participants in this study. This may be explained by the sample composition, which mostly included low level or associate members and individuals with strong family relations who supported their desistance.

Participants also illustrated Sampson & Laub's (1992) life course perspective, which views desistance from crime as resulting from maturity and growing up. Desistance also interacted with life experience, maturation, individual will-power and social support networks

(Adorjan & Chui, 2013). In meeting thresholds of strain originating from experiences (or thoughts) surrounding death/violence and incarceration, participants realized these were the eventual outcomes of the lifestyle. These changes in attitude illustrated cognitive transformations as described by Giordano, Schroeder, & Cernkovich (2007). Partaking in deviant acts such as drug dealing and fighting produced positive emotions in their adolescence, but later diminished in adulthood because they received less social backing. As a result, these positive emotions were replaced with "feelings of regret, sadness, and depression" (p. 1612).

Findings in this study showed that gradual exits were most characteristic of gang desistance as illustrated by previous research (Bulbolz, 2014; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Maruna & Roy, 2007; Rice. 2007). Participants reported thoughts about leaving the lifestyle for many years, which was facilitated by gradual maturing and cognitive transformations. These gradual exits were motivated by evaluations of risks (e.g. death) and benefits (e.g. respect) in the lifestyle.

Thirteen participants reported little difficulty in exiting the gang lifestyle, even for those who claimed long term involvement and hard core status. This is consistent with previous research that found gang members as generally able to leave the lifestyle without consequences (Bolden, 2012; Decker & Lauritsen 2002; Kwok 2009; Young & Gonzalez, 2013). The ease of exit by participants in this study was explained by their involvement with groups that comprised friends or who they had grown up with. This is consistent with research by Bolden (2013) who also reported a lack of criticism in gang exits because gang peers included friends and family (p. 475). In the only case where there was significant difficulty of exiting due to ongoing threats, it was from a participant who was relatively young (in comparison to the rest of the sample) and had a relatively recent departure (within the past few months).

In terms of desistance strategies, participants reported the significance of cutting back or severing of contacts completely as illustrated by previous research (Bolden, 2013; Gordon, 1994; Kwok, 2009; Ngo, 2011; Pih, De La Rosa, Rugh, & Mao, 2008; Rice, 2014). Participants reported limiting contacts with gang involved friends, but did not entail severing ties with them completely except in the cases of those who were most heavily involved. This is consistent with Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb (2011) who report former gang members as maintaining social and emotional ties with members of their former gang (p. 508). In regard to limiting contacts, participants applied this to avoid being dragged back into the lifestyle due to these deviant influences. As Bolden (2013) suggests, removing physical proximity to these individuals allowed the breaking of psychological connections to them (p. 484-485). The limiting of contacts as a strategy also included avoiding rivals. This included being selective of where they would go, which were implied to be public establishments such as bars where these individuals might be encountered. Geographical relocation was also suggested because it embodied a fresh start. Maruna & Roy (2007) describe this as "knifing off", which allows long term "breaking away from one's social environment and finding a new one where one is under less pressure to conform to a past identity" (p. 105).

A second strategy included keeping busy through activities such as school or work. In research by Jimenez (2005) school was cited as a motivator of gang desistance because participants wanted to finish their education. As was the case in this study nine participants went back to school or were still working on their education. Keeping busy was important because it helped manage boredom and included pro-social interactions. Routines with activities such as work allowed a break in the cycle of illicit behavior. As Ugen (2000) argues, work encourages conformity and informal social control because of the close and frequent contact with

conventional others (p. 529). The pro-social behavior encouraged by such activities resulted in attitude changes that embraced conformity and respect. While previous attitudes included cockiness and aggression, participants no longer desired to be social outsiders. The changes included no longer viewing random individuals as potential threats, instigating fights, and showing deference to police. While disrespect to police was characteristic of gang involvement because it illustrated disregard for the law, showing deference now re-established participants as willing to fulfil social obligations and portrayed them as members in the moral community (Sykes & Clark, 1975, p. 588-589).

The final strategy utilized by participants in exiting gang involvement was the removal or concealment of tattoos. Because tattoos on Asians were perceived to denote gang membership, participants reported removing or concealing them. Participants were cognizant of the deviant associations of tattoos and utilized removal or concealment to avoid this stigma. These perceptions were most significant in relation to police, as participants viewed tattoos as the source of ongoing police scrutiny. They no longer wanted a visible signifier of gang involvement because tattoos illustrated "rejecting class-based social norms, values, and beliefs" (Atkinson 2003, p. 41) and a badge of affiliation.

Although participants reported ease in leaving the lifestyle, challenges were reported in relation to perceived police harassment, legal employment, expectations to support friends and loss of status/income. They reported experiencing personally or viewing others (e.g. other Asians or their friends who were Asian) being IDed or singled out for questioning in public establishments such as clubs. As this scrutiny largely occurred from a specialized police gang suppression unit, this implied to participants and likely to others viewing these interactions suspicions of gang involvement. While challenges to legal employment did occur for five

participants, these were largely managed through social supports. For those with criminal records, legal employment was permitted because they had referrals from friends or social networks. Participants without criminal records, found employment to be comparably easy because they were capable of concealing their deviant pasts.

Various factors that threatened to pull participants back into the lifestyle included the expectation of supporting friends in fights and the loss of status/income. Residual traits of gang involvement are evident as participants reported feeling the pressure of supporting friends if fights occurred when they were present. This expectation was motivated by a desire to keep their friends safe or maintain their status. For three participants, exiting the lifestyle resulted in a loss of status and income. Three participants reported missing the status the gangster identity projected and the loss of income from financially lucrative activities such as drug dealing.

When participants were asked to give advice on exiting the lifestyle, responses exemplified reflecting on the present and future. Participants recommended that those considering leaving the lifestyle should evaluate their life now and contemplate whether it was worth the inevitable death or incarceration in the future. They discussed the temporary nature of the fame and fortune ostensibly offered in the gang lifestyle, which was short term and would eventually end. In addition to reflecting on the lifestyle, participants were asked to evaluate policing. Although most participants criticized police with accusations of racism and harassment, they assessed them positively for their handling of gang violence. While participants reported themselves to be targets of police scrutiny, many still viewed police as capable and credited them with confronting a gang problem. Less frequently, participants criticized police for a supposed focus on drug dealing rather than violence, and for expressing perceived indifference to killings

unless they included “innocent bystanders”, and for brutality and excessiveness in incidences such as raids. The findings of this study offer numerous implications.

Study Implications

The findings in this study have a number of implications in terms of the groups working with gang members, including the police. Practitioners such as counsellors, probation officers, and social workers can utilize these findings to support the desistance of gang members; Asian or not. As most participants reported their gang involvement as occurring in their late teens and for long terms, it is important for gang interventions to occur as early as junior high school. The best way to manage gang membership is to prevent it; ensuring that individuals never get involved at all or that interventions occur early when signs of involvement (e.g. gang-associated tattoos, getting into fights) emerge. Participants reported that deeper involvement into the lifestyle made it harder to extricate themselves as it resulted in ongoing issues such as criminal records, scrutiny by police, and fears of victimization from rivals. Those who had the most ease exiting were gang involved for shorter periods and less involved in the lifestyle. In other words they were able to ‘fly under the radar’, and keep their gang involvement secret. Communicating the experiences of those who supposedly ‘made it’ in the lifestyle by achieving all the so-called benefits (e.g. respect, money) and then successfully desisting from gangs is crucial to facilitate steering away those becoming seduced by the allure of the lifestyle. As participant #11 reports, the temporary glamour of the lifestyle is not worth it as the cost is damaging ones’ future:

> For those that just got in there, I would say if you don't even have a record, don’t fuck up your life, you know, just don’t, it’s not really worth it in the end to give up that kind of life, just for a short time of pleasure, like. What I mean by short time of pleasure, that you have that fame for just that short amount of time.

Counsellors supporting those attempting to desist from gangs should focus on questioning clients on what they want for their future and what they see as important to them. Participants reported how they contemplated their future before exiting the gang lifestyle and realized how they no longer desired what it involved and required. The notoriety of being a gangster and the quick and easy acquisition of material success were no longer sufficient to keep them in. What they wanted in their futures was a family and peace of mind without having to constantly look over their shoulders for police or rivals. Counsellors should engage those thinking about leaving gang involvement with these questions and issues in mind. They must be persistent as desistance by definition is an ongoing process.

Implications regarding police comprises responses by participants that perceived them as engaging in harassment and unjustified scrutiny against them. While all participants other than two could definitively state they were out of the lifestyle and not going back, five who were long out reported interactions with police that suggested suspicions of criminal activity. These comprised questioning and requests to be searched or IDed. Public interactions such as these are stigmatizing and inspire deviant labels. As these interactions largely occur with officers visibly denoting their membership as 'Police Gang Suppression', others nearby viewing these are likely to suspect or perceive these individuals as gang involved. Police in general, but specifically Police Gang Suppression may need to revaluate the criteria they utilize in selecting who they question in public establishments as suspected gang members. This may entail improved police intelligence and closer examination of existing pictures of suspected gang members. If police are more conscientious of who they question and scrutinize, and how and in what contexts, this would provide positive benefits to those trying to desist in terms of their internal and external validation as no longer gang involved. In addition, it benefits them in their desire to no longer be

stigmatized. As participants reported ongoing scrutiny from police, this suggested they were still suspected of gang involvement.

In addition it is important to underscore these findings as most pertinent to those who are not deeply involved or comprise associate members. These individuals are likely to be the most receptive to desistance and able to evaluate the positive and negative aspects in and outside gang involvement. They may also be less subject to the push and pull aspects of the gang lifestyle. Those who are 'wannabes' or just 'hanging out' have not yet attained the gangster identity as a "master status". As Becker (1963) states, a master status overrides all other statuses and has priority (p. 35). Individuals on the fringes of gang involvement have not yet been identified as deviants to the point that all their other statuses are obscured. On the other hand this is not the case for hard core members who have fulfilled the master status as gangsters and deviants. Different tactics and strategies may be more appropriate in consideration of their deep involvement into the gang lifestyle. While the implications of this study are numerous, there are shortcomings which result in limitations.

Limitations

This study's limitations center on researcher subjectivity, method and sample. Limitations shaped by researcher subjectivity relate to the similar cultural background and upbringing to participants. While this encouraged rapport between researcher and participant, it also motivated sympathy towards them. As a result, possibilities of bias and objectivity follow. However as Becker (1967) argues, not taking a side in deviance research still does not guarantee impartiality or theoretical and technical control (p. 246). In addition, concerns with bias are eased with reflexivity or the capacity of actors to adjust to situations where the fundamental goal is to deeply reflect upon their work and how it is informed through their social position (Tsekeris &

Katrivesis, 2008, p. 3). While bias may be present, awareness of it helps amend it. Researcher subjectivity also presented challenges in terms of participants who were approached. Due to existent social networks, participants mostly included Asians of similar gang affiliation. But as the literature argues, gang membership is fluid and greater importance lies upon individual gang identity and activity rather than affiliation to a specific group (Bolden, 2013; Prowse, 2012; White, 2013). Existent social networks also influenced the ethnicities approached. Chinese, Vietnamese and Filipino individuals mainly comprised this study, because these groups were most familiar to the researcher. As a result there was a lack of participation by other Asian ethnicities who may be gang involved in Alberta, such as Japanese, Koreans or Cambodians individuals.

Method presented a limitation in this study in terms of it being conducted by a single researcher. As a result the direction and themes analyzed rested upon the expertise and interests of a single researcher. A second researcher may have recognized missed or underdeveloped themes. The employment of a single researcher, however, was a requirement of this study as most participants asked for reassurance that certain details contained in this study would not be viewed by anybody else (e.g. transcriptions).

The study sample involved limitations through size, ethnicity, gender, city of participants, and level of involvement. This study included fourteen participants. While a larger sample was sought, considerations of time and practicality were required. As a Master's thesis, the desired length of completion was two years. Practicality presented itself in the difficulty of finding willing participants as there were constant pauses in the research when interview leads dried up or required rescheduling. Ethnicity as previously noted was narrowly focused on three ethnicities (Chinese, Vietnamese and Filipino). While many similarities exist between these cultures, there

are just as many differences. In addition, if other Asian ethnicities involved in gang membership in Alberta were interviewed, results may have differed. Gender resulted in a limitation as the sample included thirteen males and a single female. Although the study examines gang involvement by Asians, it is more properly characterized as examining involvement by Asian males. While the majority of gang members are male, knowing more about Asian females who become gang involved would help bolster efforts to prevent such involvement for both males and females. The final limitation included participant's city of residence. This study focused on Alberta and included participants from only the two major cities (Calgary and Edmonton). Eleven participants were from Calgary while three were from Edmonton. While more participants from Edmonton were sought, this was hindered by distance and social networks. The relevance of city, however, should not be overstated as three participants reported their gang involvement as including multiple cities (e.g. Calgary, Vancouver, and Edmonton). The focus here is on gang activity in Alberta in general. Level of involvement is a limitation as most participants implied or reported relatively low levels of involvement. The low level of gang involvement likely influenced the ease of desistance by participants. As Sweeten, Pyrooz, & Piquero (2013) find, those more deeply involved or embedded into a gang had more difficulty in desisting (p. 470). Even with the limitations described, the knowledge advanced by this study can inform future research.

Future Research

Future research should address the shortcomings noted above. This mainly includes researcher subjectivity, characteristics of sample in terms of number, ethnic focus, gender and gang member types. Researcher subjectivity limited the study in terms of narrowing the gang affiliation of participants due to their social networks. While existing social networks aided in the finding of

participants, it also limited those who could be approached by mostly precluding those of rival gang affiliations. A more adequate study would comprise participants of several different gang affiliations.

Future research should consider a larger sample and greater diversity of Asian ethnicities. A larger sample would likely allow the enhancement of themes lacking salience because they required more data to illuminate. Greater diversity of Asian ethnicities is required as ethnicities other than those comprising the study are reported to have significant levels of gang involvement. For example in Calgary, many individuals with Cambodian surnames were reported as victims of gang violence (Van Rassel, 2009) while no Cambodians were included in this study. In terms of method, although not possible in this study, others should seek the use of a second researcher in the analysis of data as this allows better recognition and promotion of themes.

Gender should be considered in terms of seeking more female participants. Although this study sought more females in order to show variations in experience and motivations of gang involvement from males, this was not accomplished. A study comprising more females should be able to accomplish this, although this is difficult in two significant ways. First in recruiting gang involved females who have desisted and second finding those who are Asian.

This study was narrow in terms of gang involvement as participants largely included those who implied or stated themselves as associate rather than core members. The reporting by most participants of ease in desistance is likely influenced by the samples' composition of mostly associate members. A more diverse sample would include more identifying as hard core members, which would likely find participants reporting more difficulties in exiting gang involvement.

Despite these recommendations for future research comprising attainment of a larger and more diverse sample, accomplishing this is far more complex. For a study of this type, finding eligible and willing participants is difficult. As Hodkinson (2005) argues, researchers studying deviant groups may require hard work over long periods of time to gain the trust they require, and may even have to resort to deception and covert methods (p. 12). Hard work was the case for this study as many rejections for participation were experienced. Researchers may not be able to acquire a diverse sample or be selective in choosing participants when securing the participation of any is so complex.

A final theme that future research should explore, missing from this study is the persistence of the gangster identity, which has ramifications for sustaining desistance. Eight participants made references to enjoying or missing particular aspects of the lifestyle, while two implied they could slip back into it. The confession that two participants considered the possibility that they would get back into the lifestyle was an interesting notion, but data for this was lacking in this study, which precluded its presentation as a theme. When participant #8 was asked what specifically made him not a gangster, he reported a desire to avoid deviance, but admitted a shift back into the identity was possible if caught up with peers seeking revenge:

> I don't want to get myself into that kind of trouble, but, but again if the situation arose I might say yeah let's go do whatever, let's go roll on [confront] whatever, but it would have to be pretty extreme, like they would have to personally attack myself, my family, or someone very very close to me, that's like you know friends, I would, I would and that's why I can't give you an answer that I'm 100% definitely out of this.

As this quote indicates, one major theme that was insufficiently captured as a result of a lack of data are the push factors that push individuals back into gang involvement.

Although recognizing the shortcomings, this study provided many important insights and answered many questions regarding the exit from gang involvement by Asians. It examined a

social problem that has provoked extensive fear and media attention in Western Canada. While most participants contended that they had successfully exited the lifestyle, it is important to highlight that many reported experiencing skepticism regarding these changes of identity as recent police interactions implied suspected criminal or gang involvement. This is a result of the enduring stigma of Asians as gang members originating from the media and the lack of external validation by police that these individuals are part of the moral community. Participants oriented themselves to the history in Alberta (or Vancouver in the 1980s) that depicted Asians as not only gangsters, but the only gangsters in existence. They attempted to dislodge themselves from this history and any insinuations they were personally involved; whether this entailed concealing/removing their tattoos or showing deference to police to illustrate their respect for the law and status as law abiding citizens. The notoriety and fear of Asians as gangsters promoted by the media was no longer desired or attractive to them. The biggest difficulty participants experienced in relation to desistance from gangs is not related to their own agency or determination, but, based on their reflections, from the lack of recognition by police.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Information Letter

Letter of Information / Consent to Individual Participants

Going Legit: An Exploration of Formerly Gang Involved Asians

Principal Investigator: Michael Hoang (Masters Student)
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Supervisor: Dr. Michael Adorjan
(address removed)
(address information removed)
(email removed); (phone number removed)

Purpose

I am conducting research at the University of Calgary exploring the experience of formerly gang involved Asians relating to the factors of their involvement and later exit.

Potential Benefits to Participants

This research will explore the experiences of Asians formerly gang involved and examine how they manage their current identity. In addition to expanding gang research in Canada, by sharing their stories, participants can gain knowledge of the causes of gang involvement by Asians and uncover the circumstances and rituals that allowed them to exit.

Procedure

Participation in this research will entail one interview lasting about an hour. With permission, this interview will be digitally recorded at a setting agreed upon by both parties (researcher and participant). This is to ensure that any statements you make are accurately captured.

Potential Harms, Risks or Discomforts and their minimization

In this study, you will be participating in an interview where you will be reflecting on your experiences as a formerly gang involved Asians. These reflections may give you insights regarding yourself and these experiences. It is possible that you may find discussing such experiences stressful and disturbing. Every possible effort will be made to minimize these discomforts.

If you choose to participate in this study, you acknowledge that you are not currently gang involved and not under investigation or have pending charges for gang-related criminal activities. You will not be asked to report your own criminal activities or those of others.

In the event that you are uncomfortable with any of the questions or the interview, you are free not to answer or continue. Also, you will be allowed to review the audio recording of the interview and inform the researcher if you wish any material not to be used. At any time for any reason, you will be free to withdraw from the study at any time. It should also be noted that participation in this study will not lead to any special benefits or remuneration. Any issues may be addressed to the researcher directly or by contacting the University of Calgary's Research Ethics Analyst, Research Services Office at (403) 210-9863; email cfreb@ucalgary.ca.

Confidentiality

All interview data will be treated as confidential. This means that your privacy will be respected. For anything you say during the interview, there will be no reference to your name and no identifying information will be used. All research data relating to the interview will be secured. Recordings of the interview will be deleted following transcription on an electronic transcript. The electronic transcript will be encrypted. The only person with access and capability of viewing this document will be the researcher. No information regarding neither your identity, nor the interview you provide will shared with anyone, including the police nor criminal justice officials. Any information obtained in this study will be used for research purposes only.

Participation and withdrawal

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. If you decide to participate, you may decide to stop at any time, even after giving consent. If you decide to stop participating, there will be no consequences to you. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided to that point will be destroyed.

If you feel uncomfortable with any of the questions, you are free not to answer. You are also free to discontinue the interview without explanation. Any issues may be addressed to myself directly or by contacting the University of Calgary's Research Ethics Analyst, Research Services Office at (403) 210-9863; email cfreb@ucalgary.ca

Questions and concerns

This study has been approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me at any time (contact information at the top of this form). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, contact the University of Calgary's Research Ethics Analyst, Research Services Office at (403) 210-9863; email cfreb@ucalgary.ca. If you have any concerns regarding gang activity, you can contact the Calgary Police Service gang help line at (403) 428-8191.

Appendix B: Consent Form

Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:

Michael Hoang, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, University of Calgary, (403) 220-3214, hoanm@ucalgary.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Michael Adorjan, (address removed), (address removed), (phone number removed), (email removed)

Title of Project: Going Legit: An exploration of formerly gang-involved Asians

Sponsor: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study will be to investigate and explore how Asians become involved and later disengage from gangs. This study examines the factors that influence Asians to become gang involved. Also the factors that influenced these individuals to exit from gang involvement and the ways in which they enact this will be examined. Your participation will help build the knowledge for a topic that is rarely researched and hopefully encourage programs to influence gang disengagement.

What Will I Be Asked To Do?

You will be asked to participate in an interview from about 30 minutes to one hour. This interview will entail the following:

- An explanation of the study
- You will be asked to understand your role in this interview and agree to participate
- You will be asked questions regarding your status (age, ethnicity, marital status, child status/how many children)
- You will be asked questions regarding your experience as someone formerly gang involved. This includes the factors that influenced involvement with gangs, possible experiences with police and the criminal justice system, and your later exit from gang involvement.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions and give any comments you have on the study
- With your permission, the interview will be recorded in order to accurately capture the interview

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may refuse to participate altogether or refuse to participate in parts of the study by declining any and all questions. You may also withdraw from the study at any point without any detriment to yourself.

In withdrawing, there will be no risk of identification to the interview provided, and any data containing your involvement will be destroyed (i.e. interview file, interview transcript).

In addition, by voluntarily participating in this research, the participant acknowledges that they are not currently gang involved and not under investigation or have pending charges for gang-related criminal activities.

What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?

If you agree to participate in this research, you will be required to indicate consent to the options below by using a checkmark in the appropriate field with the current date following. In filling out this consent form, there will be no link to the interview you may later provide. Outside of this informed consent form, there will be no personal identifying information collection, and all participants; including yourself in this study will remain strictly and completely anonymous.

Should you agree to participate you will be asked to provide the following information:

Age
Ethnicity
Martial status
Child status and how many
Signature (using an X)

These questions are important as they provide context and help identify broader factors in the process of exiting from gang life. This does not mean that you are under any obligation to answer questions relating to the providing information.

I grant permission to be audio taped: Yes: ___ No: ___
The pseudonym I choose for myself is: _____

Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?

This study will comprise a reflection on your personal experiences being gang involved and exiting from gang involvement. Through this you may also gain new insights about yourself and your experiences. It is possible that you may experience psychological and emotional discomfort from these discussions. Every possible effort will be made to minimize these as you are free not to answer any questions you are uncomfortable with or withdraw from the study at any time. Interviews will be conducted in a private setting to be later established with your explicit approval. Additionally participants will not be asked to report their own criminal activities or those of others. Nor will any information regarding your identity or your interview be shared with anyone, including police or other criminal justice officials.

Possible benefits: You may or not directly benefit from participating in this study. In participating in this interview and sharing your insights, you will have an opportunity to share experiences that may have been personally meaningful. The insights you provide may help inform others with the same experiences and aid others who have/are struggling with desistance from gangs. Knowledge from this study may also inform policies and practices helping people exit from crime and gang life.

What Happens to the Information I Provide?

Following the completion of interviews, they will eventually be transcribed and be deleted as soon as possible. All data will be stored at a secured location, using passwords and encryption. Only the researcher will have access to this anonymous information. At no point in time will your interview be shared with anybody else, especially the police or officials from the criminal justice system. This data will be and can only be accessed by the researcher, where protection of your privacy is of central importance. The scope of identifying information contained in data will comprise your age and ethnicity (for example, 29/Vietnamese Male). Any narrow identifying information that cannot be modified to ensure protection of your identify in the data will not be included.

In the event that you choose to withdraw from the study, all information relating to your participation will be destroyed/deleted.

Signatures

Your signature on this form (using an "X" only to protect your identity) indicates that 1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this

research project, and 2) you agree to participate in the research project.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's pseudonym: (please print) _____

Participant's Signature (using an X): ___ Date: _____

Researcher's Name: (please print) _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Questions/Concerns

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

Michael Hoang
Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts
University of Calgary
(403) 220-3214, hoanm@ucalgary.ca

OR

Dr. Michael Adorjan
(address removed)
(address removed)
(phone number removed), (email removed)

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact the Research Ethics Analyst, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 210-9863; email cfreb@ucalgary.ca.

In addition, if you have any concerns and an issue regarding gang activity, the following resource is available: the Calgary Police Service gang help line (403) 428-8191.

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

Appendix C: Interview Script

Year of birth _____ Ethnicity: _____
Are you currently married? ___ Yes ___ No
Children? ___Yes ___ No If yes how many? ___
Estimated age of entrance: ___ Estimated age of exit: ___

1. How would you define a gang member or someone who is 'gang involved'?

2. What factors influenced your entrance into gang involvement?
    2.1 Did your status as Asian influence your entrance?

3. What factors influenced your departure from gang involvement?
    3.1 Did your status as Asian influence your departure?

4. What was the most important factor that made you decide to depart gang involvement?

5. [for females] How do you think your experiences exiting gang life differ from the males you knew?
    5.1 Are there challenges female members face exiting gang life that males don't face?

6. How do you manage (what are your strategies to manage) your identity outside gang involvement?
    6.1 Do you have any children? If so, how long have you been a father/mother?
    6.2 [if applicable] How do you manage the identity as a father/mother with your former identity as gang involved?
    6.3 How do you manage legal employment given your former identity as gang involved?

7. How would you define your experience of departing from gang involvement?
    7.1 Did you experience any challenges in exiting from gang involvement?

8. Are your interactions with police different now than before?
    8.1 Do you think you act differently with police or would you act differently if interacting with police now?

9. How would you evaluate policing in general regarding perceived gang activity or perceived gang membership?

10. Are you still in contact in any way with the criminal justice system?
    10.1 [If applicable] Have your views changed towards the criminal justice system as a whole since you've left gang life?

11. If you were able to give advice to someone still involved with gangs, that wanted to exit, what would you tell them?