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Jana Grekul and Petrina LaRocque

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“Hope is Absolute”: Gang-Involved Women - Perceptions from the Frontline

Jana Grekul, University of Alberta

and

Petrina LaRocque, University of Alberta

***Abstract:** Part of a larger ongoing project examining the gendered nature of Aboriginal gangs on the Prairies, this exploratory study focuses on the types of programs and services that have the potential to be effective in facilitating exits for women involved in these gangs. Based on interviews with eighteen frontline professionals and three (formerly) gang-involved women, the paper is informed by research by Giordano et al. (2002), which found that offenders, female and male, often experience environmental catalysts for change that precede their decision to leave the criminal lifestyle. Through interviews with staff who work directly with gang-involved individuals, we begin to explore the gang exit process and the types of programs and services that might capitalize on the readiness of women in particular to leave the gang lifestyle. While there is overlap between supports required to facilitate gang exit for males and females, respondents suggest gendered and racialized pathways into gangs have implications for gang exit processes.*

Introduction

Aboriginal gangs, increasingly, are attracting the attention of media, researchers, government, and community agencies, and especially in the Prairies. However, surprisingly little academic research exists on female Aboriginal gang-involved individuals¹ in this country (Nimmo 2001; Fontaine 2006). While some scholars suggest that female participation in gangs is about liberation and challenging traditional gender roles (see Miller 2001), most researchers concur with Curry (1998), who argues that

gang involvement for girls is associated with “social injury.” Social injury is linked to gang involvement for males as well, but it seems that gang-involved girls tend to come from more disadvantaged backgrounds and, once gang-involved, face a number of additional, gender-based risks. As other researchers have identified elsewhere, many Aboriginal youth are faced with multiple sources of disadvantage in comparison to their non-Aboriginal counterparts, making street gang involvement attractive to them (Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson 2008; Totten 2009).

Street gangs have been defined in a variety of ways. One widely recognized definition lists the following as fundamental components of Canadian youth gangs: committing crimes together; assembling together; having a leader or an established leadership structure; displaying and wearing common colours or other insignia; claiming a territory; having a name (Chettleburgh 2007). Evidence also exists for the gendered nature of these groups (Chettleburgh 2007; Totten 2009; Dorais and Corriveau 2009; Nimmo 2001). One could ostensibly add an eighth criterion to this definition: the sexual use and abuse of women. Chettleburgh (2007, 68), for example, describes the significance of women and sex to recruitment into street gangs:

To a great extent, especially in countries where street-gang activity is beginning to emerge as it is here in Canada, girls and young women play a subservient role to men. Sex—consensual, forced or otherwise—is an ever-present part of their reality

Totten (2009, 142), describes the gendered nature of the processes surrounding gang involvement and revolving around hyper-masculinities and sexualized femininities, providing the succinct explanation, “violence is used to construct masculinity, and sexuality to construct femininity.” Much of gang life revolves around the construction and perpetuation of socially constructed notions of exaggerated traditional gender roles.

A pathways approach, which focuses on how life experiences through childhood and adolescence can lead some youth in the direction of criminal and/or gang involvement, can be applied to youth of all ethnic categories (Totten 2009; Minaker and Hogeveen 2009). The specific approach taken by Totten (2009), which identifies five pathways into violent gang involvement, relates specifically to Aboriginal youth. He emphasizes a number of structural factors that exist within Aboriginal communities

and coalesce to form a background of disadvantage that can make gang involvement a viable “option” for some young people.

Some of the structural-level factors—those societal factors largely beyond the control of families or individuals (Minaker and Hogeveen 2009, 127), and which shape the life circumstances of many Aboriginal youth—are: entrenched and severe poverty (Dooley et al. 2005); disproportionate placements with child welfare, mental health, and other social welfare institutions (Blackstock et al. 2004; Trevethan et al. 2002); and high rates of alcohol and drug abuse. Overrepresentation of this population in the criminal justice system has been well documented (Dauvergne 2008; Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson 2008), as have the high rates of violent offending and victimization within Aboriginal communities: on-reserve crime rates are about three times higher than crime rates elsewhere (Brzozowski et al. 2006). Experiences of family violence, including sexual abuse, domestic violence, and physical abuse are also disproportionately high (LaPrairie 1995; RCAP 1996). Low rates of educational attainment and high rates of unemployment (Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson 2008) contribute to the personal and structural disadvantage experienced within Aboriginal communities.

Compounding these issues are racist policies and practices that compound the ongoing trauma suffered by Aboriginal peoples in this country (Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski 2004). Fontaine (2006, 116) argues there is nothing “post-colonial” about Aboriginal peoples’ experiences; rather, “they continue to endure dislocation, de-culturalization, ecocide, and forced assimilation.” Totten (2009, 141) points out that one in ten Aboriginal children are in foster care and group homes, compared to one in two hundred non-Aboriginals. Considering the fact that over half the national Aboriginal population is under twenty-five years of age (Brzozowski et al. 2006), the implications are serious. Observers have likened criminal justice system overrepresentation and disproportionate representation in the child welfare system to historic residential school policies (Totten 2009, 141; Blackstock et al. 2004; Trocme et al. 2004).

These structural factors—poverty, disproportionate involvement in child welfare, mental health, and social welfare institutions, high rates of alcohol and drug abuse, and overrepresentation in the criminal justice system—are part of the legacy of colonization. The generational impact of trauma, hurt, and anger is expressed in the high rates of violence, substance abuse, and self-injurious behaviours in these communities (Wesley-

Esquimaux and Smolewski 2004). In Fontaine’s words, “Aboriginal gangs are the product of our colonized and oppressed space within Canada—a space fraught with inequity, racism, dislocation, marginalization, and cultural and spiritual alienation” (2006, 116). While most Aboriginal youth do *not* become gang-involved, it is against this backdrop that many must navigate within their own communities and the broader society.

A structural perspective is critical to understanding the involvement of both females and males in criminal and gang involvement. Colonialism serves as a critical precursor to many of the social structural factors complicit in gang involvement. One of the many lingering effects of colonial processes is the “double victimization” of Aboriginal women, who are “disempowered and oppressed within both the Euro-Canadian mainstream and the indigenous collective” (Fontaine 2006, 117). The views, beliefs, voices, and experiences of Indigenous women are ignored or negated by the colonial mainstream, and Indigenous male leaders “ask or demand that their women put so-called ‘women’s issues’ on the back burner in the interest of collective de-colonization” (114). Traditional processes based in gender equality and shared decision-making responsibilities were disrupted and significantly changed with colonization. As a result, Aboriginal women have become “collaterals of war” (117); victimization of Aboriginal women in gangs is but one manifestation of these processes.

These structural factors are particularly salient if we consider the conclusion made by Minaker and Hogeveen (2009, 132) that “the most significant pathway to criminalization for females is victimization.” Miller (2001) reports that gang-involved girls are more likely to report multiple family problems, including abuse by family members, witnessing physical violence, substance abuse in the home, and the incarceration of a family member. Similarly, Totten (2008) reports that while young men’s criminal behaviour is closely related to involvement with peers, young women’s criminal behaviour is linked to abuse and trauma suffered in the home. Furthermore, girls are much more likely to enter the criminal justice system from the child welfare system or from engaging in status offences (truancy, curfew violations, running away, underage drinking), administrative breaches, and shoplifting than are boys. In other words, involvement with the child welfare system serves as a gendered pathway to crime, particularly for girls (Minaker and Hogeveen 2009, 132).

The gendered interaction between structural and individual level factors, and the impact they have on developmental pathways into crime

and gang activity for girls and women, has implications for programs that can have an impact upon gang involvement. As Giordano et al. (2002, 996) states, “the notion that there may be gendered pathways into crime leads us to assume that there could be gendered pathways out of crime as well.” These researchers write about the importance of *cognitive shifts* for desistance from criminal behaviours (991), and explore the processes through which actors “make initial moves toward, help to craft, and work to sustain a different way of life” (992). In their theory of cognitive transformation as it relates to desistance from crime, Giordano et al. focus on the agency exhibited by the women they interviewed: “[W]e wish to emphasize the actor’s own role in creatively and selectively appropriating elements in the environment” (992), which serve as catalysts for lasting change. They refer to these environmental elements as “hooks for change,” which can be such positive influences as finding a spouse or the birth of a child (992).

Giordano et al. (2002) describe “hooks for change” as moments or stages in a person’s life where a turning point is reached and a decision is made to leave the criminal lifestyle (1000). Although these researchers do not discuss gang involvement specifically, we suggest that gang members might similarly experience such epiphanies that can influence the decision to leave the gang. The authors also find overlap between the men and women in their sample in terms of characteristics that contributed to their criminal lifestyles and the “hooks for change” that influenced their desistance processes. However, the researchers also note areas of gender difference. Men were more likely to focus on prison or treatment as a hook for change, whereas women were more likely to describe religious transformations. Children were a particularly significant influence (2002, 1052).

Giordano et al. examined gendered differences but not differences in ethnicity. We suggest that the specific configuration of risk factors characteristic of many gang-involved Aboriginals is such that there may be more potential opportunities for “hooks for change” to occur: multiple sources of disadvantage may translate into multiple opportunities for hooks for change to appear among Aboriginal individuals, male and female. However, gendered processes that place Aboriginal female gang members at a greater disadvantage may mean there are also additional opportunities to facilitate gang exit for Aboriginal females.

Our objectives in this paper are to discuss some of the risk factors that contribute to gang involvement among girls and women generally, and some that are specific to Aboriginal women. By drawing on the perceptions of frontline workers, we also aim to identify the types of programs and

policies that might help prevent girls and young women from becoming involved in gangs, and those that might assist gang-involved women with gang exit.

Method

Our snowball sample includes eighteen frontline professionals who work with gang-affiliated females and males, or with those at risk of affiliation. This paper has grown out of a larger study on Aboriginal gangs, the experiences of their members, and the perspectives of professionals who work with these individuals. Because the focus of the present paper is on programming and policy that can facilitate gang intervention, the insights provided by these frontline workers, who deal with the issues on a daily basis, is particularly valuable.

The frontline worker sample includes individuals representing a wide range of professions. Occupations include community workers, counselors, court diversion workers, police officers, and youth program coordinators. Years of work experience ranged from three years to over twenty-five years. Participants work in both urban and rural settings, although the majority works in the former. Nine identify as Aboriginal and fifteen are women. We also interviewed two formerly gang-affiliated females (both recently released from prison) and one who retains her gang affiliation and who was incarcerated at the time of the interview. Two of the women are Aboriginal; the other is Caucasian, but was affiliated with a major Aboriginal gang. Respondents were asked a number of questions about gang activities, precursors to gang involvement, the role of females within these groups, the current state of programming surrounding gang prevention, and about intervention and exit, and were asked for input into the types of programs that would most effectively assist females either in avoiding gang involvement or exiting the lifestyle.

Interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to an hour and a half in length, and were audio recorded. Following their completion, interviews were transcribed and subject to thematic analysis.

Analysis

Our analysis suggests that while female and male (Aboriginal) gang members share many of the same challenges, the former are faced with additional gender-based challenges. The uniquely gendered configuration of

structural and individual-level factors, and the significance of multiple sites of oppression and marginalization in the lives of criminalized and gang-affiliated women, are clearly apparent in our interviews. The participants also suggest contexts, moments, and challenges that might provide opportunities for prevention and intervention strategies, policies, and programs.

We cite participants at length, drawing on quotes and comments that we believe best represent the themes identified in our analysis. The analysis section is organized into two broad areas: issues that emerged in our conversations; and responses that are appropriate to deal with these issues. The division into these areas is, to some extent, contrived, since often, the discussion would turn to possible *responses* in discussing an *issue*. In other words the two areas overlap. They also overlap in terms of issues and responses that deal with *prevention* and *intervention*.

Issues

The trauma experienced by Aboriginal communities and peoples in this country is a major theme that emerged from our interviews and one that subsumes many, if not all, of the issues we discussed.

Trauma

Although we cannot devote the space necessary in this article to a discussion about the generational trauma experienced by Aboriginal peoples in this country, it is critical to understanding the appeal of gang membership for some individuals. While the experience and effects of trauma vary by community, we use the term to refer to the historical and current processes of colonization that have rendered “indigenous people physically, spiritually, emotionally, and psychically traumatized by deep and unresolved grief” (Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski 2004, ii). Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski (2004, iii) also describe the impact of “cumulative waves of trauma and grief that have not been resolved with the Aboriginal psyche and have become deeply embedded in the collective memory of Aboriginal people,” and how

Hidden collective memories of this trauma, or a collective non-remembering, is passed from generation to generation, as are the maladaptive social and behavioural patterns that are symptoms

of many social disorders caused by historic trauma. There is no “single” historic trauma response, rather there are different social disorders with respective clusters of symptoms. . . . In short, historic trauma causes deep breakdowns in social functioning that may last for many years, decades and even generations (iv).

One participant in our interviews, “Margaret,” spoke about the importance of educating young people about their history and culture, as well as the historical dismantling of Aboriginal cultures, as being one cause for frustration and anger within communities:

That is what bullying is and gangs—it is lateral violence, so we need to not only have the story in our community context around residential schools, not as an excuse for what has gone on but as a way of understanding what has happened . . . we need to work with families and we need to work with kids to have them understand that story because kids carry a deep enduring sadness and they don’t even know why, but it flows through the family and community structure and it is all those losses—loss of culture, language. Kids are thirsty for culture.

The critical importance of trauma was expressed repeatedly by the participants in this study, particularly by those of Aboriginal descent. They link generations of unresolved grief and loss to the search among youth in the community for belonging, which sometimes takes the form of gang involvement.

Loss, Grief, Damaged Relationships

As “Bob,” who has worked with youth for over eighteen years and is the program coordinator at a youth club in a rural Aboriginal community, explains, “Our community is really wounded right now. It is really hurting, and the reason being is that we have so much loss. We have loss of our culture, loss of identity. The residential school had a huge impact on us.” He goes on to explain that while the average person suffers loss once every nine years, “here it is once every nine weeks. This week alone we’ve had four deaths in the community, which has impacted four different families.” He continues:

We have all this unresolved grief and a lot of loss and a lot of pain and wounded people. I'm sorry to say but misery loves company. These kids are banding together to find that unity, to find that family unit because that is another thing we are suffering, the loss of our family unit. So they have to have that, they find people with the same kind of pain and they stick together and all of a sudden four or five or six of them—and all of a sudden they become a gang, and that's where they start to run around in a pack. That's their surrogate family.

“Tracy,” the youth justice facilitator for the restorative justice program in the community for the past eleven years, offers her personal experience with gangs, highlighting the importance of personal loss in her own gang involvement. “When I was fourteen, I lost my father, when I was fifteen I was riding with a gang. I was looking for safety because I had lost the person that was my protector, so, I know how these kids feel and I know what they are doing.”

Clearly, the loss described is experienced by both genders but the possibility that loss and trauma may be experienced in gendered ways is worth exploring further. It is not insignificant that all three of the gang-involved women in our sample recount tumultuous and estranged relationships with their mothers, starting at a young age in all cases, and in all cases linked to substance abuse. “Summer,” gang-affiliated and incarcerated at the time of the interview, self-describes as an “average twenty-five-year-old Aboriginal woman who was born to alcoholic and drug-addicted parents” (most of her sixteen siblings were taken away by child welfare services). Both she and her brother have been gang-involved. Her relationship with her mother was difficult almost from the start: “I was abandoned when I was three years old by my mom. She left me with my dad and my dad was abusive . . . my dad raised me until I was about five.” Summer started using cocaine at the age of ten, saying,

My mom would always get high with me and I would run away from my dad and my mom would always get high with me. . . . I was pulling tricks at eleven years old and just being a prostitute at such a young age. I would go to school and I would work the streets when I wasn't in school. . . . I committed my first crime when I was ten years old. I did a B&E with my brother . . . just for coke and alcohol.

Substance abuse by parents and young people is a common theme throughout the interviews. Difficulty with parenting is another theme. Margaret (who has worked for almost twenty-five years with youth and people with addictions) explains, “It is through structure, safety, predictability, and routines that kids find safety, so if people aren’t parenting, if they aren’t providing that support they need when kids need it, then kids feel like they don’t count. It is internalized, whether with family violence or addictions.”

Lack of structure, substance abuse, family violence, and in many cases lack of parenting skills, lead to a number of problems, including parent-child estrangement. Damaged relationships figure prominently in the front-line workers’ accounts of their experiences with gang-involved individuals. As Tracy puts it, “it is sad to say a lot of parents . . . don’t get involved in their kids’ lives. Then when kids get in trouble they think, ‘I will give them to child welfare.’” Summer recalls being with her dad and finding her mother in a hotel room with a needle in her arm. She remembers screaming “Mommy, mommy,” while her father yelled at her mother. “My dad just said ‘either you choose to stay here or you come and raise your daughter,’ and my mom chose to stay with drugs.” Summer referred to this incident repeatedly throughout the interview, signifying the impact it had on her and her development, including the relationships she sought and built over the years. She also stressed how her mother never visited her in jail:

So I hated her for that [not visiting in jail] and then my mom ended up getting sick with HIV/AIDS and she lied to me about how she got it and I hated her for that. You know, it was continuous lies all through my life and so I just kept turning angrier and ashamed to have a, I don’t know, a chronic liar for a mother...

Margaret (who has a long career working with youth and families) in her own interview agreed that, “the stuff that kids need really is that relational context that was taken away through residential schools. People don’t know how to parent. It’s not that they don’t want to parent, because people genuinely love their children, but you don’t want to parent in the way you were parented so sometimes you don’t parent at all.”

The gang offers promise of “family,” support, and a sense of belonging.

Intergenerational Issues

Another theme that emerged from the interviews is the significant role played by the “piling up” of grief, substance abuse, problematic parenting, violence, and general abuse over generations. Margaret situates the issue of gang involvement in the broader issue of parenting and dealing with the intergenerational impact of residential schools on parenting: “We have young people who are in a gang with their uncles, or there are adults using pot with their kids. We have so many boundary violations, the generational boundary violations. We have a real need to do multi-generational work.” Summer was sexually abused by her stepfather. The interaction between grief, trauma, abuse, and the intergenerational nature of these issues is illustrated by the circumstances surrounding the loss of her father:

But before I lost my dad I found out some hurtful things about him, that he was charged with child molestation on my stepsister and he was found guilty. So another, you know, betrayal incident. So the last words I ever said to my dad was ‘I fucking hate you . . . like how could you? You seen what sexual abuse did to me, like how could you do that?’ And then a year and a half later I ended up losing my dad. So I went south and started selling drugs and smoking crack really hard and I just gave up and I was pregnant . . .

Child abuse has other casualties attached to it. “Cheryl,” a thirty-nine-year-old Aboriginal woman and formerly gang-affiliated, is on parole after serving time for her role in the murder of her husband, who sexually molested their children.

Perhaps not surprisingly, gang involvement among Aboriginals is also intergenerational. Cheryl, who has been addicted to drugs for the majority of her life and did “dirty work” for gangs, has two sons who are currently in rival gangs. In Tracy’s words, “Bigger brothers have started the gangs. I even know dads that are leading these little gangsters. Sometimes you feel like you are not getting anywhere, you know? You worked with Dad and now you are working with his son.”

Intergenerational trauma has impacted parenting skills, and family dynamics are part of the broader context within which other issues exist. Moving from this broader context to specific examples of issues faced by Aboriginal peoples, a specifically gendered theme that emerges from our interviews is the desperate need for safe housing for women.

Housing and Transportation

When asked specifically about what needs to be done for women affiliated with gangs, “Michael,” a youth and family court worker with sixteen years of experience who self-describes as “not burned out quite yet,” immediately stated safe housing as a priority.

One of the leading causes of girls falling into gangs is they don’t have access to safe housing. Safe housing could mean my stepdad is an asshole and he leaves red marks around my neck and bite marks all over my body. Safety could mean I don’t want to stay at the youth emergency shelter where I have to stay with boys. Safety could mean, you know, not only for me but also my baby because I am thirteen and a mother of two, so we have to make sure that they are safe. We need resources much more than crisis intervention, we need long term placement options that would be like—maybe like an apartment block that is specific for women and girls.

Cheryl also talks about the need for shared responsibility for the homeless. She pragmatically talks about women’s homelessness, and states that, “especially when you get out of the federal institution, there are not many places that will take you in.” Following her release from prison, Cheryl had to stay in a men’s halfway house because of the shortage of such facilities for women in the area. She admits to feeling afraid while living there. If women do not have a safe place to go, it increases their chances of falling in with gangs again or back into criminal activity in general. “Frank,” a chaplain who works with incarcerated women, laments the state of women’s corrections when it comes to reintegration for women upon release: “[M]en generally get taken care of well, but in terms of the women, we are years behind the guys.”

“Cindy,” a youth program support coordinator, confirms the need for support following release from incarceration:

The women need social assistance, housing, employment, especially those who have been in for any length of time. They are just like stepping into a new world once they are released so they don’t really know where to go, what to do, and how to get there. Transportation, for example, is a small but important thing.

Certainly, men share these needs as well. However, respondents emphasize that the current state of support for women is, relative to their male counterparts, severely lacking. In this regard, the differences between the genders, to some extent, are not as much about quality as quantity in services and support.

The transitional difficulties experienced by Aboriginal women moving from reserves into the city are another issue. The transition from home communities can be especially difficult for Aboriginal women because they are faced with “myriad racist, alienating, and patronizing realities firmly entrenched within mainstream social institutions” (Fontaine 2006, 117). Frank, the chaplain with almost fifteen years of experience working with correctional populations, made a particularly strong connection between the perils of the transition to urban life faced by Aboriginal women coming from outside communities and the creation of a context within which “they easily fall prey to that kind [criminal, gang] of lifestyle.”

Education

The idea of “falling prey” to the gang lifestyle is something that, in the estimation of many of our respondents, is the result of a lack of awareness among young people about the nature of these groups.

About gangs. Dorais and Corriveau (2009, 108), whose research is based on female gang involvement in Quebec, make clear the importance of “educating girls about love, gangs, and the predictable traps that a person may fall into.” Their work is relevant because they identify areas of support required for females at risk of gang involvement, regardless of ethnicity or geography. “Barbara” is a nineteen-year-old ex-gang member who recently completed a prison sentence for a crime she committed at the behest of a gang. She thinks the message is best delivered by ex-gang members:

The fact is that [young women] have never been accepted into the gang. They will never be respected like a guy is respected. They will never be treated the same ways as a guy will be treated. These people, these women, need to know this, man. It’s not a game. This is your life you are thinking about and you got to think about it now while you still have time before it is taken away, by either getting

killed or killing yourself from overdose or from going to jail for the rest of your life for something you had no fucking idea would put you there. You know?

Formal. In contrast to Barbara, who emphasizes the need for education and awareness on the perils of gang life, Michael stresses the need for formal education: “We need to educate them. For girls you need to empower them and they need to be educated. If they can somehow get their high school diploma, then the likelihood of them remaining entrenched in a gang or a clique is probably a lot less.”

Gender Discrimination

Michael discusses discrimination against females in terms of education and treatment:

They are victimized in a number of different ways and they are discriminated against in the system. A good example is the [local young offender centre]. Because they can't meld the programs for girls and boys and there are only twelve girls and sixty-five boys, the girls have almost nothing more than sewing needles and sewing clubs. All the intensive programming and all the treatment, even the education is slanted more for boys. So girls are discriminated against systematically in government programming.

In terms of women and the law, Linda explains how little sense it makes to fine women for being prostitutes when they are working the streets because they clearly do not have money, suffer from addictions, and/or are homeless²:

There are simply not enough resources to help these women. Even to go to detox it takes a week or two to get in and then once you get there you stay for seven days then there is nowhere for you to go because there is a month and a half or two months wait time to get to treatment centre. You know, it is just crazy. . . . same with the women who are homeless who have no food or are living in poverty.

“Melanie,” who worked for twenty-seven years as a police officer and now works, in her retirement, as a counselor in a women’s prison, discusses the gendered nature of stigmatization when it comes to addictions and involvement with the prison system:

There is more stigma for women because they are not being womanly. So the social stigma they get from even social agencies or anybody they meet, employers, any of that stuff. “What do you mean your kids aren’t with you?” and “you are a lousy mother,” and “you haven’t been there to raise your kids and you haven’t been there to look after your husband like you were supposed to.”

She goes on to explain further the gendered reaction to women and men who have been involved with criminal activities:

Men who say they have been in jail, it’s like “What? You got a drunk driving charge? It’s not that big of a deal.” A woman has been in jail, it’s like, “Oh my god, did you kill someone? It must have been a domestic violence situation and you just reacted in self-defense, right?” So it is just—the stigma is different.

Responses

Our participants confirm what other researchers have found regarding the types of programs that are effective in preventing gang involvement. Totten (2009) emphasizes the need for early intervention in the lives of children (from birth to six) and their families as the best way to prevent Aboriginal youth gang violence. Referring to the “Families First” model, he argues that “in-home, culturally competent public health nurse visitation with young high-risk mothers over the long term” can help reduce physical child abuse and neglect by up to eighty percent (147). He also lists comprehensive Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) prevention programs, school readiness programs, Head Start programs, and a number of others as integral to prevention of criminal and gang involvement among Aboriginal youth (147). Susan, who works with a program that helps women involved in prostitution leave the lifestyle, concurs, arguing that by investing in these professionals, “somebody is going to catch those early issues, whether it be social problems or learning issues, or whatever. You put those services

with the family at the beginning . . . you put that little bit of money in at the beginning and it saves you so much more money in the end.” As Summer shares,

I remember my dad giving my mom a choice and that really bothered me that she chose a needle and I think just even my mom coming to visit me or not beating me up, like my mom would mentally abuse me and physically abuse me and just stuff like that and maybe just being a better, or maybe just having a mother figure in my life and being nurtured in my childhood then I think maybe I would have had a fairly better childhood than I did. . . .

Program Support

One theme that resonates very clearly and consistently from the interviews with court workers and program workers is the need for increased support and services to families and individuals, whether the support is for addictions-related problems, financial issues, child care, recreational needs, or any number of other issues. The lack of services available, and the difficulty women have in accessing those that are available, is illustrated in a number of the comments made by our participants. When asked whether a difference in resources exists for males and females who are gang-involved and wanting to leave, Michael offers this observation:

You are dealing with a situation where males are easy to plug in because of just sheer numbers, there are more beds . . . There is not a lot of room for gang girls. Now, if you are getting the shit beat out of you by your husband, then there is a safe place but that is for middle class women . . . but when you look, are there resources for gang women? No! The transitional housing program run by [local organization] has been cut . . .so not only do we need more, but [what we have] is being cut back now.

Melanie compares the programming in place for domestic violence situations with the desire to leave the gang for some women:

It is like leaving a domestic violence relationship. You need somewhere safe where they are not going to find you, where you

are going to get the help and the holistic kind of supports you need to help you start the path back on . . . We need an underground like they do for domestic violence. So you can go from a shelter in Edmonton and hide in one in Ontario. . . . you almost need that for women leaving gangs behind. There is a lot of risk in leaving a gang without buying your way out and without permission.

Melanie compares the “brainwashing” of women in domestic violence situations with that in gangs:

The whole crazy making part of abusive relationships is that it happens in gangs too and it is the same thing—cults—it is all brainwashing. It is all in there so you have to be able to keep them [the women] safe enough until you can get them past that and reprogrammed . . . helping them understand a little bit about what reality is. It isn’t what they have been told reality is.

Also important to programming for women is the significant role played by children in this process. Women trying to leave face an enormous dilemma in having to choose between leaving the gang and attending treatment, and being separated from their children. Melanie, again, explains that

We need gender only—female only—treatment. And they need to be able to have some place to bring their kids because lots of times the kids are the hostages, so that the women come back. It’s the same situation with domestic violence . . . but with gangs too.

Importance of relationships

Programs are important, but so too are relationships. The professionals emphasize the importance of developing positive, trusting, and respectful relationships with their “clients.” This takes time and effort and we suspect, in the end, it comes down to personality, determination, and the level of dedication exhibited by *individuals*. Dorais and Corriveau (2009, 110) found in their study on gangs in Quebec that “where intervention was successful, it was usually due to the proficiency and personal commitment of an individual police officer or social worker.”

This relationship building role is not only crucial when working with youth but is equally relevant in working with women (and men) who are deeply entrenched in criminal lifestyles. Melanie understands addictions as based in trauma; her approach to helping individuals deal with addictions is to deal with the underlying trauma as well. “[The women] are trying to numb out whatever was happening before . . . [I want them to see] they don’t have to use the drugs to cope. They can, you know, let go or cope better or get past whatever happened to them earlier.”

Melanie’s position as former police officer, and now counselor, places her in a unique position with the women she works with. In her former position, she often worked undercover as a prostitute on the streets, “so I borrowed clothes from them and I literally walked in their shoes in a way and some of them I have known for fifteen to twenty years.” She goes on to explain her approach in dealing with the women:

Building the relationships so there is somebody who thinks they are important because the gang is telling them that nobody cares about them but the gang. It was the same in the days when it was pimps . . . because the pimp is saying nobody is going to like you but me. And I don’t like you much unless you bring me money . . . so what I am trying to do is it isn’t just build relationships but build hope. Because hope is absolute. If you don’t have hope you don’t have change. It is the bottom building block of change . . . Now I am trying to help them see themselves beyond the trauma.

Michael shared with us the ways in which he works to develop positive relationships with the girls he works with. He concludes that, in the end, “the more meaningful and the more successful [aspects] have been the day-to-day interactions with these kids in court and mentoring and developing relationships with them.” He goes on to explain that

[a]n investment doesn’t mean working nine to five. An investment sometimes means getting a knife in the cheek or picking them up from somewhere and not asking where you are dropping them off. I am not asking questions and I am not breaking their trust. It is more of a harm reduction philosophy than—Steven Harper’s ideology just doesn’t work in the real world . . . that get tough on crime crap is a bunch of bullshit. That doesn’t work for these kids. Mentoring does.

Frank, who runs a volunteer mentoring program for incarcerated women, offers his insights into the issue as well: “It seems to me that because women are more relationally oriented, that relationships need to be established as early as possible, to be as long as possible so that they know that if things get difficult, ‘I have a friend who I could talk to.’”

Frank’s program involves bringing volunteers in from the community to mentor women one-on-one while they are incarcerated and then continuing once they are released. He goes on to say that, for the volunteers involved with the program, it does not take long before they realize that the incarcerated women are more than the label of “inmate” or “offender.” Positive relationships between volunteers and the women develop quickly.

Melanie emphasizes how she, in her counseling role, tries to show the women she works with that leaving the gang does not mean a person will be alone:

People think if you are leaving the gang or the street or addiction behind that they are going to be completely alone but they can find themselves a new gang like a bunch of CA [Cocaine Anonymous] people or a bunch of peer support groups—women who left prostitution behind and volunteer and mentor you along.

This emphasis on support and community is best illustrated in the “circle process,” described as key to dealing with gang and other issues by the Aboriginal participants in this study.

Sharing Circles

“I think we could create world peace if we could just get everybody into circles.” (Margaret)

Circles are a practice rooted in Aboriginal cultures that focuses on healing through community involvement and support and work to accomplish many objectives, most of which are subsumed within the following goals of restorative justice:

- 1) invite full participation and consensus;
- 2) heal what has been broken;

- 3) seek full and direct accountability;
- 4) reunite what has been divided;
- 5) strengthen the community to prevent further harm (Sharpe 1998).

Sharing personal stories, issues, and challenges through a circle comprised of interested parties serves a variety of needs. As Margaret continues to explain, circles are used for “bringing families together to make placement decisions about kids, and really using circles in all the ways that we can.” In her work with families and children, some of whom are “on the edges,” she sees the value of circles in the following way:

If you can bring them into a family circle, that is great. If you can't, bring them into child circles. Help them learn it isn't their fault, life can be great for you, you are surrounded by people who care. I really think the larger work we need to do to keep kids out of gangs or to address their developmental needs in a more proactive way is to do intergenerational work. That has to happen coming out of residential schools.

Jennifer, another member of the community and one who works as a community justice facilitator, conducts circles with gang members.

I really truly believe in the circle process because it gives power to the person to speak on what they are feeling. I would say ninety-nine percent of the time they speak the truth. On an intervention level for the gang circles that we've done I believe they've had a hard time talking about it and admitting that they were in a gang. At the end of the circle I was amazed that they were able to almost give each other a hug and to me that is powerful because they spoke their truth, they were able to talk, discuss. . . they just needed to communicate to understand each other.

Even while in prison, restorative justice through circles can be effective for women. Summer's brother was murdered by his wife, who had been hired by a rival gang to kill him. Summer recounted to us in detail her plan to go to jail with the specific goal of killing the woman. Prison intelligence officers realized what was going on and, after the prison chaplaincy got involved, Summer and the woman participated in a mediation process.

There was a lot of “whys” and a lot of questions unanswered and I wasn’t satisfied with her answers . . . I wanted to attack her when I was sitting in that chapel and but instead, I just like, my brother, my brother would have wanted me to forgive her, you know . . . like, I dunno, sometimes people do stupid things for money and so I forgave her and we are like the best of friends today.

Discussion

Personal histories marred by victimization and multiple sites of oppression, including those based on gender, race, social class, and systemic discrimination, characterize the lives of many young women involved with gangs. The research that exists also seems to suggest that, once they become affiliated with gangs, their situations actually get worse. Rather than being a safe haven, a source of protection, and a substitute family, as it usually promises to be, the gang becomes abuser, pimp, and crime boss, often turning so-called “girlfriends” into prostitutes and sexual slaves for gang members and the public (Dorais and Corriveau 2009). “Dave,” a police detective, puts it bluntly:

Women’s issues in gangs are different: they’re the same, but they’re different. There are gender differences and there are gender issues that come into play. There’s a lot more issues in relation to self-esteem that come with the female gang members ‘cause when you get passed around like a piece of meat from this gang member to that gang member to that gang member, well that does something to you personally.

For many gang-involved girls, the hypermasculine environment of the gang means an emphasized femininity for themselves that leads to abuse, lack of power, and dependence on men. It appears that gang-involved women are often forced to work a “double shift”: they are sexual objects, caregivers, and the bearers of gang members’ children, but they must also “work” for the gang by transporting drugs, recruiting other women for prostitution, fighting for the gang, orchestrating “business” while boyfriends are in prison, or—in more than a few cases—serving prison sentences for male members. Women might be easier to target than male gang members for this

reason, as they have more incentive to leave an “organization” that does not treat them well in the first place. Exit strategies, as well as prevention and intervention programming, must take this into account.

Drawing upon work by Giordano et al. (2002) on cognitive transformations and “hooks for change,” we argue that intervention efforts, programming, and frontline workers’ interactions with these women should capitalize on the dire straits that many gang-involved girls find themselves in. Summer, for example, credits prison with her rehabilitation and refers to it “kind of as being rescued . . . it took a jail sentence to get me to really find myself. But it helped me a lot.” She explains part of the process:

I was screwed up on drugs and I just didn’t know how to cope, so I turned to the only thing that I could turn to, like I couldn’t turn to my pipe, and I couldn’t turn to alcohol or violence, so I had to turn to somebody that was caring and it was weird you know but . . . we had a really good chaplain and I worked with the elder because it was something that my dad always wanted me to do . . .

Nimmo (2001) cites “crisis situations,” such as the death of a gang member, pregnancy, and getting tired of repeat trips to prison, as motivations for gang exit. In our study, Melanie offers this explanation:

When you are dealing with women, either her kids are in care and she needs to find a way to get them back and that may be a way to get them away from the gang. That might be the way you get her away from the gang . . . we help you but you have to leave this, you have to leave your addiction and you have to leave the gang . . . I think it [children] is the biggest reason women try to walk away . . . It is something like they are pregnant or something to do with the kid. They just got apprehended or something like that. It is a big trigger for them to either go downhill or get up.

Arguably, because of the exacerbated oppression and victimization of women in gangs relative to males, there may be more “crisis moments” or opportunities for “hooks” to occur (as compared to male members), to capitalize on their subordinate position in the gang, and to facilitate gang exit.

Based on the insights of the participants in this study, we cannot emphasize enough the importance of having appropriate supports in place if/once gang-involved women (and men) have reached the point where a hook for change has appeared in their lives. Our participants point to some of the gender specific needs of gang-involved women, such as prioritizing safe housing, support for families and children, educational programming, and the provision of educational support geared toward employability in the work force. Health care specific to the needs of these women also emerged as an area of concern. For women coming into urban centres from reserves, and women leaving correctional facilities to reintegrate into communities, the participants emphasize the current lack of transitional programming and support. Often left to their own devices, without safe housing, without employment, and without personal support, women are released (back) into the arms of their former gang affiliates.

An underlying sub-theme in our interviews was the recognition that there are programs “out there”—very good programs—but women on the street, women affiliated with gangs, women leaving prison often simply do not know about them or how to access them.

The need for supports for families also emerged as an area requiring more resources. Damaged familial relationships, substance abuse, and family violence were cited as critically important by several of our participants, as was, more generally, the need for an affordable place for families to go and to participate in positive activities together. Childcare is an area where many, if not all, parents struggle. The need for childcare is especially pronounced for the large number of women who are the lone head of the household, and that number is even higher amongst Aboriginal women than for the rest of the population (Weber 1998). Without safe, affordable, and reliable childcare, women’s options are extremely limited when it comes to treatment options or educational and work activities. For those women who require some kind of treatment for addictions or mental health issues, the childcare issue is complicated further by the fact that seeking assistance might jeopardize their ability to keep their children with them. Authorities might be more apt, especially in the case of Aboriginal women, to remove children from those mothers who require these kinds of services (Dell and Lyons 2007).

Also significant is the role played by front-line workers. The importance of relationship building, mentoring, and developing trust and rapport with their clients resonates through many of the interviews. *These*

relationships can be a hook for change. The implication of this observation is the need to support people working the front line, financially, emotionally, physically, and professionally. Well-educated, well-paid early childcare workers can go a long way toward preventing, identifying, and reducing the issues that lead to criminal lifestyles and that result in far greater costs, both personal and financial.

In addition to targeting issues relating to poverty, substance abuse, violence and victimization, racism, and sexism, the issue of family loyalty and family expectations is increasingly relevant, particularly for Aboriginal gangs, where recruitment is known to occur along family lines (Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson 2008). Although they existed in the 1980s, Aboriginal gangs flourished relatively speaking in the 1990s. Now, twenty years later, we are witnessing the results of the entrenchment of these groups in our prisons and on the street: they have become, not unlike the trauma that has played a role in their genesis, intergenerational.

The intergenerational effects of gangs in some Aboriginal communities are a reflection of compounded issues relating to family, parenting, identity, and culture. Generations that have experienced loss and trauma require a number of responses. While we attempted to single out some of the possible types of “programs” identified as important by participants, the crucial significance of culturally appropriate responses warrants more attention at the level of research and practice. The use of circles and restorative justice more generally to address the deeply rooted issues faced by Aboriginal communities emerged as a significant and recurring theme throughout our interviews with Aboriginal participants. One participant candidly shared that one of the girls in her community seems to have become “addicted” to circles. It is possible that for some individuals, male and female, participation in circles might become an effective “hook for change.” In more than a few cases, Aboriginal offenders who have been introduced to “culture” for the first time while incarcerated have indicated the transformative effect this exposure has played in their healing journeys.

The significant influence of local context on prevention and intervention programming must be recognized in future work in this area. First, differences between Aboriginal communities, including different experiences of colonization, loss, trauma, and healing, mean that circles and restorative practices will need to reflect these differences. Aboriginal leaders, elders, and youth workers are best suited to implement programs and practices; however, support for these approaches must come from

mainstream society as well. Second, gangs in the Prairies differ from those in Ontario or British Columbia and any programming or policy initiative needs to take the differences in context, structure, and activities into account (Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson 2008). Klein (2001) states that “. . . while we can generalize about gangs, we had best do so while recognizing that they reflect a [range of] different . . . contexts” (x). Furthermore, gangs evolve over time (Nimmo, 2001). Keeping that in mind, programming efforts must take into account local context and the evolution of these groups. Tailoring intervention efforts to local needs is critical. For instance, cities which are home to correctional institutions are faced with the challenge of providing supports, like housing and transportation, to women being released from these institutions. This critical post-release time period might provide opportunities to *create* a “hook for change.”

This preliminary investigation specifically into gendered pathways into and out of gangs and Aboriginal gangs is part of a larger, ongoing project on the topic. There are a number of weaknesses with our research study. Most troubling is the manner in which large scale social problems deeply rooted in historical, cultural, economic, and structural processes are left to be dealt with primarily by micro-level programs and individuals. This band-aid approach cannot be successful ultimately without widespread, societal-level changes in understanding, thinking, and acting.

Conclusion

As our analysis began to take shape, we realized the need for further investigation into rural–urban differences in experiences among Aboriginal peoples. We suspect an argument can be made, not only for gendered pathways into and out of gangs, but also for urban/rural pathways. All of these factors contribute to the nature of the environmental stimuli individuals experience. More research might help identify a “hook” process that perhaps is common, for example, to people leaving correctional facilities and re-entering the community or those moving from reserve to city.

At the same time, we are reminded of the fact that Giordano and her colleagues (2002) found overlap in terms of the hooks for change experienced by females and males in their sample. In cases where hooks are not gendered, programs and policies in place for men might be expanded to include women. However this exploratory study seems to indicate that there are also uniquely gendered and localized hooks for change. One

effective way to utilize the “hooks” concept to facilitate gang intervention (and prevention) is an individualized approach to care illustrated by “wrap-around” programs. Totten (2008) identifies wrap-around programs which involve a team of individuals who identify the risk and protective factors of the young person and work together to build a circle of support around the young person as having “excellent outcomes” (22). Future research might consider how gender affects the wrap-around process, and how the process leading to a hook for change might be accelerated based on knowledge about a particular individual. The potential for integrating identification of hooks for change, wrap-around processes, and healing through circles, recognizing the importance of gender in these processes may be a viable option for facilitation of gang exit for women involved in these groups.

Endnotes

1. The general sense we get is that females are not “real” members of gangs. We use the term loosely, and intend for it to cover the various roles filled by women associated with gangs, recognizing that more research is required on this topic.
2. A discussion of prostitution-related offences is appropriate here since the nature of gang-involvement for many women is directly linked to the sex trade: they sell sex for the gang (voluntarily or involuntarily). Please see Dorais and Corriveau (2009) for more on this topic.

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