



‘Getting Out’: Youth Gang Exit Strategies and Interventions

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Executive Summary

In the city of Ottawa, gangs and their criminal activities are the focus of a significant amount of police activity, are increasingly presented as a serious problem by the media, and seem to be a growing concern for the public. Fortunately, it appears that the problem is not as serious as in some other large Canadian cities. This presents a unique opportunity to address the issue of youth gang involvement while it is still relatively manageable.

Research (primarily from the US, but also from the UK and Canada) suggests that for many young people, the gang is a means of survival. Gang membership offers an opportunity for those whose lives are marked by systemic inequalities, ineffective support systems, experiences of victimization, and feelings of hopelessness to make money, gain status, obtain protection and acquire a sense of belonging. The gang is seen as providing a number of advantages. When this is no longer the case, and gang membership starts to be seen as detrimental, many youth may develop a desire to 'get out'.

Researchers examining gang involvement have generally found that leaving is a process that occurs over time. It includes a combination of reasons, events and circumstances that help to push or pull an individual away from involvement. These include: the temporary nature of membership; the development of bonds and attachments to non-gang members; participation in positive activities; a desire to fit into the community; a desire to escape violence; and an absence of barriers and obstacles that hinder the process. Given the relationships formed in gangs, the benefits of membership, and the repercussions often associated with leaving, we can understand why many youth gang members may decide that leaving the gang may 'not be worth the effort'.

Effective exit strategies and interventions provide gang-involved youth with legitimate alternatives for fulfilling the need(s) satisfied by the gang. Best practices from the research literature and experiences elsewhere focus on removing the barriers, which may keep the individual stuck in the gang lifestyle while simultaneously helping them to gain and maintain new positive roles and responsibilities. In applying these findings to the situation in the city of Ottawa, we may help youth gang members who are seeking to leave by:

- Promoting and protecting their safety throughout the exit process;
- Helping them to identify personal issues and then supporting them in dealing with these issues;
- Helping them to re-envision their personal identity and promoting positive change and development;
- Providing access to education and meaningful employment opportunities; and
- Encouraging the development of relationships with non-gang individuals and institutions by identifying new forms of social support.

In engaging various stakeholders to propose strategies to address gangs in the city of Ottawa, several recommendations were made for moving forward, including: continuous, integrated support to assist youth with a transition out of the gang; a multi-dimensional strategy to provide viable alternatives to gang membership; and the collaboration of well-integrated partners in service delivery. This approach can have a beneficial effect, not only on the youth gang member but also on their family and peers, their community, and on the city of Ottawa as a whole.

Introduction

Crime Prevention Ottawa commissioned this report to explore the existing research literature and best practices related to exit strategies and interventions for gang-involved youth. Gangs are increasingly considered a dangerous feature of our society. Research has revealed that affiliation is associated with serious crimes (such as homicide, attempted murder, break and enter, arson, robbery), drug offences, and other instances of violence that pose a threat to individuals, communities and society as a whole (Carrington, 2002; Caudill, 2010; Lemmer & Johnson, 2004; Sheldon, Tracy, & Brown, 2004; Spergel, 1995). Even short-term gang involvement can have long-term effects for young people. In addition to participation in illegal activities, it can lead to school problems and dropping out, decreased employment prospects, exposure to and abuse of drugs and alcohol, and an increased risk of victimization. Further, youth gang members may cut ties to family, friends, schools, and religious and cultural communities. The longer a young person is involved in the gang, the more severe the effect of involvement becomes (Thornberry, Huizinga, & Loeber, 2004; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003).

Drawing from the research literature on gangs (primarily from the US, but also from the UK and Canada), this report seeks to provide insight into the initial reasons for joining, how and why young persons may decide to leave the gang lifestyle behind, and the barriers and obstacles they encounter in this process. By identifying the common elements of strategies and interventions that have demonstrated success elsewhere, and providing an overview of the recommendations proposed to address the issue of youth gangs in the Ottawa context, this report aims to provide those involved in the lives of gang-involved youth (e.g., parents/guardians, school officials, youth justice representatives, youth service providers) with information on how they may help to support the gang exit process.

The 'Gang' Situation in Ottawa

In Ottawa, gangs and their criminal activities are the focus of a significant degree of police activity. They are also increasingly presented as a serious problem by the media, and seem to be a growing concern for the public. At a recent public forum focused on addressing the issue of gangs in our city, the Ottawa Police Service presented statistics that suggest that there was a 30% increase in shootings in Ottawa in 2012, with half of these being gang related.

The Ottawa Police Service uses the definition of gangs drafted by the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police (CACP) Street Gangs Committee in June 2011.

A 'gang' refers to any group of three or more people, formally or informally organized, which may have a common name or identifying sign or symbol, whose members individually or collectively engage in or have engaged primarily in street level criminal behaviour, creating an atmosphere of fear and intimidation within the community.

The Ottawa Police Service has adopted the Criminal Intelligence Service of Canada's six point criteria and a seventh criterion (recommended by the CACP Street Gang Committee in June 2011) to classify persons as gang members. Three of these seven criteria must be met in order for an individual to be considered a confirmed gang member (and number four must be present):

1. Reliable information that a person is a gang member;
2. Police officer observes person associating with known gang members;
3. Person acknowledges gang membership;
4. Person is involved directly or indirectly in gang motivated crimes;
5. Court finds the person to be a gang member;
6. Person is found to be displaying common or symbolic gang identification or paraphernalia (street name, tattoos, colours, etc.); and/or
7. Physical evidence, including photographs, documents, data or items of evidentiary value that speak to street gang membership.

Based on this approach, as of October 2012 the Ottawa Police Service estimates that there are 15-19 identifiable gangs in the city with approximately 473 known members.

Fortunately, it appears that the level of the problem is not as serious in terms of volume or severity as in other large Canadian cities. On a density basis, Ottawa's gang problem is among the lowest in the country (with a rate of 0.53 per 1,000 population). Compared to Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Regina and even Toronto, Ottawa's gang problem is real but is not yet 'beyond control' or of 'epidemic proportions' (Chettleburgh, 2008). This presents a unique opportunity to address the issue while it is still relatively manageable.

Who are the Gang Members?

It should be noted that it is difficult to come up with a concrete list of gang names and members because gangs are in a constant state of flux – names and membership change frequently (Totten, 2012). Of the gang members known to the Ottawa Police Service, 95% are male. The average age is 24.5 years, though members can be as young as 13 and as old as 37. Most gangs are very transient – for example Toronto and Montreal share gang members with Ottawa gangs. Even boundaries within Ottawa are vague and not well defined – gangs appear to be less focused on defending territory, and more interested in making money (Taking Action Together: Addressing Gangs in Our City – Record of Proceedings, 2012).

The Ledbury-Banff Crips and the West Side Bloods are the two most organized gangs in Ottawa. The former is based in a south end social housing project and has been involved in drug trafficking, fraud, gun crimes, and prostitution. The West Side Bloods are based in a number of west end social housing projects. They have a significant influence over the drug trade in the west end of the city. There are other smaller Ottawa gangs, some of which have ties to the Ledbury-Banff Crips and the West Side Bloods (Totten, 2012).

A distinction can be made between 'street gangs' and 'youth gangs'. Street gangs usually consist of young adults (18-30 years of age) and adolescents who have been recruited by the older street gang members to carry out various criminal activities such as carrying or selling drugs. Street gangs are primarily organized to engage in criminal activity and they are sometimes associated with organized crime groups (Kelly & Caputo, 2005; Lafontaine, Acoose, & Schissel, 2009; Mellor, MacRae, Pauls, & Hornick, 2005). Youth gangs include groups of young people who come together in a community or neighbourhood around issues related to status, identity, protection, and power. While they may engage in criminal activities, this is not necessarily their primary purpose (Mathews, 1993). Members of youth gangs may be connected to street gangs, but they are usually marginal to the street gang structure. Differentiating between 'street gangs' and 'youth gangs' is important because it has implications for how we perceive the groups of young people in our communities (Kelly, 2011) and the types of strategies and initiatives that are developed and implemented to respond to the issue.

Examining the Research Literature on Gangs

A general assumption has been that a gang is a group of individuals with negative characteristics (e.g., aggressive, impulsive, having little intelligence, no initiative) who participate in criminal activity (Curry & Decker, 2003; Esbensen, Winfree, He, & Taylor, 2001). This view is not accurate; research suggests that while gangs are made up of a range of individuals, the vast majority are intelligent and capable of creative initiatives (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991). Further, what is often overlooked is that gangs may also represent solutions to problems; gang membership is one way for young people to address the challenges they face (Bania, 2009; Sánchez-Jankowski, 2003). In this way, the gang can be seen as serving to meet the needs of its members (e.g., providing access to resources and money, status, protection from victimization, social support, sense of belonging, excitement) (Ball & Curry, 1995; Pitts, 2008; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Wood & Alleyne, 2010). A gang represents a response to various social, economic and cultural conditions its members face (e.g., poverty, school exclusion, unemployment, discrimination) (Sánchez-Jankowski, 2003). Young people may choose to join a gang for a variety of reasons. An individual joins when they believe that it is the best option for them at that time (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991).

How Youth Leave Gangs

Researchers examining gang involvement have found that leaving is a process that occurs over time. It involves the young person disconnecting from the gang and its activities, as well as a change in thinking and attitudes towards involvement in the gang (Maruna, 2001). Gang members usually leave the gang through a gradual series of steps and commitments often involving increasing loyalty to non-gang members and conventional institutions (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Spergel, 1995). Leaving can be more difficult than joining; the gang fulfills a need, and a young person may be reluctant to leave unless and until a suitable substitute to address that need has been found (Mathews, 1992). The process may also be dependent on the level of engagement within the gang – it is generally more difficult for core members to leave than peripheral members as the former tend to be more involved in gang activities and better integrated into the group (Spergel, 1995; Starbuck, Howell, & Lindquist, 2001).

Why Youth Leave Gangs

Research studies, the majority of which examine the situation in the US, have identified a number of factors that may push or pull a youth away from involvement in the gang. These include the following:

Temporary Nature of Gang Membership: Gang membership among youth is usually short-lived (typically averaging two years or less). Most members leave eventually, and exit is often associated with maturity – findings from American research studies report former gang members often describing having ‘grown out of the gang’, or simply having ‘gotten too old’ for the gang lifestyle (Battin, Hill, Abbott, Catalano, & Hawkins, 1998; Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth, & Jang, 1994).

Relationships with Non-Gang Individuals and an Increasing Stake in Community: Findings from American and Canadian research studies suggest that a young person may give up involvement in a gang as they take up opportunities for stable relationships, parenthood, education, employment, participate in communities activities and/or access community services (Ngo, 2010; Wood & Alleyne, 2010). The development of these pro-social bonds is like an investment process; as the bond grows, the incentive to leave the gang increases because there is now more at stake and the young person has more to lose (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Costs and Benefits of Membership and Experience with Violence: Research has found that gang members often have a strong motivation to escape violence and the risk of victimization (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Ngo, 2010; Wood & Alleyne, 2010). Threats to personal safety and/or experiences of victimization may induce young people to join the gang for protection (Stinchcomb, 2002; Pitts, 2008; Taylor, 2009). However, Canadian research suggests that youth who identify being in a gang report significantly greater levels of victimization than non-gang-involved youth (Wortley & Tanner, 2004). Gang-involved youth seem to have a limited tolerance for personal experiences of violence, the threat or fear of personal violence, and/or having family members and friends be the victims of violence.

Regardless of the specific motives, Canadian research on gang involvement suggests that a young person must be ready to leave the gang in order for them to be successful (Totten & Dunn, 2011). Just as they make the decision to join a gang based on an assessment of what is best for them at that particular time, they use a similar process when deciding whether to stay in the gang or whether to leave. At the time of their decision to join, the young person believes that the gang is capable of providing a number of advantages. When this is no longer the case, and gang membership starts to be seen as detrimental, other alternatives become more appealing and the decision to leave the gang may be made (Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, in press; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991).

Challenges to Leaving the Gang

The level of difficulty, perseverance, and commitment required when exiting a gang cannot be overstated (Mellor et al., 2005). Part of the process involves addressing barriers and obstacles to leaving. Research from the US, the UK and Canada suggests that a young person may maintain membership in a gang based on various fears. The commonly held assumption of being unable to leave the gang and/or the threat of violence accompanying exit is likely a significant barrier (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Pitts, 2008; Totten & Dunn, 2011). Further, since gangs are perceived to meet unfulfilled needs of their members, a young person may be reluctant to leave out of a fear of the loss of these benefits (Mathews, 1992).

Research studies undertaken in the US, the UK and Canada suggest that the perceived difficulties that youth face when trying to make new lives for themselves may also present challenges to leaving the gang. A youth may stay if they feel that there are no alternative places to go outside the gang, and if they believe they will be rejected by society (Bjørgero, 1999). Gang membership may have limited a young person's ability to acquire education and marketable skills for the workforce, thereby limiting options for employment. Many youth are left with unstable, low-paying service sector employment that promises little in the way of career development (Ritter & Anker, 2002). Further, social barriers, such as the 'gang' label, public perceptions of the young person as a gang member, and the stigma of former gang membership, may limit the ability to leave the gang. The individual may continue to be seen as a gang member by their own gang, rival gangs, the police, and the community. Gang tattoos, criminal records and activities committed while a gang member may hinder their ability to integrate into the community (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002). Finally, there are other barriers including personal problems such as anger management issues, family conflict, mental health, and substance abuse issues (Young & Gonzalez, 2013).

Under these various conditions identified in the research literature, we can see why youth gang members may feel that leaving the gang is perceived as 'not worth the effort'. While the combination of reasons, events and circumstances that lead to and/or prevent leaving the gang is different for each young person, the overall factors that appear to influence the process have implications for the development of exit strategies and interventions.

Common Elements of Successful Exit Strategies and Interventions

Research and experience in the US, the UK and elsewhere in Canada reveals some common elements that may be relevant to helping youth in Ottawa leave the gang lifestyle. Effective exit strategies and interventions provide gang-involved youth with legitimate alternatives for fulfilling the need(s) satisfied by the gang. Best practices include removing barriers, which may keep the individual stuck in the gang lifestyle, while simultaneously helping them to gain and maintain new positive roles and responsibilities (Hussong, Curran, Moffitt, Caspi, & Carrig, 2004). We can help youth gang members who are seeking to leave by providing them support in transitioning out of the gang and helping them to design and implement a feasible plan.

Promoting and Protecting Safety: It is important to be aware of the potential risks and consequences of leaving the gang, both to the youth gang member and to their families/friends, and ensure that these risks are taken into consideration. Although some gang members feel safe when leaving, others may fear violence and/or retaliation – providing them a safe place to go where they feel protected is important. In some situations, more extreme solutions such as moving or relocation may be required (Hastings, Dunbar, & Bania, 2011; Young & Gonzalez, 2013).

Addressing Personal Issues: Many gang-involved youth have untreated personal issues. In some cases, these individuals may cope by using drugs and/or alcohol. It is important to work closely with the young person to identify these issues and then support them in dealing with them. This involves developing relationships with local service providers, learning about available services, helping the young person access services, and 'bridging' them into involvement (e.g., by providing transportation, going with them to initial meetings) (Young & Gonzalez, 2013).

Promoting Positive Change and Development: To successfully leave the gang and integrate into the community, the young person must re-envision their personal identity, including their view towards criminal behaviour, methods of handling conflict, personal ethics and interpersonal relationships. To support changes, it may be helpful for the gang-involved youth to participate in interventions such as cognitive behavioural therapy or aggression replacement therapy. These types of programs address critical thinking errors and interpersonal skill deficits while providing youth gang members with new tools for handling difficult situations as they work to reframe their self-images (Young & Gonzalez, 2013).

Providing Access to Education and Employment Opportunities: Some youth join gangs in order to obtain money, albeit illegally. Many youth are willing to leave the gang if they are provided with access to educational, training and employment opportunities that better prepare them to achieve legitimate career goals. It is important to assess the educational status of a gang-involved youth and then to identify the fastest way for them to complete or catch up on their education. It is also important to help young persons to identify short- and long-term employment goals and work with them to ensure that they are ready to work and that the employment opportunities provided set them up to succeed (Young & Gonzalez, 2013). Most importantly, employment that meets the young person's need to feel respected for their work is crucial to long-term success: employment in menial jobs is often short-lived, inconsistent, and unfulfilling (Moloney, MacKenzie, Hunt, & Joe-Laidler, 2009).

Encouraging Positive Relationships with Non-Gang Members and a Desire to Fit into the Community: For many young persons, the gang serves as their primary mechanism of social support – representing family, friendship and community. Assisting gang-involved youth will require facilitating new sources of social support. Strategies and interventions might include programs designed to strengthen and support family bonds or providing opportunities for families to spend positive time together. It is also important to help the young person gain access to more positive peer groups where they can meet their need for belonging and socialization. Gang-involved youth should be encouraged to identify supportive individuals in different aspects of their lives (neighbourhood, home, school, community agencies, probation/parole) who can be available to support them as needed (Young & Gonzalez, 2013).

Key Themes for Moving Forward

In October 2012, the Ottawa Police Service, Crime Prevention Ottawa, the Youth Services Bureau, and Ottawa Community Housing co-hosted a Leadership Symposium entitled "Taking Action Together: Addressing Gangs in Our City". The aim was to engage various stakeholders to collectively propose strategies to address gangs in Ottawa. More recently, the Youth Services Bureau, in partnership with the Ottawa Police Service and Crime Prevention Ottawa hosted several training events for youth justice representatives, youth serving agencies and community-based organizations on the topic of youth at risk of gang involvement and youth gang exit strategies.

Participants in these sessions felt it is important to provide and/or enable continuous, integrated support to assist youth to transition out of the gang, through building long-term, trusting relationships. Gang-involved youth wishing to exit need an ally, someone to believe in them and take a chance on them, to identify and build a bridge to the system of available supports, and to see them through this process. They discussed the importance of having age-appropriate mentors, with whom the gang-involved youth could identify and establish a connection. Timing is also important – the young person must be at a point where they want to change, and it is essential to build relationships to be there for them when that happens.

A multi-dimensional strategy is needed to provide young people with viable alternatives to gang membership. This involves a combination of human capital (the development of basic capacities such as self-control, education and employment skills) and social capital (the development of relationships and networks that generate meaningful opportunities) (Farrall, 2002; Maguire & Raynor, 2006; McNeill & Whyte, 2007). It is important to help youth gang members to identify their strengths and aptitudes, and related positive opportunities. Youth need to see themselves in this new light in order to make choices other than gangs. Further, the availability and accessibility of these opportunities needs to be addressed. Participants identified gaps in service delivery, whether it be long waitlists/wait times or eligibility criteria, that limit access to programs and services for gang-involved youth.

The research literature demonstrates that the delivery of multi-dimensional solutions requires the collaboration of well-integrated partners. At a service delivery level, it is important to address information sharing practices. Participants noted that gang-involved youth are a high-risk group, often coming to the attention of various service providers. There needs to be openness to lawful sharing of information within and between these agencies and organizations in a timely and accurate manner. It is also important to break down the current information 'silos' and share resources. Participants noted that gaining access to and information on currently available programs, services, supports and resources for gang-involved youth is challenging (for youth gang members, their families, and various support systems) and this needs to be addressed.

Conclusion

Once a young person has become involved in a gang, getting out can be a daunting prospect. Exiting a gang is a long-term, gradual process. It took time for a young person to become a gang member and it will take time for them to distance themselves from it (Young & Gonzalez, 2013). Leaving involves the interaction of individual choice; relational, social and institutional forces and practices; and challenges and opportunities.

Gang-involved youth need various supports in place in order to change their lives (Totten, 2009). They need help with:

- Safety and protection;
- Dealing with personal issues;
- Changing attitudes and developing new patterns of behaviour;
- Establishing educational/career goals and finding meaningful employment; and
- Repairing relationships with family and developing a new social support network.

A multi-dimensional strategy is needed to provide young persons with viable alternatives to gang membership, options or incentives that give them some of the same benefits as the gang, and help to fulfill their needs. Achieving success in gang intervention can have a profound effect, not only on the youth gang member but also on their family and peers, their community, and the city of Ottawa as a whole.

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