

DESISTANCE FROM CANADIAN ABORIGINAL GANGS
ON THE PRAIRIES:
A NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

A Thesis Submitted to the
College of Graduate Studies and Research
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Education
In Educational Psychology and Special Education
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon

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Abstract

The violence, crime and hardships associated with Aboriginal gangs are an ever-growing concern on the Canadian Prairies. Saskatchewan has a large number of young individuals engaged in gang life who are struggling to find their way out. The current literature base on gangs emphasizes risk factors and gang prevention. In comparison, there is a dearth in the literature regarding desistance (leaving and abstaining) from gang life. Utilizing narrative inquiry, a qualitative methodology, a single unique participant was interviewed to examine the issue of how individuals are able to successfully desist from gang life. The key informant was both an Aboriginal spiritual advisor and expert on gangs in the Canadian Prairies. Through thematic narrative analysis, this study provides a narrative depiction of a life that is strongly connected to gangs and presents a number of themes related to desistance from gang life. Thematic narrative analysis of the interview revealed a series of themes including process elements, factors that facilitate desistance and factors that are barriers to desistance.

Acknowledgements

Dr. Laurie Hellsten,
Thesis Supervisor

For your continued support, guidance and advice.
Thank you for helping me through this process and
guiding me along the way.

Dr. Stephanie Martin,
Committee Member

For your insightful review, advice, knowledge and expertise.

James Cooke,
Participant

I would like to express my deepest gratitude
for your participation and sharing your personal story
for the betterment of others.
Your honesty and selflessness are truly admirable.

My Family

For your patience, understanding and
never ending encouragement.

Dedication

For a man who believes so strongly in me, that it gives me the power to do anything.

For parents who have believed I was capable of big things since the time I was small.

For a small boy who inspires me to want to create change in the world.

For all the children, families and young individuals who have been trapped within gang life, I hope this research helps to reduce the hardships of gang membership and facilitate desistance from gang life.

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Prologue

*“They may have done many bad and evil things,
but they are not bad, they are not evil.” (John Howard Society, 2012)*

I myself have never been in a gang. I have never lived in poverty or had to fight for basic needs. I don't fear for my personal safety or personal security. My friends are not involved in gang activity. My family is not entrenched in gang life. And for these things I am thankful. For I have seen what happens to children and youth who have.

My life has taken me in many directions and I have worked with many different peoples. I have been witness to the effects of gang involvement at most stages throughout life, from the children and youth who are inadvertently effected, to youth and adults who have become deeply entrenched themselves. I have seen the harsh effects of gang involvement on the community, gang members themselves and their families. I saw the effects of gang membership on families and children as members of their family were incarcerated, victims of violence or even killed as a result of gang involvement.

My interest in Aboriginal gangs started when I worked at an emergency childcare facility. We took in children from birth to twelve years of age who needed somewhere to be and someone to look after them when their parents could not. The reasons for the emergency childcare varied greatly from medical appointments to children being apprehended by the province due to unfit parenting or an unsuitable home life. A number of children came through our doors as a result of losing one or both parents to incarceration as a result of criminal activity associated with gang involvement. Several of these children did not know their fathers at all as

they had been incarcerated since before the children were born. I witnessed so many children greatly longing for their fathers or not have been afforded the opportunity to know their fathers at all. Worse yet were the children who were innocent victims as a result of gang initiations and activities. One event in particular had a profound impact on me and kindled my interest in gangs. There were two young children in our care as a result of being apprehended by the police. The one child was heavily bruised and beaten upon arrival. As it turned out, the child was sexually assaulted and beaten by a group of teenage boys while the sibling was forced to watch helplessly. The assault was thought to be gang related, possibly an initiation. For months, the young children were in our care and the effects of the assault were heartbreaking to witness.

Then I worked at a youth correctional residence where I spent time with a number of youth who were affiliated or fully entrenched in gang life. Smart kids, funny kids, good kids who had so much potential but were stuck in the gang life and either could not see the destructive nature of their path or had no idea how to get away from it. I spent a lot of time with one young lady, who although not involved in the gang herself, came from a family and community that was heavily entrenched. While in custody and receiving services and support, she excelled, until the day she was released and was placed back in her community. Quickly she got into trouble and it was no time before she was incarcerated again. I witnessed so many young men struggle internally with maintaining the bravado associated with being involved in gang life yet wanting a better life and not knowing how to get out. They were so heavily entrenched (as were their families and communities) that they could not see a way out or a different future from those who had gone before them. Although they had so much potential, they had no idea how to get out of the gang and lead a different life. Unfortunately, once released from custody, our communities do not have the necessary supports or services to help gang members desist.

In addition to working with young offenders, I have further spent a number of years working with adults in the adult correctional system in Saskatchewan. Here I witnessed the effects that gang membership took over the course of many years. Many of the young men in the correctional system were involved in gangs. When reviewing their records, it was clear that they had been in and out of jail for much of their youth and adult lives. Those that were active were constantly fighting; fighting with others and fighting with themselves. Those that wanted out of the gang life, struggled to gain separation from the gang and floundered when trying to find the means to get out and stay out. While working in corrections, I spoke with a number of individuals who were involved in gangs who had lost brothers, fathers and uncles to the violence of gang life. The level of violence and pain associated with gang life was astonishing. I can hardly imagine what it is like for those who have lived that life.

Although I have never been in a gang or been affected first hand by gang violence, I have listened and continue to listen to the stories of those who have and those who have. Stories of violence, struggle and fear. Stories of isolation and pain. Stories that break your heart and compel you to search for change. I have been able to see the hardship that these individuals have faced and the changes that they experienced as children and young men were turned into hardened individuals, living a life of crime. In all that I saw and learned from my experiences and interactions, I was unable to find an answer to how to help individuals get out of the gang life and stop the cycle of gang involvement.

The inspiration for this research comes from my desire to become more knowledgeable about gangs on the Canadian Prairies, particularly, how individuals are able to escape gang life. It is the hope that with this knowledge, we begin to gather a greater understanding regarding

desistance and can in turn better aid those who are struggling with gang life or suffering inadvertently due to the side effects of gang membership.

Chapter 1: Introduction

“It’s a hard struggle to move along in life with a broken spirit, a shattered heart, and lost dreams. You may feel lost and confused and the past may haunt you everywhere you go and the present moment may feel like hell. You also may think that the future doesn’t look bright for you either. You don’t exactly know what tomorrow will bring for you at any moment or any given time when you are in a gang.” (John Howard Society, 2012, p.5)

Statement of Research Purpose

The gang phenomenon across the prairie landscape has become a prominent concern in recent years (Criminal Intelligence Service of Saskatchewan, 2005; Public Safety Canada, 2007). The purpose of this research was to develop an understanding of desistance and examine the process that occurs for Aboriginal individuals on the Canadian Prairies who are attempting to desist from gang life. Currently, research on Aboriginal gangs is scarce and the relatively small number of studies that do exist have sought primarily to identify risk factors for gang membership. In addition, the current research base has largely been conducted from a second hand perspective (Caldwell & Altschuler, 2001; Craig, Vitaro, Gagnon, & Tremblay, 2002; Kelly & Caputo, 2005; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002) due to a number of practical and ethical issues including safety of participants and researchers, need for cultural sensitivity and limits to confidentiality as a result of potential disclosure of criminal activity.

This study was designed to begin to bridge the gap with the idea that future research could interview gang members directly. Specifically, this research was conducted from a qualitative perspective using descriptive narrative inquiry. For the purpose of this research, one key informant was interviewed, to examine in depth the knowledge of an expert in the field of desistance from Aboriginal gangs. The information gathered aids in the understanding of a

currently misunderstood phenomenon, namely Aboriginal gangs on the prairies and how members abscond and abstain from gang life successfully. Analysis of interview data revealed themes, factors, and experiences that present opportunities for desistance from gang life.

Significance and Rationale

It is estimated that there are 434 known youth gangs within Canada (Public Safety Canada, 2007). The general public is aware of the gang issues within the major metropolises across the nation, and in turn, this is where the research is primarily focused. In reality, when examining the numbers, per capita, Saskatchewan has the highest rate of gang involvement in the nation (1.34 youth gang members per 1000 pop.), far above the national average (0.24 youth gang members per 1000 pop.) (Public Safety Canada, 2007). Law enforcement officials have become increasingly concerned with the growth and impact of these gangs (Richter-White, 2003). In Saskatchewan, Aboriginal youth are highly overrepresented within gang populations on the streets and in correctional institutions (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2006). The literature indicates that Aboriginal youth are particularly susceptible to gang recruitment and lifestyle as a result of the disproportionate amount of suffering Aboriginal people have endured throughout Canadian history (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2006; Bracken, Deane & Morrisette, 2009). Social disorganization theory states that gang involvement provides an alternative for youth who lack social connectedness with personal and community institutions (Corrections Service of Canada, 2004). This theory postulates that the lack of connectedness may originate from rapid social or political change, racism, industrialization, rapid shifts in the labour market, community fragmentation or social and family disorganization (Corrections Service of Canada, 2004).

Canadian Aboriginal peoples have a history of marginalization and oppression as result of the impact of colonialism and assimilation practices that date back to the eighteenth century

(Grant & Feimer, 2007; Friesen, 2004). Past impact, in conjunction with the current issues of poor housing, failed child welfare intervention, lack of educational and employment opportunities, problematic peer associations, and the continued effects of racism and prejudice, increase Aboriginal youth's vulnerability to gang recruitment. Gang membership, in turn, becomes an alternative for young Aboriginal people as it may provide a sense of belonging, security, self-identity, status, and support that fills the dearth caused by marginalization and disenfranchisement (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2006; 2008). By compensating for social, cultural and familial deficits, migration to gang life may appear advantageous for many youth. However, there are immeasurable negative consequences associated with gangster lifestyle that affect gang members, their families, and entire communities. Such consequences may come in the form of victimization, increased levels of fear, criminal behaviour, criminal records, incarceration, financial burdens (e.g., theft, vandalism), increased violence and injury or even death (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2006; Dupere, Lacourse, Willms, Vitaro & Tremblay, 2007).

After conducting a review of the literature, it appears as though we have yet to truly understand the gang phenomenon in Saskatchewan and other Prairie Provinces. Our lack of understanding has in turn prevented us from finding ways to facilitate desistance from gang membership. Therefore, the overall objective of this study was to learn from an expert on gangs of the Canadian prairies, about how individuals are able to find their way out of gang life and abstain permanently.

Overview of the Research Study

Much of the literature regarding youth gang involvement stems from gang research conducted in the United States (e.g., Thrasher, 1927; Jankowski, 1991; Del Carmen, Rodriguez, Dobbs, Smith, Butler & Sarver III, 2009; Grant & Feimer, 2007; Eitle, Gunkel, & van Gundy,

2004; Hagedorn, 2008; Lahey, Gordon, Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Farrington, 1999; van Gemert, Peterson, & Lien, 2008; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003).

Researchers have just begun to address the unique issues of Aboriginal youth gangs within Canada, but it is still a relatively understudied phenomenon. The bulk of the literature that is available is generated by law enforcement agencies or corrections and is primarily directed towards identifying risk factors and causal relations to gang involvement (e.g., Correctional Services of Canada, 2004; Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada, 2002; Statistics Canada, 2005; Public Safety Canada, 2007; Totten, 2008; Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2006). Although this provides a starting point and researchers are beginning to understand what leads to gang involvement, this information does not directly aid gang members in desisting from gang lifestyle. Further research is needed in order to address the growing issue of Aboriginal gang recruitment and involvement within Saskatchewan. In addition, opportunities for desistance from and resistance to gang life need to be identified and examined. By examining the first-hand accounts and experiences of an expert in Canadian gangs, the following research identifies factors and opportunities to desist and abstain from gang involvement and criminal behaviour.

Chapter Summaries and Descriptions

Chapter 2 provides a literature review of the gang phenomenon and Aboriginal gangs within the province of Saskatchewan and the other Prairie Provinces. This chapter outlines the connection between the existing literature and the purpose of the present study which in turn illustrates the need for the current research. Specifically, chapter 2 examines the pre-existing gang literature base that is prominent in the United States. Further, analysis and summarization of the theories and methodological approaches associated with gang research occurs in this section. For example, the ground-breaking gang research sparked by Fredrick Thrasher (1927)

and the prominent theory of social disorganization are reviewed. Specifics regarding the understanding and dynamics of Aboriginal youth gangs in Saskatchewan are also outlined. Finally, this chapter illustrates how the current research contributes to the existing gang research and provides insight into the gang phenomenon and the ability for members to desist from gang life.

Chapter 3 focuses on the methodology used to identify means and processes of desistance from gang life. This study was conducted from a qualitative perspective, specifically through the use of descriptive narrative inquiry (Polkinghorne, 1988; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To begin with, this chapter covers the rationale for the use of descriptive narrative for this study and the specifics of this methodology. The chapter further outlines the data collection process. This section then provides a brief overview of qualitative research methods, descriptive narrative inquiry, and thematic narrative analysis. In order to develop an understanding of desistance from gangs, data collection consisted of an in-depth interview with a spiritual advisor who is an expert in gangs on the Canadian Prairies. The chapter further describes the physical data collection process that was conducted through digital recording and research notes. Lastly, concerns and considerations that are specific to this line of research and this study are detailed.

Chapter 4 provides the results of the data gathered from the participant in this study. Although a single key informant was interviewed, due to the unique nature of the individuals' experiences, the individual was able to share a variety of sub-narratives about individual gang members as a result of shared experiences with the process of desistance. Specifically, a brief narrative portrayal of the life of James Cooke is depicted. Thematic narrative analysis was then used to analyze and understand his accounts of desistance from gang life are presented according to three broad categories associated with desistance: process elements, facilitating factors, and

barriers to desistance. Relevant interview data corresponding to each theme and subtheme are presented. Furthermore, this chapter sought to identify and illuminate factors and themes associated with the process of desistance.

Finally, Chapter 5 provides a summary and discussion of the findings resulting from this study. Specifically, findings will be discussed in relation to existing theory and research. In addition, this chapter discusses the limitations of this study, conclusions and implications for future research on desistance from gang life.

Key Terminology

Throughout the current study, there are several key concepts and terms that are paramount to the overall understanding of this research.

1. Indigenous, Aboriginal, First Nations or Indian

Much debate exists regarding the proper terminology to be used when referring to indigenous peoples of Canada. *Aboriginal* is a collective term used to describe the original peoples of North America and their descendants (Health Canada, 2005). The Canadian Constitution Act of 1982 recognizes three groups of Aboriginal peoples – Indians (First Nations), Métis and Inuit. *Indian* is a collective term that describes all Indigenous people in Canada who are not Inuit or Métis (Health Canada, 2005). The term *First Nation* came into common usage in the 1970's to replace the word Indian as some found the latter term to be offensive (Health Canada, 2005). Although commonly used, the term First Nations has no legal definition (Health Canada, 2005). *Métis* are an Aboriginal people of mixed First Nations and European ancestry. Although Aboriginal gangs do not differentiate between Métis, Status or Non-status Indians, the term Métis is not likely to be used throughout this study; neither will the term *Inuit* be used as this term refers to the Aboriginal peoples of Arctic Canada whereas this

study focuses on the Prairie Region. The terms *Aboriginal* and *Indigenous* both refer to those that were first in a particular region. *Aboriginal* is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2014) as relating to the people and things that have been in a region from the earliest time. In comparison, the term *Indigenous* is defined by Merriam-Webster (2014) as those produced, living or existing naturally in a particular region or environment. For the purpose of this study, based on the aforementioned definitions, the terms *First Nations*, *Aboriginal* and *Indigenous* are appropriate and will be used interchangeably to refer to the collective peoples of origin on the Canadian Prairies.

2. Gang

To date there is much debate as to a universal operational definition of a gang. For the purpose of this research, the definition of a gang is based on a basic set of criterion and benchmarks that determine whether a social group is a gang. In order to be a youth gang, the following criterion must be met according to Bill C-24. Bill C-24 indicates that criminal organizations, including gangs, are a group, however organized, that:

- (a) is composed of three or more persons in or outside Canada; and
- (b) has as one of its main purposes or main activities the facilitation or commission of one or more serious offences that, if committed, would likely result in the direct or indirect receipt of a material benefit, including a financial benefit, by the group or by any of the persons who constitute the group.

It does not include a group of persons that forms randomly for the immediate commission of a single offence (Parliament of Canada, 2001).

Further, the identification of individual gang members for the purpose of this study will be based solely upon self-identification as once belonging to a gang (i.e. sub-narratives

presented by the key informant, rely on self-identification as a gang members as means to define gang membership).

3. Desistance

The concept of desistance in relation to gang life is the process by which gang members leave the gang and are no longer involved in gang life (Pryooz & Decker, 2011). Research has focused on the study of gangs and crime through life-course analysis (Farrington, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993). From this research it has been determined that the process of the process of engaging in criminal behaviour and entering gang life occurs in three phases: onset, continuity and desistance (Farrington, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993). According to Deane, Bracken and Morrissette (2007), "desistance is a dynamic process that occurs over time" (p. 129). Desistance is not merely the opposite process of joining the gang but rather is a separate process that consists of a number of contributing factors that are both intrinsic and extrinsic from the individual (Deane et al. 2007). Desistance may appear as an abrupt rupture or a gradual removal from the gang and gang lifestyle (Decker & Lauritsen, 1996).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The “Gang Phenomenon”

In the 1950’s images of gangs flooded the big screen in a romanticized, musical display of gang warfare as the Jets and Sharks battled over the streets of New York City in the classic film *West Side Story*. By the 1990’s, gang culture was depicted in the media in a much different fashion by the evolution of gangsta rap (Howell, 2010). Gang culture, values, and character described by rappers was rough and obscene, referring to women as prostitutes to be used, beaten, or discarded and the extreme violence and cruelty of gang life was glorified (Howell, 2010). This popularization of gang imagery by movies, television, and music resulted in a paradoxical reaction of both fascination with and fear of gangs and gang activities (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008). Howell (2010) stated that “the diffusion of street gang culture into modern day movies, music and clothing merchandizing has served to intertwine gang culture with the general youth subculture” (p. 5). Presently, most young people can recognize the look, the walk and the talk of gang culture and some may even try to mimic the gangster persona (Howell, 2010). For others, the notion of gangs and mere mention of their presence gives rise to feelings of trepidation and apprehension (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008). Media fuels the concern of the general public by sensationalizing gang activity and crime, making it appear readily common with over saturation of gang content and imagery in the media (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008). While gang involvement and gang imagery are becoming increasingly prevalent (Mellor, MacRae, Pauls, & Hornick, 2005), there is little consensus as to a solution to the rising problem (Public Safety Canada, 2007).

Gang Demographics

Stereotypically, gangs have been thought to be an urban phenomenon, only existing in the lower socioeconomic echelon of major metropolises across the nation (Delgado, 2007). Today, gangs have spread from coast to coast across Canada and are appearing in communities of all sizes, including suburbs and rural areas (Delgado, 2007; Public Safety Canada, 2007). According to Public Safety Canada, in 2007 there were 434 known youth gangs across Canada (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: Canadian Gang Statistics by Province

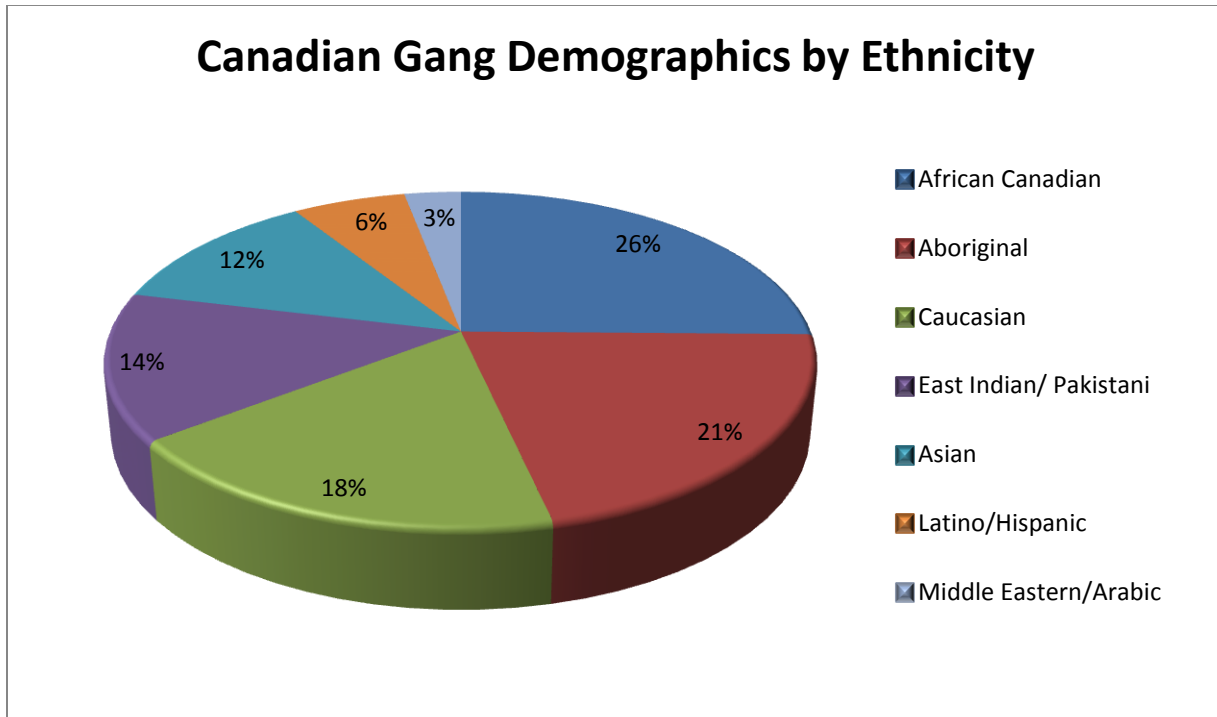
Area	Number of Youth Gangs	Number of Youth Gang Members	Youth Gang members per 1000 pop.
Canada	434	7071	0.24
British Columbia	102	1027	0.26
Alberta	42	668	0.22
Saskatchewan	28	1315	1.34
Manitoba	15	171	0.15
Ontario	216	3320	0.29
Quebec	25	533	0.07
Nova Scotia	6	37	0.04

(Public Safety Canada, 2007).

Across Canada, gangs are as diverse as they are similar, being dispersed across different ethnic, geographic, and socio-economic contexts (Public Safety Canada, 2007). In 2002, a nation-wide police survey was conducted by Astwood Strategy Corporation to examine the gang presence across Canada. Prior to this survey being completed, there was no reliable assessment of the number of youth gangs and youth gang members in Canada (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2003). To date, this appears to be the only study of its kind in terms of reliability and magnitude. The survey indicated that although gangs are appearing across a multitude of

demographics, in their construction, gangs tend to maintain a relative homogeneity in regards to ethnicity. Across Canada the majority of the gangs are founded within the following ethnic groups: African Canadian (25%), Aboriginal (21%), and Caucasian (18%) (See Figure 2 for further details) (Public Safety Canada, 2007).

Figure 2: Canadian Gang Demographics by Ethnicity



(Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2003).

African Canadian or Black gangs have a predominant presence throughout the provinces of Quebec, Ontario, and Nova Scotia but have little or no presence in Manitoba and Saskatchewan (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2003). In contrast, First Nations or Aboriginal gangs are concentrated predominately in the Prairie Provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2003). In Saskatchewan, the gang demographic consists of an overwhelming majority of Aboriginal males (Chatterjee, 2006). Of note, Saskatchewan has a higher percentage of gang membership than provinces with considerably larger metropolitan

areas and had the highest gang percentage per capita. Although gangs still make up a small percentage of the population in Saskatchewan, they account for a large amount of the delinquency within Saskatchewan communities, particularly violent offences (Public Safety Canada, 2007), indicating that gang members contribute to a disproportionate level of crime in society (Thornberry et al., 2003). When compared to youth of similar age who are not involved in a gang, gang members are more extensively involved in delinquency (Thornberry et al., 2003). This relationship between gang membership and delinquency becomes more pronounced for more serious offenses and for violent offenses (Thornberry et al. 2003; Public Safety Canada, 2007).

In Saskatchewan, Aboriginal youth and adults are highly overrepresented within the prison population (Statistics Canada, 2005). Aboriginal people in Canada represent approximately 3% of the overall population demographics (Totten, 2008). Yet the Aboriginal population represents 17% of the provincial and federal prison populations within Canada (Totten, 2008). Specifically, in Saskatchewan in 2004, Aboriginal people represented approximately 10% of the adult population in the province but comprised approximately 57% of the adult population in the correctional system (Statistics Canada, 2005). The percentage of Aboriginal peoples in the correctional system has been increasing since the 1980's (Statistics Canada, 2005). It is thought that this trend will persist or worsen in the coming decades (Statistics Canada, 2005). Youth under the age of 19 comprise half the total Aboriginal population (Statistics Canada, 2005). As a result, the numbers of Aboriginal individuals who are at-risk of being involved in the correctional system are likely to increase as these youth reach adulthood.

Street gangs within Saskatchewan exist in and out of the prison system (Criminal Intelligence Service of Saskatchewan, 2005; Kelly & Caputo, 2005; Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008). There is a strong connection between prison gangs and street gangs (Kelly & Caputo, 2005; Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008). Within Saskatchewan, many of the same gangs that exist on the streets also exist in the prison system (Criminal Intelligence Service of Saskatchewan, 2005). Prisons and correctional centers are also seen as optimal grounds for gang recruitment (Kelly & Caputo, 1995).

Defining Gangs

While gang involvement and gang imagery are becoming increasingly prevalent, there is yet to be a consensus among social scientists and law enforcement agencies as to the definition of a gang. Within social science research, employing a succinct universal, operational definition allows for “replication and independent assessment of any set of research findings” (Esbensen, Winfree, He & Taylor, 2001, p.105). Failure to employ a universal definition has a number of implications for gang related research and policy makers including under or over estimating gang membership, decreased research validity and reliability, and inefficient resource allocation (Esbensen, Winfree, He & Taylor, 2001). According to Esbensen et al. (2001), changing the definition of what constitutes a gang can alter the results of a study and in turn policy decisions and the effectiveness of gang prevention and intervention programs.

The lack of definitional congruence is due in part to the diversity amongst and within gangs and the “changing dynamics of what represents a gang over time” (Correctional Service of Canada, 2004). Mellor and colleagues (2005) further attribute the difficulty of defining gangs to the differing perceptions of what constitutes a gang across Canadian jurisdictions given that each region or jurisdiction has gang issues that are specific to that particular region. Basic definitional

criterion are generally outlined by the following two widely used benchmarks to determine whether a social group is a gang: (1) "youth status, defined as an age classification ranging between 10 and the early 20's or even older", and (2) "the engagement by group members in law-violating behavior or, at a minimum, 'imprudent' behavior" (Esbensen, et al., 2001, p.106). Although this criterion is necessary for the definition of a gang, it is not sufficient to fully define a social group as a gang. Moreover, according to Mellor and colleagues (2005), composition and formation of youth gangs are influenced by the following factors: age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, degree of organization and types of activities.

It is generally agreed amongst social scientists that interest in the phenomenon of adolescent gangs was brought about by the work of Frederic Thrasher in his "A study of 1313 gangs in Chicago" in 1927. Thrasher observed the behaviours and attitudes of over 1300 gangs from which he was able to postulate a number of theories (Branch, 1999). From this pioneering study, Thrasher (1927) defined gangs as the following:

The gang is an interstitial group originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict. It is characterized by the following types of behaviour: meeting face to face, milling, movement through space as a unit, conflict, and planning. The result of this collective behaviour is the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, esprit de corps, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to local territory. (p. 46).

Although Thrasher is thought to be the pioneer of adolescent gang research, society has changed greatly in the decades since Thrasher's research and definitions (Branch, 1999). The early gangs studied by Thrasher in 1920's Chicago were "rebellious, youthful by-products of immigration, urbanization and industrialization" (Hagedorn, 2008, p.24). Within his detailed definitional

criterion, Thrasher does not include any references to criminal behavior or the violation of the law (Esbensen, et al, 2001). Rather, he acknowledged the criminal gang as merely one type of youth gang (Thrasher, 1927).

Clay and Aquila (1994) attempted to highlight the ambiguity of gang definitions by defining gangs as “group, often associated with a territory or "turf," that shares a common identity and expresses membership through common clothing, symbols, and insignia” (p. 65). With that, Clay and Aquila (1994) highlighted that this same definition could be applied to sports teams, sororities or fraternities or a number of other pro-social groups. Caldwell and Altschuler (2001) describe gangs simply as groups that are involved in patterns of criminal behaviour or delinquency. Definitions such as this are criticized for being too generic, general, inclusive or vague. Further, when using involvement in criminal behaviour or activity as a basis for defining a gang, one blurs the definitions between delinquency and gangs as delinquent groups other than gangs also perpetrate criminal activity (Clay & Aquila, 1994; Kelly & Caputo, 2005).

The Canadian Criminal Code defines criminal organizations, including gangs, in Bill C-24, an Act to amend the Criminal Code (organized crime and law enforcement), which is described as the most aggressive anti-gang legislation (Lafontaine, Acoose, & Schissel, 2009). Bill C-24 indicates that criminal organizations, including gangs, are a group, however organized, that:

- (a) is composed of three or more persons in or outside Canada; and
- (b) has as one of its main purposes or main activities the facilitation or commission of one or more serious offences that, if committed, would likely result in the direct or indirect receipt of a material benefit, including a financial benefit, by the group or by any of the persons who constitute the group.

It does not include a group of persons that forms randomly for the immediate commission of a single offence.

(Parliament of Canada, 2001)

Kelly and Caputo (2005) criticized the criminal code definition for being “extremely broad and not useful for distinguishing among the different types of ‘group crime’” (p.18). Furthermore, the criminal code definition provides a legalistic definition of gangs that may not be appropriate from a social science or intervention standpoint. Rather, the legalistic definition serves to provide authorities with guidelines for criminal prosecution. Although criticized heavily, the definition outlined in Bill C-34 will be used as a basic set of criterion for the definition of a gang in this study, as it is a succinct, consistent definition used in Canadian literature.

Adding further complexity to defining gangs is the notion of varying types of gangs. Mellor and colleagues (2005) published a study with a main objective of developing a multidimensional conceptual framework of gangs in a Canadian context. This places the definition of a gang on a continuum. Mellor and colleagues considered a number of factors including motivation to join the gang, recruitment tactics, organization, activities and exit strategies in developing a typology to better understand youth gang involvement. Within this model, Mellor et al. (2005) postulated that there are five distinct group/gang categories as follows: Type A (Group of Friends), Type B (Spontaneous Criminal Activity Group/Gang), Type C (Purposive Group/Gang), Type D (Youth Street Gang), and Type E (Structured Criminal Organization). These groups differ based on description, activity, organization, motivation to join, recruitment, and exit strategies (See Appendix A).

It is apparent that the debate regarding definitional congruence for youth gangs will not be easily solved. However, the information and analysis provided by the varying sources can be

used to set up the series of criterion and operational definition that were used in this study. For this study, the definition described in Bill C-34 will be used as basic criterion. For the purpose of this research, the definition of a gang and the identification of the necessary criterion was based upon self-identification by gang members themselves and individuals that worked through the desistance process with the gang members.

Theoretical Perspectives on Gang Development

Much modern gang literature stems from the ground-breaking theory of Fredric Thrasher. Thrasher's research has been quoted by other prominent gang theorists as "the most important of its time" (Jankowski, 1991) and has remained influential ever since. Thrasher studied 1,313 gangs within Chicago. From this he postulated a theoretical understanding of the gang formation, structure, and functioning.

Thrasher (1927) stated that gangs develop as a response to society. Thrasher posited that adolescents, particularly young boys, need an outlet to release energy and absorb their interests. As a result, when society does not provide the opportunities to facilitate the needs of these young boys, the gang offers what society has not provided. Thrasher postulated that when society, whether through one's immediate family or greater community, fails to provide the necessary structure and support to their youth, young individuals seek other means to meet those needs. Thrasher coined this theory "social disorganization" (1927).

Social disorganization theory states that gang involvement provides an alternative for youth who "lack social connectedness with personal and community institutions" (Correctional Services of Canada, 2004, p.24). This theory postulates that the lack of connectedness may originate from rapid social or political change, racism, industrialization, rapid shifts in the labour market, community fragmentation, or social and family disorganization (Correctional Services of

Canada, 2004). This rapid change and movement prevents the development of a stable and constant social code within society or a culture which results in a high degree of disorganization, and thus manifesting itself in crime and other social maladies (Thrasher, 1927).

Since Thrasher, a number of other researchers have integrated the theory of social disorganization into their work (Spergel, 1995; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Goldstein, 1991). Although several other researchers have provided derivations of Thrasher's theory, they all still stem from his ground-breaking study from the 1920's.

Several decades and several additional theories of gang development later (i.e., strain theory, subculture theory, labelling theory, underclass theory, differential association theory) (Correctional Services of Canada, 2004), Martin Sanchez Jankowski (1991) further expanded on Thrasher's theories. Over the course of ten years, Jankowski (1991) carefully observed 37 gangs within the urban metropolises of Boston, New York City, and Los Angeles. Jankowski gained access to gangs of varying racial groups (Irish, Mexicans, Black/African Americans, etc.) and observed the behaviours and acts within the gangs from a participant/observer perspective.

Jankowski (1991) proposed that most sociological theories of gangs, including those of Thrasher, were theories of delinquency rather than gangs themselves. Regardless of semantics, Jankowski still stated that these theories rested on the assumption that gangs emerge from poverty and persist as a result of the persistence of poverty. Jankowski challenges the notion that gangs exist because of social disorganization. Rather he purports that low-income neighbourhoods, which facilitate the emergence of gang development, are indeed organized. These areas are organized around an "intense competition and conflict over scarce resources" (p. 22). Individuals seek to improve their competitive advantage in obtaining resources by banding

together therefore obtaining strength in numbers – and developing the emerging gang (Jankowski, 1991).

Although Thrasher and Jankowski seem to present competing theories, it appears that each theory speaks to a different risk factor to gang involvement, development, and maintenance. Rather than having competing theories, I would postulate that poverty plays a vital role in social disorganization of communities through a lack of opportunities and social supports for youth in impoverished communities.

When examining gang development as a response to society, it is readily apparent that Aboriginal youth are particularly susceptible to gang recruitment and lifestyle as a result of their disproportionate amount of suffering Aboriginal people have endured (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2006; Bracken, Deane, & Morrisette, 2009). First Nations People of Canada have a history of marginalization and oppression as result of the impact of colonialism and assimilation practices that date back to the late nineteenth century (Grant & Feimer, 2007). The Aboriginal people inhabited Canada long before Canada became a nation itself. The latter half of the nineteenth century constituted a revolution for the Aboriginal societies living on the prairies (Friesen, 2004). Although experiencing numerous changes to their way of life over the past two centuries, the Aboriginal people had not experienced such an extraordinary and expeditious upheaval as they did in the late nineteenth century (Friesen, 2004). Aboriginal people were moved off their native land onto isolated, restricted reservation lands. The Canadian government restricted the policies regarding Aboriginal abilities to travel off reserve, to sell their agricultural goods, to obtain an education, and to express their religious and spiritual beliefs (Friesen, 2004). Aboriginal people experienced over a century of continual efforts to assimilate and abolish Aboriginal culture, traditions, and way of life (Grant & Feimer, 2007).

To this day, Aboriginal people are faced with numerous hardships as a result of assimilation practices and the destruction of aboriginal culture and traditions that took place in the past (Grant & Feimer, 2007; Friesen, 2004). Past impact, in conjunction with the current issues of poor housing, failed child welfare intervention, lack of educational and employment opportunities, problematic peer associations, and the continued effects of racism and prejudice make Aboriginal youth especially vulnerable to gang recruitment (Grant & Feimer, 2007). Gang membership provides an alternative for young Aboriginals by providing a sense of belonging, security, self-identity, status, and support, which in turn fill the dearth caused by marginalization and disenfranchisement (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2006, 2008). By compensating for social, cultural, and familial deficits, migration to gang life may appear advantageous for some youth (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008). When combined with the history of marginalization, oppression, and social disorganization, Aboriginal youth are at high risk for gang involvement.

Common Characteristics of Aboriginal Gangs

In an attempt to further describe and understand gangs, the literature depicts several commonalities amongst gangs. In Canada, the vast majority of individuals in gangs (94%) are male (Mellor et al, 2005). Youth gang members range in age from approximately 10-24, with an average age of 16-18 years (Caldwell & Altschuler, 2001; Mellor et al, 2005). Mellor et al. (2005) reported that almost half (48%) of youth gang members are 18 years of age or under. Although originally based strongly upon ethnic or racial affiliation, many gangs have become less homogenous in their structure, being composed of more than one ethnic group. However, Mellor et al. (2005) stated that the youth gangs in Saskatchewan (which are primarily Aboriginal youth gangs) have remained most homogenous.

Each gang is different and Thrasher (1927) stated, “no two gangs are just alike” (p.36). In order to be effective in research, it is important that gangs be described in a local context (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008). In comparison to gangs of other regions (i.e.: United States, Eastern Canada, Western Canada), Aboriginal gangs within Saskatchewan and the other Prairie Provinces still exist in a relatively rudimentary state. These Aboriginal gangs can be considered, as Thrasher (1927) described as “embryonic”, in which the level of organization is relatively crude and only partially recognized by the members of the gang. In general, Aboriginal gangs appear to lack the sophistication of many organized crime groups and gangs of other ethnicities (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008).

Aboriginal gangs tend to model themselves after the popularized imagery of the African American gangs and other gangs in the United States (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2006; 2008). Members of Aboriginal gangs are often decorated with identifiable gang colors, gang tattoos and insignia. Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson (2006) state that Aboriginal gangs are more likely to follow the model of American gangs where “tattoos, hand symbols and strict chains of command define gang membership and function” thus being “unlike other gangs in our country” (p. 3). The colors chosen by the Aboriginal gangs often mimic the American gangs such as the Bloods and the Crips (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008). These gangs often possess other identifying characteristics such as graffiti in their territory and gang symbols (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2006). This behaviour is directly linked to the behaviours of the American gangs, which are overly popularized and sensationalized within the media (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008).

Aboriginal gangs play host to one of the most violent initiation processes within gang culture in Canada (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2006). While many gangs go through a

“courting” process of new recruits where members attempt to show new recruits how appealing gang life can seem, Aboriginal gang leaders often submit new recruits to an extreme physical beating by numerous gang members for a certain duration in order to show the recruit’s loyalty to the gang (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2006). This process is known as being “jumped in” to the gang (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2006). The Criminal Intelligence Service Saskatchewan (2005) describes the recruitment and initiation into an Aboriginal gang as a three step process:

1. The “recruit” must perform a series of criminal acts called “strikes” at the direction of his superiors in the gang to prove his loyalty. Many of the gang-related crimes in Saskatchewan are “strikes” committed by new gang members trying to increase their status in the gang.
2. A “recruit” must also produce “paperwork” or a copy of their criminal record to members of the gang. Generally, the greater the numbers of convictions the more respect and higher status the recruit has.
3. The last phase of the initiation ritual is the “beating in” or “jumping in” process. The “recruit” must endure a beating from the other gang members where they punch, kick, and assault the recruit for several seconds or minutes to prove their strength and loyalty. (p.4).

Other gangs have violent initiation processes as well, but these violent acts are often committed against members outside of the gang as opposed to the new recruits themselves. Like many other gangs, it is extremely difficult, once recruited, to remove oneself from a gang. Trying to leave a gang is seen as a sign of extreme disloyalty.

Development of Aboriginal Gangs in Saskatchewan

Although the origin is not definitively known, it has been theorized that Saskatchewan Aboriginal gangs emerged as an extension of gangs that originated in the neighbouring province of Manitoba (Criminal Intelligence Service of Saskatchewan, 2005). As indicated by the Criminal Intelligence Service of Saskatchewan (2005), Saskatchewan gangs were thought to have established a presence in the mid to late 1990's. According to police, "following a riot at a Manitoba prison in 1997, some of Manitoba's established gang leaders were moved to secure custody in Saskatchewan" (Criminal Intelligence Service of Saskatchewan, 2005). As a result, these gang members began to heavily recruit in their new correctional setting and further recruit once released onto the streets in Saskatchewan (Criminal Intelligence Service of Saskatchewan, 2005).

According to the Criminal Intelligence Service of Saskatchewan, as of 2005, there were at least 12 known active adult and youth Aboriginal gangs operating within Saskatchewan. Some of the known gangs within Saskatchewan include the following: Native Syndicate, Native Syndicate Killers, Scorpion Brothers, Indian Posse, Terror Squad, Redd Alert, Saskatchewan Warriors, Manitoba Warriors, Crazy Cree and West Side Soldiers (Criminal Intelligence Service Saskatchewan, 2005). It is difficult to develop an accurate assessment of the number of gangs present at any given moment as the development of gangs is an extremely fluid concept and new gangs are constantly being created while others are being dismantled or amalgamated with others. In addition, these numbers do not take into account the growing number of female gangs on the Prairies. That being said, the aforementioned gangs remain the most powerful and dominant gangs in Saskatchewan to date.

In recent years, both urban and rural areas of Saskatchewan have seen increased growth in gang involvement, recruitment, and gang related crime (Criminal Intelligence Service Saskatchewan, 2005). In southern Saskatchewan, the impact of gangs is most prominent in the following communities: Regina, Fort Qu'Appelle, Broadview, Indian Head, Yorkton, Carlyle, Moose Jaw, and Kamsack (Criminal Intelligence Service Saskatchewan, 2005). In northern Saskatchewan, those communities with the highest gang influence and presence are the following: Saskatoon, Prince Albert, North Battleford, Pelican Narrows, Stanley Mission, Pierceland, Meadow Lake, and La Ronge (Criminal Intelligence Service Saskatchewan, 2005), with no community or region in between being immune to the effects of gang presence.

Aboriginal Gangs on the Canadian Prairies

Although gang involvement appears to be increasing, only a small fraction of studies have been conducted surrounding the topic of Aboriginal gangs on the Canadian Prairies (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2006, 2008; Lafontaine, Acoose, & Schissel, 2009; Criminal Intelligence Service Saskatchewan, 2005). According to Grant and Feimer (2007), less is known about Aboriginal gangs than any other subgroup of gangs.

Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson added to the information on Aboriginal gangs with a study they published in 2008. This study sought to gather information on risk factors leading to gang involvement through interviews with a number of former Aboriginal gang members. They derived their data from two larger projects, one of which consisted of open-ended, face-to-face interviews with ex-gang members in the community and a number of individuals that were incarcerated. The focus of these interviews was to highlight information regarding risk factors for gang involvement and recruitment. This data was further expanded by a second project that interviewed a number of police officers and correctional service personnel to gather information

on the dynamics and structure of the gangs in the Edmonton area. They found that Aboriginal gang members experience significant marginalization making gang life an attractive option. They also found that recruitment by family members on reserves was significant, making gang life "a family business of sorts" (p. 76). This study further emphasized the fact that the risk factors present within Aboriginal communities "exacerbate each other and are compounded by the physical separation from society (living on reserves), cultural loss and lack of cultural identity" (p. 76). The results indicate that a loss of culture is highly associated with the increased likelihood of gang involvement (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2006).

In the past few years, a number of studies have been conducted regarding the personal experiences of gang members. Del Carmen et al. (2009) conducted a study to examine the perceptions of individual gang members. Del Carmen and colleagues carried out a number of focus groups with gang members in Texas. This study provided a rich source of qualitative data whilst implementing a relatively unstructured format. According to the results, participants indicated that becoming involved in a gang was a matter of growing up, "the thing to do" (Del Carmen et al., 2009). Many focus group participants stated that gangs were an escape from their lives and they stayed involved as a result of their dysfunctional or broken family units. Finally, members stated that little could have been done to prevent them from joining; therefore reinforcing the importance of finding ways to facilitate desistance from gangs (Del Carmen et al., 2009).

Lafontaine, Acoose, and Schissel (2009) sought to identify the effects of gangs on youth in Saskatchewan. For Lafontaine et al. (2009) the objective was to examine the voices of youth, specifically Aboriginal youth that were "living with the realities of gang presence" (p.28). Further, their study sought to hear the voices of the youth who have risen above or avoided gang

membership. They examined youth from three inner-city youth centers that are devoted to helping youth at risk (Lafontaine, Acoose & Schissel, 2009). These researchers used a semi-structured interview format to collect their data. There were approximately 30 individuals who participated in the study who ranged between the ages of 12 and 25. Through this research, Lafontaine et al. (2009) succeeded at amplifying the voices of youth regarding the gang phenomenon. The study showed that youth have a high degree of compassion and understanding for gang members. The youth interviewed in the study indicated that they understood why individuals join gangs, but gangs were not an attractive or ideal social outlet for youth, even for those who are thought to be high risk.

After presenting the available research on the topic, one can see that there are few studies regarding youth gangs in Saskatchewan. There are even fewer studies focusing on means for desistance from Aboriginal gangs in this area. Del Carmen et al. (2009) stated that it is imperative to have an understanding of the gang phenomenon before one can begin to generate positive social change in the streets. Currently, although having an abundance of empirical evidence regarding the characteristics of American gangs and risk factors for joining gangs, we do not have the research and data to understand the intricate dynamics of Aboriginal street gangs in Saskatchewan and how one can desist from gang lifestyle. Researchers have identified the dire need to understand the phenomenon of Aboriginal gangs in Saskatchewan and to seek ways for youth to desist from gang life.

The Gang Problem: Prevention, Intervention and Suppression

As more youth are involved in gangs and risk factors are ever mounting for others, governments, policy makers, and community organizations strive to develop responses to this escalating problem. Over the past three decades, the responses to the youth gang problem have

produced three primary strategies: prevention, intervention and suppression (National Crime Prevention Centre, 2007). Gang prevention programs focus on risk factors for gang involvement and discouraging children and youth, especially those who are high risk, from joining gangs. Gang intervention programs target active gangs and individuals who are already involved in gang life and activity. Lastly, gang suppression programs target active gang members and their “illicit activities through aggressive enforcement of laws” (National Crime Prevention Centre, 2007, p. 2). Gang suppression is generally led by police or criminal prosecutors and further enforced through incarceration and the corrections system.

Prevention. As Decker and Lauritsen (2002) discern, “most analyses of gang involvement focus on becoming a gang member rather than discontinuing membership” (p.51). Prevention as a response to gang involvement focuses on individuals who are at high risk of gang involvement prior to initiation into gang life. Prevention programs focus heavily on the “why” of gang involvement and attempt to implement strategies to counteract these factors before they result in gang involvement. Although the current study examines desistance and intervention rather than prevention, in order “to determine effective strategies for disengagement requires an understanding of why individuals join gangs” (MacRae-Krisa, 2013, p. 8).

Within gang literature, two general theories are often used to explain gang entry. The first theory is the classic theory of social disorganization proposed by Fredric Thrasher in the 1920’s. Social disorganization theory states that gang involvement provides an alternative for youth who lack social connectedness with personal and community institutions due to greater failure by the community and family systems to provide the necessary structure and support for their youth (Thrasher, 1927). The second theory proposed by Jankowski (1991) states that the theory of gang development relates to poverty, and scarcity of resources and opportunity within

the community. This theory indicates that individuals look to gangs in order to development means to provide economic opportunities in lieu of legitimate opportunities for employment and the fulfillment of needs (MacRae-Krisa, 2013). Although these theories strive to explain gang membership and entry, neither theory can effectively explain the gang phenomenon in its entirety (MacRae-Krisa, 2013).

The study of gang entry and gang prevention also examines risk factors that may influence a youth's decision to enter into a gang (Totten, 2009; Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008; Caldwell & Altschuler, 2001, Sinclair & Grekul, 2012). Risk factors are characteristics that have the potential to increase an individual's vulnerability for negative outcomes (Caldwell & Altschuler, 2001). Such risk factors may include but are not exclusive to the following: low socioeconomic status and extreme poverty, alcohol, drug and other substance abuse, antisocial peer associations, antisocial parents, lack of social and community connectedness, aggressive behaviour, unemployment, low educational attainment, familial violence and abuse, history of committing delinquent offences or illegal use of substances, truancy or school dropout, involvement in the welfare, foster or alternative care programs, generational gang involvement and strong gang presence in the community (Totten, 2009; Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008; Caldwell & Altschuler, 2001; Public Safety Canada, 2007, Sinclair & Grekul, 2012). Identifying and addressing these risk factors may play a large role in prevention programs to deter youth from entering.

Further studies throughout Canada and the United States have examined the risk factors for gang membership in detail. For example, Craig, Vitaro, Gagnon and Tremblay (2002) examined a group of 1,034 kindergarten boys from a large metropolis in Quebec. This sample was involved in a longitudinal study starting in 1984. From that sample, Craig et al. (2002)

examined a subsample of 142 boys between the ages of 10 to 14. Craig et al. (2002) conducted repeated analyses of variance (ANOVA) which indicated that stable gang members had significantly higher scores than non-gang members on factors such as fighting behaviour, hyperactivity, inattention, oppositional behaviour, and delinquent acts such as drug and alcohol abuse, theft, and vandalism. The results further indicated a relationship between gang membership, aggression, and other antisocial behavioural characteristics. Although they identified a relationship, it is still uncertain as to the directionality of the relationship. In addition, as this study is based upon perceptions of gang members, it is unknown whether perceived aggression is based upon actual displays of aggression or potentially the stigma associated with the gang label. Either way, the analyses conducted by Craig et al. (2002), show a reverse indication of the risk factors of gang membership by comparing and contrasting those characteristics present in gang members that are significantly different between gang members and non-gang members.

Studies such as those by Craig et al. (2002) and those conducted by Grekul and LaBoucance-Benson (2006; 2008) are the most common genre in gang related research. Their approach has been to identify why youth join gangs in order to prevent gang membership (Caldwell & Altschuler, 2001). The aforementioned studies, and others with similar objectives, provide a starting point for understanding what leads to gang involvement.

Suppression. Suppression is likely the most well-known and the most commonly practiced strategy of gang intervention as gang members are commonly arrested, convicted, and incarcerated for gang related criminal activity. Although most readily practiced, suppression is also regarded as the least effective response to youth gang problems, and on its own is thought to be highly ineffective (National Crime Prevention Centre, 2007). Suppression and intervention

both focus on the individual once they are involved in the gang life but through completely different practices. Where intervention strives to help individuals desist from gang life, suppression focuses on the individual's criminal acts and attempts to alleviate the gang problem through incarceration. The National Crime Prevention Centre (2007) states that incarceration, as a means for gang suppression "alone does not work" (p. 3). Rather, correctional institutions are thought to not only do little in regards to rehabilitation but in fact further criminalize individuals and increase the likelihood of recidivism (National Crime Prevention Centre, 2007).

Intervention. As a response to gang involvement, intervention practices and programs focus on active gang members and ways for them to successfully desist from gang life. Suppression as a response also focuses on active members but through vastly different motives and means compared to intervention. Where suppression isolates the criminal activity of gang members, intervention strives to identify opportunities to facilitate desistance. Where suppression employs the use of authorities, intervention provides opportunities and resources for a change in life course trajectory.

Caldwell and Altschuler (2001) provided a critical meta-analysis of the current and relevant gang literature to answer a series of questions including: "Can literature on risk and protective factors aid in our understanding of leaving the gang? Should we look at more general factors to aid in desistance from offending? Does identification by law officials hinder those who want to leave the gang?" (p. 21). Caldwell and Altschuler indicated that in addition to prevention methods that are already in place, there needs to be an increased focus on intervention programs and strategies. Although they insinuated that little research has been done regarding desistance, the existing literature suggests that the reasons for leaving a gang differ from the reasons for joining. They give merit to the studies and programs designed to prevent gang involvement but

highlight the notion that there may be opportunities to facilitate desistance from gangs through the systematic study of means of desistance, in particular the effects of age and stage of development on desistance. Caldwell and Altschuler's research re-emphasizes the need for desistance research separate from risk and protective factor research.

Desistance

Hastings, Dunbar, and Bania (2011) caution that there is “little consensus on why and how youth leave a gang, or on what types of programs work to help accomplish this successfully” (p. 2). As a result, Hastings and colleagues (2011) conducted an extensive evaluation of the literature to illuminate the “how” and “why” of gang desistance. The desistance literature indicates a number of internal and external factors that combine to facilitate desistance from crime and gang life (Hastings et al., 2011; Deane et al. 2007; Caldwell & Altschuler, 2001; Decker & Lauritsen, 1996; Bracken et al. 2009; Pryooz & Decker, 2011; McRae-Krisa, 2013). As described by Hastings and colleagues, the literature depicts several interrelated themes that shed light upon why and how youth leave gangs. Figure 3 is a summarized presentation of themes from the desistance literature that serves as an introduction to how and why individuals leave gangs.

Figure 3: Desistance Themes

Theme	Description
Desistance as a Developmental Process	The defining characteristic of desistance is a behavioural change that is normal and expected over a life course trajectory
Desistance as a Result of Rational Choice	The decision to continue or give up on gang life is based on a conscious evaluation of costs versus benefits
Distance as a Result of Maturation and Aging	Physical and mental changes that result as a natural process of maturation offer an explanation for a change in conduct and result in the temporariness of gang involvement
Desistance as a Result of Social Bonds and Institutions	The development of relationships and/or employment provide opportunities to alter perceptions of gang life
Desistance as a Result of Social Learning	Reducing negative social relationships and increasing association with prosocial, noncriminal individuals, less exposure to crime and criminal behaviour, while increasing favourable, law-abiding attitudes and behaviours
Social Structures and Obstacles to Desistance	Changes in the economy and legitimate opportunities out of crime, in addition to educational opportunities, have influenced the chances for successfully desistance and reduced obstacles

(Hastings et al., 2011).

It is known that gang members have desisted from gang life via a number of different modes including being “jumped out” or beaten up in order to receive the gang’s permission to leave (Caldwell & Altschuler, 2001). More often, it is reported that gang members leave gangs by simply ceasing to associate with their former gang and pursuing other interests (Caldwell & Altschuler, 2001). Jankowski (1991) speculated that there are a number of ways in which gang members could successfully leave a gang including the following: age or mature out, die, go to prison, find legitimate employment, join other organizations, or leave the gang as it subdivides or breaks down.

Age and Maturation. Several attempts have been made to explain why and how individuals are able to desist from the gang life. Within the literature, theories of age and maturation are predominant (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Hastings et al, 2011). Age and maturation focuses on the notion that gang membership is often temporary. Hastings and colleagues (2013) indicated that eventually individuals leave the gang and their exit is often associated with maturity and life course events that correspond with growing up such as marriage, employment, and parenthood.

Violence. The effect of violence has also served as a strong motivator for many in the process of disengagement and desistance. Decker and Lauritsen (2002) focused on the effect of violence in the process of desistance and indicated that violence can either facilitate desistance or enhance cohesion. The variance on the effect of violence is based on time. Decker and Lauritsen indicate that in the long term, violence may serve to "enhance cohesion" (p. 121) as it provides a means of protection and security but in the short term (i.e., shortly after the individual gang member has been the victim of violence or witnessed a violent act against someone they are close to) the risk of violence and in turn gang membership may cause the individual to reconsider the degree of benefits in relation to cost of gang membership. Based on this conclusion, Decker and Lauritsen (2002) suggest intervention immediately after the commission of violent act, "counteracting the socializing power of the gang" (p. 122). Therefore, the effect of violence as an intervention for gang involvement has largely to do with the timing of the violent offence and the effect that it has on the individual.

Social Connections and Skill Acquisition. The notion of social connectedness and the acquisition of skills as means for gang intervention links directly to the solution of social disorganization (Thrasher, 1927) as well as the poverty based theory from Jankowski (1991).

Deane, Bracken, and Morrisette (2007) presented a research paper based on an intervention program in Winnipeg, Manitoba known as the Ogiijita Pimatiswin Kinamatwin Program (OPK Program). The OPK program provides participants, who are all gang members, the opportunity to learn marketable skills while they are provided with "modest income" (p.130) in return for the work they provide using their newly acquired skills. The objective of the research was to gain understanding of desistance from gang related criminal activity and gather an understanding of the effects and influence of strong social networks and social capital on desistance.

Deane et al. (2007) concluded that for desistance to be successful, it was imperative to implement as many opportunities as possible to help participants move away from criminal activity. They attempted to give gang members the opportunities to make decisions that would facilitate desistance by providing them with the skills and opportunities to make a life change more feasible. They determined that of these opportunities, employment was of primary importance in the process of desistance. The opportunity of employment gave the participants a means to provide for themselves other than through the commission of criminal activity. In addition, they found that employment helped to make connections to mainstream society and a prosocial support network. Furthermore, it was found that introduction to Aboriginal traditional culture played a critical role in cognitive change. This provided participants with a non-judgemental and nondirective form of counselling which helped to develop a more positive perspective and depersonalize their anger regarding their personal situations. According to Deane et al. (2007), the combination of financial assistance based on employment, social networks, and cultural counselling appear to be a successful combination to facilitating desistance from crime.

Incarceration. Incarceration is a commonly used method to reduce gang involvement. It is thought that by incarcerating or institutionalizing an individual you can remove them from

gang involvement. Although suppression through incarceration is the most common form of intervention, gang members rarely cite justice system involvement as their reason for exit or a factor in the facilitations of desistance (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002).

Cognitive Transformation. In addition to external factors of influence such as violence or the acquisition of skills, research indicates that much of desistance process occurs on an individual psychological level. Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002) suggest a theory of cognitive transformation that often occurs in successful desistance. Cognitive transformation implies that a cognitive shift occurs when an individual chooses to desist from crime (MacRae-Krisa, 2013). The focus of the cognitive transformation of the individual is based on the individual needing to make the personal choice to want to desist and the corresponding psychological adaptations that occur as a result of this choice. Giordano et al. (2002) proposed that a variety of different external environmental factors occur within an individual's life that may facilitate the decision to change. Giordano and colleagues called these opportunities "hooks for change." Hooks for change are key life events that spur an individual to consider or decide to desist. In addition, it is suggested that the cognitive decision to leave the gang must be accompanied by "certain physical and or logistical changes" (MacRae-Krisa, 2013). Decker and Lauritsen (2002) suggest that once the decision has been made to desist, individuals need to sever ties with the gang by creating decreasing physical proximity and relocating to a different community. Further barriers and external hurdles often require attention after the individual has made the choice to desist and the psychological transformation has occurred.

Problems with Desistance

Much of the process of disengagement and desistance involves combatting the numerous barriers to desistance. Some problems are associated with the gang itself while others develop

from outside the gang (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002). For instance, although an individual may denounce his gang membership he may still be viewed as a gang member by members of rival gangs, the police, or the community (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002). Threats from rival gangs may force an individual back into gang involvement as a means for protection from violence. In addition, the label of being a gang member is stigmatizing and not easy to be rid of (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002).

Gang members are overwhelmed by an extreme sense of loyalty combined with fear of violence or death that makes it appear as if they are ensnared in gang life indefinitely (Totten, 2009). Furthermore, gang membership for Aboriginal youth is often familial and generational which increases the degree of loyalty (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008). According to Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson (2008), the family plays a large role in gang involvement in two different but equally powerful ways: "as an arena for dysfunction that can lead youth to gang involvement and as a direct source of recruitment" (p. 67). In other words, family problems can push a youth towards a gang, while family members who are already involved in a gang attempt to pull younger family members towards gang involvement (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008).

In the study by Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson (2008), gang members indicated that the gang offers a substitute family, filling the void left by their own dysfunctional biological family, creating a sense of allegiance and loyalty. In addition, there is a strong loyalty to gangs when an individual is recruited by family or has family in the gang as the gang is legitimately composed of the individual's family members (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008). Many gangs, particularly Aboriginal gangs on the prairies, begin as friends, family or acquaintances from the same ethnic background. These groups grow together, experience life together, rely on each

other, and eventually commit criminal activities together (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008). Like a family, the gang provides protection, acceptance, and support, thereby providing the individual with a sense of belonging and in turn, allegiance.

A further barrier to desistance exists in the fact that gang members are historically placed under more surveillance by law enforcement officials than other members of the public as they are known or suspected of past criminal activity. This stigma associated with past negative behaviour may cloud the potential behaviour changes of the individual and bias the perception of law enforcement officials and the public (Caldwell & Altschuler, 2001). This in turn makes it difficult for those attempting to get out of the gang as they are placed under heavy scrutiny. Furthermore, the opportunities for employment and education can be diminished if an individual is a known gang member or displays gang related tattoos or markings (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002). As a result, individuals may remain in or go back to the gang if they are unsuccessful at finding more pro-social means to living within society. This scenario provides little incentive for an individual to leave the gang, where they have friendship, security, and a means for survival. Decker and Lauritsen (2002) described the scenario by stating “why sacrifice your friendships when you continue to be treated like a gang member anyway” (p. 107).

Contribution of Research

Recent years have provided a sample of studies that have shed light on an initial understanding of the problem of Aboriginal gangs in Saskatchewan. To date we have relatively little understanding of the gang phenomenon in Saskatchewan despite its prevalence.

Past research has provided a number of theories as to how or why youth join gangs (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2006, 2008; Thrasher, 1927; Jankowski, 1991; Kelly & Caputo, 2005). Yet, Del Carmen et al. (2009) found that gang members themselves indicated that little

could be done to prevent them from becoming involved in gang life. Based on that premise, one would assume that we need to examine desistance, how to get gang members out of the gang, in order to reduce gang membership within Saskatchewan. Saskatchewan has the highest gang population per capita in the nation (Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada, 2002), strongly indicating that there are a number of individuals already in gangs that are leading a maladaptive and destructive lifestyle. Further examining prevention methods will fail to help the individuals who are already involved in gangs, therefore highlighting the importance of examining desistance from gang membership.

Research Question

The guiding research question for this study is the question of what process is undertaken to achieve desistance from gang life on the Canadian prairies. And, what does this process mean for individual gang members? I have thought a great deal about all the lives affected by the young men involved in gangs in our province and have often wondered how we can help those affected. I realized that before we could help to get people out of gang life, we need to truly understand the process of abstaining from gang life and what that means for those who are directly involved. This study contributes to our overall understanding of desistance from gang life in Saskatchewan.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter begins by explaining the context of the methods used and the rationale for the methodological choice for this study, which is narrative inquiry. Next, the research methods are outlined, including participant recruitment and data generation. This is followed by a review of the data analysis process. The chapter concludes with an in depth analysis of challenges, concerns, and ethical issues that are present within this research.

When this project began, it looked quite different than it does now at its completion. The study began with the intent to interview former Aboriginal gang members to hear their narratives of desistance. There was a wide gap in the literature where few studies had been conducted on desistance from gangs, fewer yet on Aboriginal gangs particularly on the Canadian Prairies. Of these studies, there was little to no research from an emic perspective.

The idea was to speak with gang members directly to gather first hand knowledge of how they were able to desist from the gang life. It quickly became apparent why this research had not been done until this point. Gaining access to this population would prove to be extremely challenging and presented a great number of ethical concerns. While working at a young offender institution, I connected with an Aboriginal spiritual advisor who had a vast background in working with Aboriginal gang members. This man's name was James Cooke. After hearing James speak to the youth, about his background and his culture, I approached James regarding this project, in hopes that he would consult on the study and help ensure that the study remain culturally appropriate and sensitive.

As I progressed through the preliminary stages of the project and examined the literature on gangs, I spoke with James on a number of occasions about the project. Through these conversations, James began to share his experiences in working with gang members. His

experiences were unlike any that I had heard or had read about in the literature. He had an unparalleled perspective as a result of his personal and familial background in conjunction with his employment experiences. From these conversations, it became apparent that James' narrative would offer significant value to the desistance literature.

I discussed the addition of James as a participant, with my committee and it was determined that this would be beneficial to the research. Originally, he was meant to be a part of the research in addition to interviewing former gang members. In addition, he agreed to remain as a consultant on the project and also help to find further participants. It became readily apparent that the number of roles and responsibilities placed on this one individual created a number of ethical conundrums. At that point, my supervisor and I discussed the best course of action and determined that James' narrative was too unique to remove from the study and we therefore decided to make it the focus of the study.

Context of Methodology

I am a female Caucasian researcher conducting research with an Aboriginal male. A number of scholars have indicated that this is not an ideal situation as the research is cross-cultural and there is the potential for stories to be misunderstood or inaccurately conveyed. Lafontaine, et al. (2009) state that, "genuine knowledge and understanding begins with developing a foundation that is consistent with the values, beliefs and worldviews of the targeted population" (p. 35). They imply that this foundation cannot be built "by an outsider" (p. 35) and remain consistent with Aboriginal ways of knowing. Contrary to this perspective, I believe that I am uniquely qualified to conduct this research. Menzies (2001) argues that non-aboriginal social science researchers can conduct research and write about Aboriginal peoples with the contention that research is conducted "for" Aboriginal people rather than "on" Aboriginal people and with

the intent to promote decolonization (p. 19). I have built a foundation with the targeted population through my extensive professional work with gang members, their families, and victims. The primary purpose of this study, from its origin was to focus on the process of desistance from gang life in Saskatchewan and the other Prairie Provinces. This study developed an Aboriginal focus as a matter of reality, that being, the primary demographic of gang members within Saskatchewan are Aboriginal.

Deciding upon a methodological framework for this project occurred following a great deal of deliberation and contemplation. A number of different methods were considered for this project. The use of Indigenous methodologies was initially considered as a possible vehicle for this project. I decided not to use Indigenous methodologies as I did not feel, as a Caucasian female, that I could properly grasp and implement the nuances of an Indigenous methodology.

In addition, I had also given considerable consideration to phenomenology and grounded theory as means to conduct this research. In regards to phenomenology, I deemed the nature of the method to be overtly philosophical for this particular research. I was also concerned that the meaning of the stories may be lost in the philosophical nature of this methodology to which I do not believe I could do justice to at this stage in my career. Grounded theory was also considered for this research. After analysis of this method, it was determined that through the interview format and the design of the study, I would risk being unable to reach saturation or would be unable to collect sufficient data or information to develop a theory. Furthermore, research into the concept of desistance is still in its infancy, making the development of a theory an unrealistic task for this study.

After considerable deliberation of the different philosophical and theoretical perspectives for conducting this research, I chose to employ descriptive narrative inquiry (Clandinin &

Connelly, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1988) to conduct the research process and thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2000) to analyze the data. Narrative inquiry allows participants to share their experiences in a narrative or storytelling format while remaining culturally sensitive and allowing myself as the researcher to capture the nuances of human experiences. Thematic analysis allows the researcher to focus exclusively on the content of the narrative to uncover common themes associated with desistance from gang life.

Qualitative Inquiry

Traditionally, the scientific method was based upon empirical methods of inquiry. Although, quantitative or highly empirical research methods still hold high importance in the scientific community, favour is being given to qualitative methods when dealing directly with human experience (Polkinghorne, 1988). Qualitative methods allow for the researcher to ascertain the phenomenology within human nature which may not have been possible through statistical quantitative methods (Gall, Gall & Borg 2007). When conducted properly, qualitative research and analysis allow researchers the ability to convey the voices of participants which would be lost through traditional quantitative methods of analysis (Henry, 2009). For these reasons and for the purposes of this research, qualitative research approach is the ideal means for collection of the data and analysis of the phenomenon.

Descriptive Narrative Inquiry

In the field of social sciences, particularly psychology and education, much of our world and our work are constructed in narrative form. Polkinghorne (1988) looks at various practitioners including psychotherapists, psychologists, counsellors, and educators and asserts that narrative is the basis of their work. Further, he states "they are concerned with people's stories: they work with case histories and use narrative explanations to understand why people

they work with behave the way they do" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. x). On a day to day basis, our worlds and the worlds of those we work with are comprised of narratives that make up our existence: the "who," the "what," and the "why" of each individuals' sense of being and way of life. With this notion it is apparent that research within human science can no longer rely solely on "mathematical and logical certainty" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 161) but rather needs to expand into the subtleties of narrative human experience.

Experience and Meaning. Human science or social science research is focused on the examination of human behavior and experiences. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) claimed that for them "narrative is the best way to represent and understand experience" (p. 18). Polkinghorne (1988) states that "experience is meaningful and human behavior is informed by this meaningfulness" (p. 1). Therefore, as one attempts to study human behavior, it becomes paramount to explore the "meaning systems" (p. 1) that form human experience (Polkinghorne, 1988). Narrative meaning is one of the processes that Polkinghorne referred to as the "the mental realm" (p. 1). Within the mental realm, Polkinghorne explained that narrative meaning serves to "organize elements of awareness into meaningful episodes" (p.1).

To examine narratives is to examine and try to find meaning in the lived stories of individuals in a temporal fashion. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000):

Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling the stories of the experiences that make up people's lives, both individual and social. Simply stated...narrative inquiry is stories lived and told. (p. 20)

When studying narrative meaning the objective is to "make explicit the operations that produce its particular kind of meaning, and to draw out implications this meaning has for understanding human experience" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 2). Specifically, descriptive narrative research serves to produce a description of the narratives of the individual, and in turn be able to identify the events, situations, or scenarios that are meaningful (Polkinghorne, 1988).

Living in Relation to my Participant. We as researchers cannot exist outside of the narrative of our participants. We possess our own narratives that are ever changing and begin before and continue long after the course of this research. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated:

As researchers, we come to each new inquiry field living our stories. Our participants also enter the inquiry field in the midst of living their stories. Their lives do not begin the day we arrive nor do they end the day we leave. Their lives continue. Furthermore, the places in which they live and work, their classrooms, their schools, and their communities are also in the midst when we researchers arrive. Their institutions and their communities, their landscapes in the broadest sense, are also in the midst of stories. (pp. 63-64)

Before beginning the research, I developed a rapport with the participant through several conversations and interactions at a mutual workplace. With our mutual interest in high-risk youth and young gang members, several discussions took place prior to the commencement of the research. Further, I observed the participant as he worked with the youth. He spoke in depth and mentored young individuals. In addition, I observed as the participant engaged several youth in a sweat lodge ceremony. From these interactions, conversations, and events, I was able to develop a relationship with the participant. This rapport and relationship became the backbone for an in-depth, information rich interview with the participant. It was this relationship that allowed me to convey a holistic interpretation of the narrative.

Researcher Bias. Like all other researchers, I do not come into this study without my own bias. I have a background in working with gang members and have seen the devastation that gang life can cause to the individual, the family and the community. I have sat and held a child as they cope with the physical abuse inflicted by a gang member and sat with a gang member as he confessed his fears of the rival gang. With that, I have become emotionally invested in this research.

My biases have affected the relationship that I have developed with the participant and the way I see and interpret the data. I have empathy for gang members, the victims and all those affected by gang membership. Although affected by my bias, I have worked diligently through this research process to present the data in as impartial a way as possible. However, my bias and desire to help, has allowed me to conduct the research to the best of my ability to honor the participant, his narrative, and the power it has to aid in the understanding of gang desistance.

Research Strategies

Participant Selection and Recruitment. The participant for the present study was originally recruited as a consultant to aid in the development of this study due to his expertise and unique set of knowledge. As the initial stages of the research progressed, and further conversations occurred, the wealth of knowledge and extraordinary insight of the participant became widely evident. Upon discussion with the research supervisor, it was determined that an in-depth interview with this unique individual could provide great insight into the phenomenon of gangs in Saskatchewan and the other Prairie Provinces and help to develop and understanding of the process of desistance. Through discussion with the participant, it was decided that he would no longer consult on the project but rather; his expertise would serve as the sole data set for the study. To explain the process theoretically, a selection procedure known as purposeful

sampling (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007) was carried out, whereby a participant was selected as a case that was likely to be information rich with respect to the purposes of the study (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007).

The participant, James Cooke, fills an extraordinary set of criteria that made him an ideal participant for this study. James Cooke is a highly respected individual within his culture and within the field of corrections. Within the Aboriginal culture, James is often referred to as an Elder. James himself does not feel as though he is an elder, although highly respected, he considers himself to be a spiritual advisor and a student of the culture and I will therefore refer to him as such. James has developed strong rapport with many young individuals and gang members in the past. James also has a long history working with gang members in the federal prison system. From his personal history and employment background, James was able to provide a unique perspective on gangs and desistance. As James himself had associations with gangs as a youth, he was able to share his personal narrative. In addition, as a result of varying life events and employment opportunities, James worked with a number of individuals as they worked towards successful desistance. These opportunities allowed James to share number of sub-narratives of the desistance process of several Aboriginal gang members. The uniqueness of this participant allowed the opportunity to gather multiple narratives through a single individual. The narrative James shared helps to bridge the gap between previous etic research studies and the ideal of studying a number of individual gang members themselves. Further, the construction of this research in collaboration with the interview of a respected individual, in both the Aboriginal community and corrections, I was able to alleviate a number of complex ethical issues while maintaining access to a rich source of information.

Data Generation

“The researcher does not find narratives but instead participates in their creation.”

(Reissman, 2008).

This project began with the identification of a psychological topic or phenomena (Wertz, 2005). For this project, the phenomenon to be studied was desistance from Aboriginal gangs in Saskatchewan. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stress the importance of justifying the research in three ways: personal, practical, and social. To be most effective and purposive, it is paramount that the researcher identifies a topic of personal and social significance that will engage them both intellectually and emotionally (Gall, et al. 2007). This is of particular significance as one inevitably collects data on their own experiences with the phenomena as well as the experiences of those participating in the research (Gall, et al. 2007).

This phenomenon of desistance from Aboriginal gang membership in Saskatchewan is of particular social and personal significance. Over the past number of years, I have witnessed the effects of gang involvement on gang members themselves, their families and the community. I have seen the direct effects of gang membership on the gang members themselves while working as a corrections officer. I have further seen the effects of gang membership while doing emergency child care and seen the effects on children who have been apprehended and placed under the care of the province due the incarceration of their parents as a result of gang related activities. I have seen the destitution caused by gang activity and yet remain perplexed by the continual and increasing involvement in gangs in the province of Saskatchewan. As a result, I have become emotionally, socially, and intellectually invested in the study of this phenomenon. In terms of practical significance, this research began to bridge the void in the current literature

between etic and emic research and identified a numbers of themes related to successful desistance from gang life.

Practically speaking, the research was carried out with an Aboriginal individual who is a spiritual advisor and an expert on Aboriginal gangs on the Canadian Prairies. The participant was met by the researcher in a neutral location to conduct the interview. The participant resided out of province but came into the province to perform sweat lodge ceremonies and other cultural services for youth. I was able to coordinate with the participant and conduct the interview while he was in proximity due to business. Due to the geographic distance between researcher and participant, the interview process was conducted in a single sitting.

The number of interviews conducted was based on the quantity and quality of the information that is derived from the interview. As it stands, a single interview was conducted, as it was extremely information rich. The interview conducted was approximately 90 minutes in length. Although a single interview may seem to be a relatively small data set to base a study upon, the interview given by the participant was uniquely rich. The interview differed greatly from a traditional western academic research with the interchange of question asked and answer given. Rather, the participant started at the beginning of the interview and continued over the duration, whilst sharing his narrative. The interview concluded after the 90 minutes as a result of the participant being finished sharing his narrative. In addition, myself as the researcher had no further questions to ask, as the participant had covered all the questions I had wished to ask over the course of the interview. Based on the quality and quantity of information that was gathered in this interview, it was determined that subsequent interviews were not necessary. The data was collected through the use of digital recording and field notes. Field notes were taken during the interview to capture the nuances of speech, emotions and thoughts of the interviewer that are not

present in the recording. In addition to the research interview, a number of informal discussions took place with the participant prior to the conduction of the research. These discussions served an important purpose in developing rapport with the participant and providing background information about the participant and his personal perspectives. This information was further documented through field notes.

Once the data was digitally collected, it was necessary to transcribe the interview verbatim onto a word processor or computer. Once transcribed into written form, the data was read initially without focusing on the research problem, but rather with the focus to “grasp the participants expression and meaning in the broadest context” (Wertz, 2005, p. 172). In addition to audio recording, detailed field notes were taken. Additional informed consent was also received in order to digitally record the interview. All data was stored on the researcher’s computer and a copy was provided to my supervisor. Upon dissemination of results, an electronic copy of the original data and paper hard copy of field notes will be transferred to my research supervisor to be kept in a locked file cabinet. In order to ensure confidentiality, the consent form, (which indicates the name of participant) were kept separately from the transcribed data.

The data for this project was collected through a semi-structured narrative interview process (See Appendix B for full Interview Guide). According to Reissman (2008), the “goal in narrative interviewing is to generate detailed accounts rather than brief answers or general statements” (p. 23). Contrary to the model of a facilitating interviewer who asks questions of the “vessel-like” participant who in turn gives brief answers, narrative inquiry creates a situation where two active participants (the researcher and the participant) engage in a joint discovery of narrative and meaning (Reissman, 2008). Through our presence, the way we listen, and when

and how we choose to ask questions, we contribute to the shaping of the narratives that the participant chooses to share (Reissman, 2008). In addition, the transcribing of the narrative presented is an interpretive process whereby the transcript is a representation of speech that “includes some and excludes other features of speech and rearrange the flow...into lines of text within the limits of a page” (Reissman, 2008, p.50).

The Researcher-Participant Relationship in Creating Field Texts. The experience of a narrative researcher differs greatly from those of many other methodologies. A narrative researcher’s experience is always a dual experience – that of the inquirer of the experience and also being a part of the experience and narratives themselves (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Clandinin and Connelly state, “when narrative inquirers are in the field, they are never there as disembodied recorders of some else’s experience. They too are having an experience, the experience of inquiry that entails the experience they set out to explore” (p. 81). It should be noted, that all field texts in narrative inquiry are interpretive (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and each individual is likely to interpret a set of data differently based on their personal bias, personal narratives and relationships with the participant.

Field texts, or field notes (as they may also be referred), were kept throughout the data collection process. Field texts were written while the interview was occurring to record the nuances of the participant’s narrative, to record expressions, tone of voice and the feelings and thoughts that I as a researcher was presented with throughout the interview process. These notes were used to add context to the written narrative and retain authenticity of the voice of the participant. In addition, notes were kept from previous informal conversations that occurred with the participant that provided context and depth to the semi-structured interview.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis. Riessman (2005) posits that there are four general modes for the analysis of narrative based qualitative research: thematic, structural, interactional, and performative. When examining how individuals are able to desist from gangs, the objective for this research was to identify key themes from within the narratives to be able to highlight events, people, or circumstances that can facilitate desistance and help gang members move towards a more prosocial life. Therefore, for this study, thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. According to Polkinghorne (1988), the objective of data analysis is to "uncover the common themes or plots in the data" (p. 177). The focus of thematic analysis is on the content of the text. According to Reissman (2008), all narrative inquiry is concerned with the content of what is said, written, or shown but in thematic narrative analysis, "content is the exclusive focus" (p.53). Riessman (2008) describes it as focusing on "'what' is said more than 'how' it is said, the 'told' rather than the 'telling'" (p. 2). Thematic analysis is particularly useful in theorizing across a number of cases or a number of narratives told by a single individual in order to find common thematic events across participants and events (Riessman, 2005). Within this approach, language becomes a resource rather than the topic of investigation like in other types of narrative analysis such as structural or interactional analysis (Riessman, 2005). Thematic narrative analysis moves beyond counting explicit words or phrases and focuses on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012, p.11). These implicit and explicit ideas are the themes to be identified within the data. Thematic analysis is the search for meaning within the written word and the attempt to identify meaningful themes.

Challenges and Concerns in Conducting Narrative Inquiry

Throughout the narrative inquiry process there are number of challenges, concerns, and

ethical issues that researchers need to be cognizant of. The following issues need to be considered.

Ethics. Ethical approval from Western post-secondary institutions in general, poses a vastly different concern when conducting narrative inquiry. As required by university guidelines, ethical approval was achieved for the exploration of this study. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state, that not only do ethical concerns need to be considered before the study commences and prior to receiving ethical approval but that “ethical matters need to be narrated over the entire narrative inquiry process” (p. 170). In the case of narrative inquiry, ethical matters are not dealt with once ethical approval is received but rather, these matters shift and change over the course of the inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Anonymity. Throughout most qualitative research, in particular narrative inquiry, issues of anonymity appear and reappear throughout the course of the research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this research study in particular, third party anonymity presented as an issue during the course of creating field texts. A number of individuals were identified by name, occupation and other identifying information by the participant during the creation of the participant’s narrative. To alleviate this concern, all names, occupations and other identifying information were changed before the presentation of the results and the analysis of the field texts.

Fact and Fiction. In narrative inquiry, the question of truth or trustworthiness often arises throughout the course of research. How do we know if the stories we are told and the events that were described actually happened? In narrative research, there is not one single truth. All narrative is interpretive.

In traditional research methods, particularly those of the quantitative strain, validity and reliability are related to the tests and measurement instruments associated with the research

(Polkinghorne, 1988). Polkinghorne (1988) asserts that the concept of validity has been confused and restricted by such definitions. In narrative research, the term *valid* retains its original denotation of being "well-grounded and supportable" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.175). The objective of this research was not to uncover findings that were generalizable to the overall populace or an absolute truth but rather to be able to uncover well-grounded information and meaning from a reliable source to shed light on the issue of gang desistance. In this study, I have strived to depict accurate representation of the narrative that was presented by the participant.

Conducting Culturally Appropriate Research. Culturally appropriate research is a term used to describe research that "recognizes the difficulties that can arise from cultural differences between researchers and their subjects" (Hudson & Taylor-Henley, 2001, pg. 94). Hudson and Taylor-Henley (2001) stated that culturally appropriate research identifies ways to respect those differences for the purpose of removing cultural bias.

Throughout this research, a number of principles were followed to ensure the research remained culturally appropriate including elder input, use of traditional language, and clear demonstration of benefit to the community (Hudson & Taylor-Henley, 2001). For this research, the involvement of an elder or spiritual advisor was twofold. To begin with, an elder had agreed to consult on the project prior to submission of the research proposal to ensure that the research was culturally appropriate and sensitive. According to the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS, 2008), in order to uphold the ethical obligation to respect the rights of First Nation, Inuit, and Métis peoples and their culture, communities, and knowledge, the researcher should seek advice appropriate to their context of work involving Aboriginal participants. An Aboriginal spiritual advisor was consulted prior to ethical approval to ensure that the study was culturally

appropriate. In addition, the study was able to maintain cultural sensitivity and appropriateness, as the participant was a student of the culture and spiritual advisor.

According to Hudson and Taylor-Henley (2001), the choice of language is based on necessity and respect. For this study, the language of English was used as it is considered to be the "accepted language of business" (Hudson & Taylor-Henley, 2001, p. 96). The participant agreed that English was an appropriate language to conduct the interview and his first language. The final concern is to ensure benefit to the community. The research may provide benefit to the communities that are most effected by gang involvement. By beginning to uncover means for desistance, we provide the potential to help young men find their way out of gang life. This process not only helps save lives of gang members, but saves families and communities the hardship of losing a loved one or experiencing the adversity associated with gang involvement.

Narrative Inquiry and Aboriginal Oral Tradition. In order to conduct culturally appropriate and respectful research, one must choose a methodology that is consistent with Aboriginal ways of knowing. According to Lloyd (2008), oral tradition is central to Aboriginal epistemology and therefore it is appropriate to conduct research with an Aboriginal individual employing a narrative methodology.

People from different socio-cultural groups have different communicative strategies. These strategies correspond with approaches to problem solving, social interaction, and conceptualizing (Gee, 1985). Therefore, they are greatly significant in how different people make sense of experience. According to Gee (1985), these strategies can be arranged upon a continuum, with orally based or oral strategies on one end and literate-based or literate strategies on the other.

In Western culture, there is a bias in favour of literate communicative strategy whilst

against more orally based strategies, particularly in the world of academia (Gee, 1985). Typical Western education, especially post-secondary education, is based upon a literate style, yet the current study focuses on a culture that is traditionally orally based. Oral strategies are often characterized negatively in terms of what it lacks in comparison to literate strategies: “It is inexplicit where the literate style is explicit; it is less well integrated than the literate; less syntactically correct, and so on” (Gee, 1985, p. 11).

With the negative association faced by oral communicative strategies, it becomes highly significant that researchers protect the oral tradition that is integral to various individuals and cultural groups such as those present in this study. Hudson and Taylor-Henley (2001) stressed the importance of maintaining traditional language. For this research, that is not only in the dialect that the participant is comfortable with but also protecting their form of communication and honouring differences to the utmost ability.

Through the use of narrative inquiry, I was able to uphold, to the best of my ability, the integrity of the oral tradition while adhering to Western academic standards of a thesis document. According to Gee (1985), “narrative is oral style in its richest form.”

Chapter 4: Results

People keep asking me, why do I keep doing what I'm doing when you know the success rate is very little. I said it's not what I look at as the success rate, think about the one person that does make a change. You know, and that's exactly what I keep trying to instil with people everywhere I go. It's like you know, it only takes one to cause a ripple effect. I said you know, maybe that one might make a transition for everybody. Who am I to say.

– James Cooke

The following chapter depicts the results from the data collected. Data was derived from an in-depth interview with one key informant, James Cooke, who is both a cultural and spiritual advisor and expert in regards to gangs on the Canadian prairies. The data was derived from one single in-depth interview. As a result of James' unique history and experiences with a multitude of gang members, James was able to provide a series of sub-narratives of individual gang members and their experiences with the process of desistance. The results are presented through a brief narrative of James' life, providing a firsthand account of the struggles to avoid gang life and means to desist from criminal behaviour. The narrative account is followed by narrative thematic analysis of the interview. The analysis revealed three overarching themes that reoccurred throughout the interview: process elements of desistance, barriers to desistance and factors that facilitate desistance.

The Story of James

From a young boy, James was exposed to the reality of gang life. He came from, what he termed, a separated and segregated, dysfunctional family which he himself likened to most others. His mother was Ojibwe and his father was an Irishman (whom he never met and who played no role in his life). James was in trouble with the law a fair bit in his early years.

Growing up, he spent much time with another young man. Both boys seemed to come from similar backgrounds and they had much in common. The boys became strongly affiliated with the local chapter of a bike gang. They hung with the club and rode with the club. But the problem was, the father of James' friend was also the president of the club. Early on he told the boys, "you guys join, I'll kill ya." Not meant as a true threat but rather meant as a warning, the father stated that the boys could hang with them, ride with them, be affiliated with them but they were never to join the gang. He warned that once you get into the inner workings of the gang, that it is not a lifestyle they would want or that he wanted for them. Although still connected, the boys were pushed away from a life of gang membership. The boys were lucky to have been pushed away, as those who had been involved long enough knew that changes were coming down the pipe as the Hells Angels were coming to town. And that they did. The Hells Angels rolled in and told the club to either "patch over or step out." Many of the older guys, who were in the club merely for someone to ride with, for the camaraderie or for a sense of freedom, stepped out. These guys still "got into shit," they did their drugs, but many of these men had careers and were professionals. One individual was actually a dentist, while another was a physical therapist. These men stepped away from the life. But many of the younger members chose to patch over, becoming members of the Hells Angels and becoming much further entrenched in a far more precarious lifestyle.

When the Hells Angels came to town, James and four others, including his brother, were approached by the gang based on their affiliation. They were strongly urged to join. The remarkable thing about organized crime or a gang such as the Hells Angels is the amazing street intelligence that they possessed. The information they had and what they knew before they even came into town was astonishing. They knew who the boys were long before they rolled in and

approached them. Three of the boys stayed firm and said no to getting involved while two of the boys, James' brother included, were slightly more enticed by the proposition. This forced James to remain associated longer and more closely than he would have liked. His brother was on the cusp, waffling back and forth as to if this was what he wanted. After some time he decided that it was not the life for him and he walked away as well, allowing James to further distance himself from the gang.

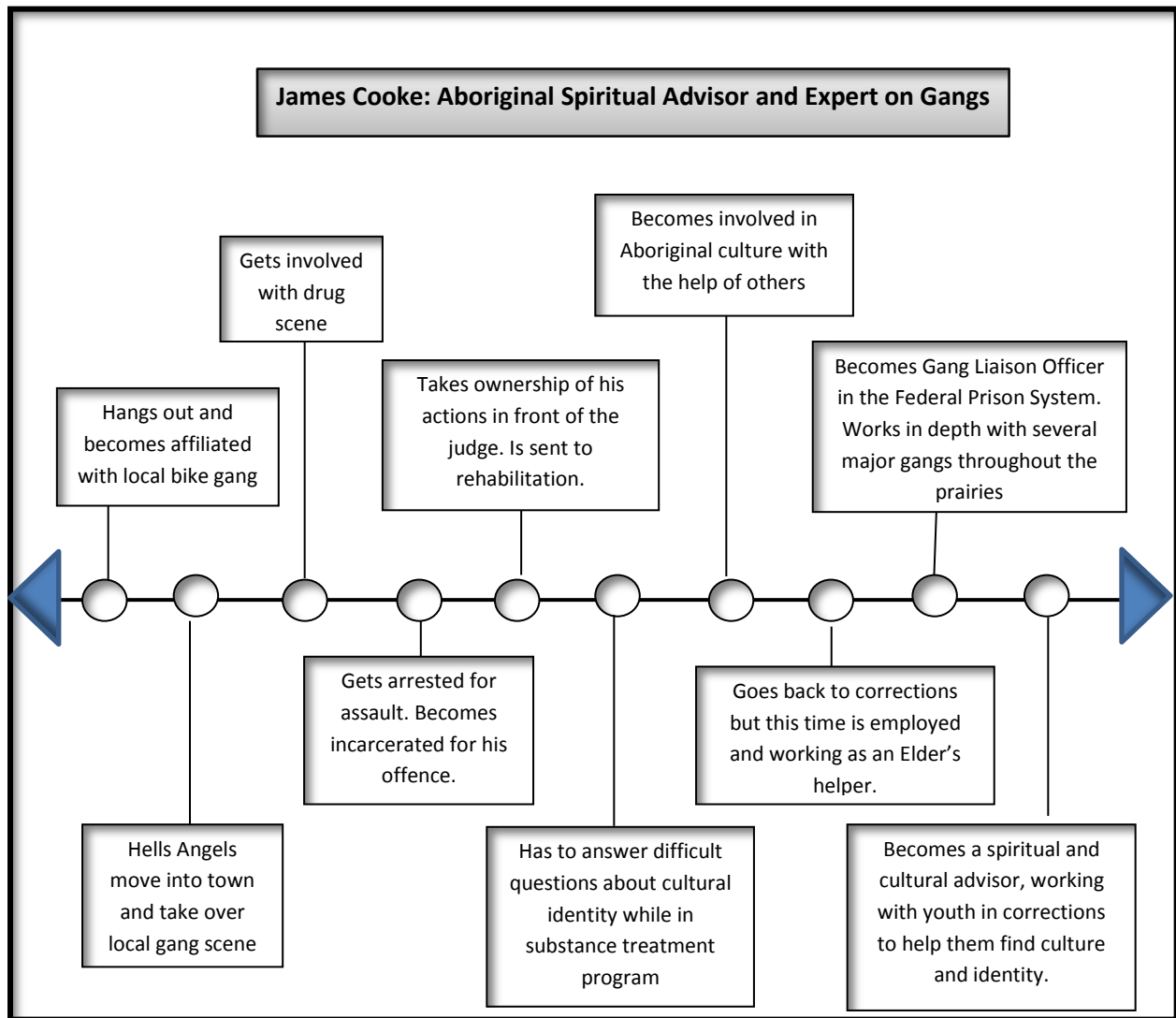
Although James was able to avoid gang membership at a young age, staying away from the criminal life all together was not in the cards. Things started to slide for James and he got into quite a bit of trouble with the law. James had gotten involved in the drug scene and things were beginning to close in on him. Meanwhile, James was arrested after he got into a fight over a girl. In retrospect, this turned out to be a blessing in disguise. James was sent to jail but avoided the heat related to the drug scene. While incarcerated, James quickly realized that this was not the life that he wanted. He didn't want the heat from the police, the constant looking over your shoulder and stints spent behind bars. When he came up before the judge, he took ownership of his actions and put the decision in the hands of the judge. The judge sent James to a 28-day treatment program for substance abuse. James lasted until day 24. He had four days remaining in the program when he got thrown out. While in that program, James was forced to face a part of himself that until then he had suppressed - his identity as an Indian man. In a therapeutic group at the treatment center, James was asked "when are you going to accept the fact that you are an Aboriginal, native man?" That question threw James and stayed with him for some time. He hadn't acknowledged that he was ashamed of being Aboriginal or that his family had been ashamed of being Aboriginal. This question, although faced with resistance and irritation at the time, would start James on a journey to find his identity as an Aboriginal man. Through the help

of others, James began going to cultural ceremonies. He went to sweat lodge after sweat lodge, ceremony after ceremony. The more he went to ceremonies and the more he was immersed in his culture, the better he felt. As time went on James began to find himself.

On his journey to find his own identity, James was presented with a number of opportunities to help others. He was sought out by the Aboriginal Youth Justice Council (a program designed to help young offenders with making better choices and providing them with the opportunities to do so) when it was in its infancy in the early 1990's. James moved from council member to council president. James' involvement in the council provided opportunities to meet all sorts of people including a number of elders. His name started to be recognized in the community and he sat on a variety of boards for different organizations and agencies, becoming more and more involved in the Aboriginal community. On his journey, James' became connected with two elders, Elaine and Albert Harrison. Albert worked in the prison system, both with young offenders and adults. With Albert, James went back to prison but in a different capacity compared to his early years. This time, James worked with Albert and the inmates doing drum teachings, conducting cultural ceremonies and helping out however he could.

More than twenty years later, James is still working with corrections. His capacity has changed over the years from elders' helper, to gang liaison officer and now to spiritual advisor himself where he works with young offenders providing them with cultural teachings and ceremonies. He spent much of his early days in corrections still trying to find himself, without realizing that he was helping others find their way on a similar journey.

Figure 4: Narrative Timeline

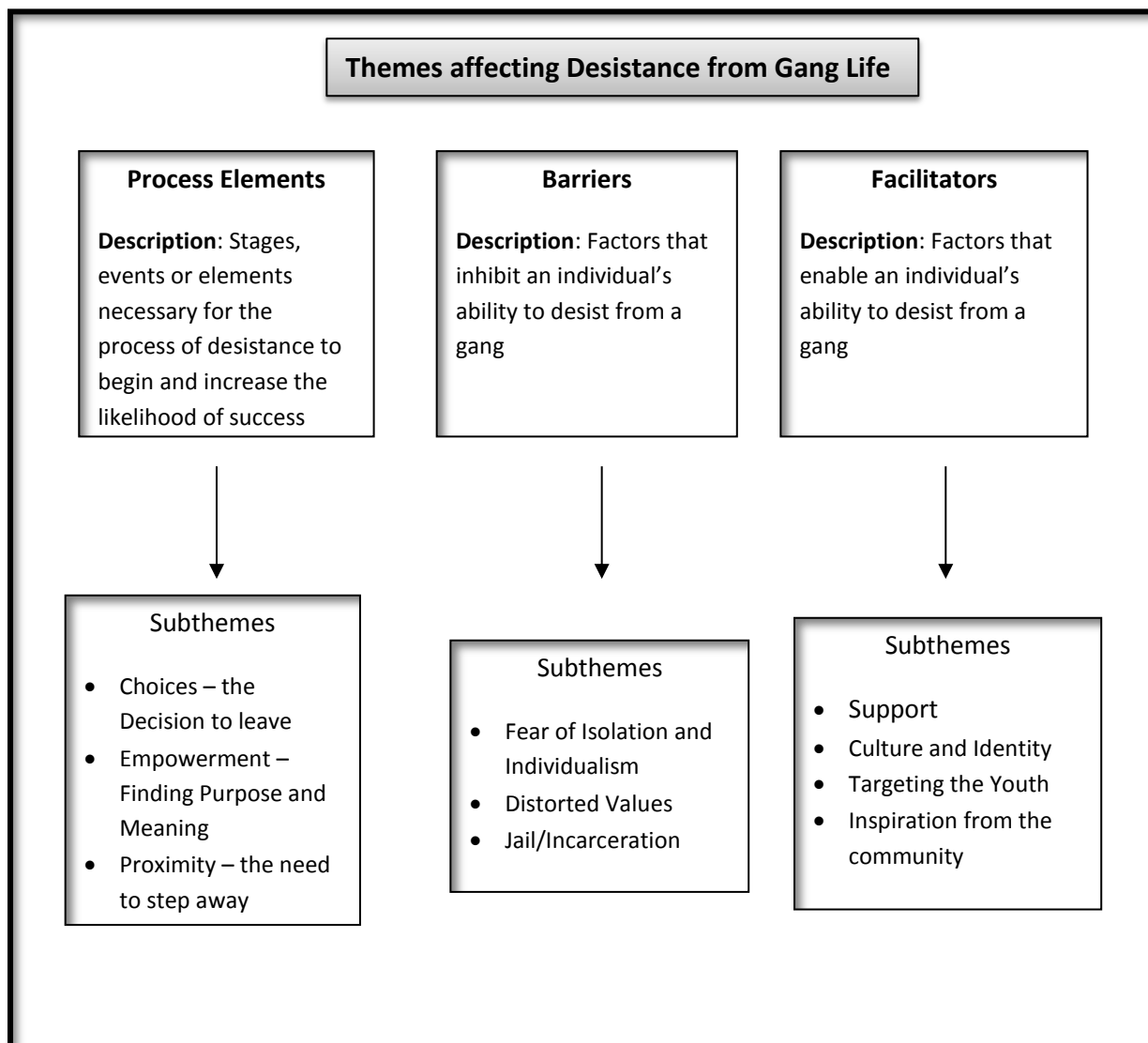


Themes for Desistance

The following section is a presentation of the themes identified within the data. The themes relate to the overall process of desistance from gang life. Through thematic analysis, it was apparent that the data falls into three overarching themes: Process Elements, Barriers to Desistance and Facilitators to Desistance (See Figure 5). Process Elements are those factors that are neither positive nor negative but rather are elements present that appear to be necessary

components, albeit not sufficient, for the process of desistance to begin and to be successful. Barriers include those elements that become a deterrent to desistance, or inhibit the individual's ability to desist from gang life. In contrast, Facilitators are those elements within one's life that facilitate the process of desistance or increase the chance that the process will be successful. Each of these themes is then reduced into the subthemes that affect desistance.

Figure 5. Themes Affecting Desistance from Gang Life



Process Elements

It seems that desistance cannot be classified or studied as a single event in time. Rather desistance appears to take the shape of a nonlinear process over the course of time and is likely a process that one needs to continue with for the duration of life in order to be successful. The process elements present within the data illuminate some of the steps or stages individuals may go through in order to continue the process of desistance. Individuals sometimes have the desire to leave the gang but are unsure of how to make it happen: *"What do I need to do? And I said, one, you need to get honest. Second, you need to make a commitment about what you are about to do, and ...Three, you need to step away."*

Choices – Making the Decision to Leave. Before the process of desistance can truly begin, it is apparent that a genuine choice for change needs to be made. When working in the field of corrections, particularly with gang members, corrections officers are often presented with individuals making claims that they want to change, they want to drop their colors, etc., but these individuals often lack sincerity and make such claims for secondary gains. For example, a gang member may denounce their gang affiliation to corrections workers in an attempt to gain privileges such as increased time off the unit. There is little that can be done in regards to desistance until one makes the honest, intrinsic decision to change, to leave the gang. When working with the gangs, James' made the necessity of that choice very clear:

I said to each one of [the gangs], 'Look guys; drop your god damn colors. I'm not here for the bullshit. You want rights, if you want certain aspects, I will help you with every means that I can but if it's gang-related or anything to do with gang stuff, I'm not the person for you....And I said, I will fight for you if I feel like I'm being treated fairly, but if it goes sideways, I'll be the first one to walk.

The following is an explanation of an incident between James and a high-ranking member of a major gang:

He comes up to me. You talk a lot of shit. Fine. I said, I understand that. Please explain. He just sat there, he just tore a strip off me in my office. And I said, 'Ok, are you done?' He said, 'ya, I think so.' And I said, 'now are you willing to put those words into action?' And he said, ' what do you mean?' I said, 'you know, you can sit here and tell me how much of an asshole you are, try to tell me how tough you are and so far down the line, but where will that fucking shit get you? You're going to stay here for the rest of your god damn life. So you got two choices. He just looked at me, he was pissed. Fuck you, he just walks out, slams my door. Three days later, who comes back to my office? He sits himself down. What do I need to do?

The choice was made - honestly.

Empowerment - Finding Purpose and Meaning. Once the decision has been made to change, in order to facilitate the change or reduce the chances of recidivating, the individual needs to find purpose and meaning beyond gang life. Up until this point, their sole purpose, meaning, and identity has been completely enmeshed with that of the gang:

As strong as they think they are, they are weaker than they really are. Which is really sad to say because, here you are, you've got a bunch of guys that live in such a fantasy world. There's no originality, there's no sense of individualism, everything they do is a copy of somebody else.

In order to break free from the gang life, the values and beliefs of the individual need to be challenged, intrinsically by the individual themselves and extrinsically by those supporting the individual through the desistance process:

...where you start with that is you've really got to try and instil that self-worth. You really got to try to question them on their values, question them on their tactics, question them what they truly believe...you're going up against years of distortion. And what I've learned from working with these guys, it's not their shit. And what I mean by that is when they start to open up and they start to build that trust, all of a sudden they realize, these are not my thoughts. This is my mother, my father, my uncle, my aunt....

The gang members have taken on everyone's voice in place of their own voice. They have had all these voices telling them who they should be and have lost their sense of self. For individuals to move on, James believes it is necessary for them to feel empowered and find that sense of meaning and purpose outside the gang:

Empower yourself. Feel good about who you are. And that's the hardest part is about teaching these guys is how to empower themselves, to be good enough to make these decisions out. Because the reality of it is that in a gang relationship, you're not meant to be an individual. You're part of a unit, you're part of an affiliation, you're a family. So that's where these guys get really dependent upon that sense of structure. They have a sense of purpose. Now they have purpose and meaning and it's like, you want me to be on my own. That's why the success rate is very low.

For James, when working with these young men, to get them to a point where they can think about this, he states it's like *"batting one out of ten."*

Thinking critically about their beliefs and values, their background, and their connection with their families can foster a range of complex emotions. Some may experience a sense of

shame regarding their past while others may experience an intense fear of disappointing, betraying or going against their biological or pseudo-gang families:

It's difficult because all of a sudden when you get them to a sense of realization, they feel betrayed. All of sudden they get back to that feeling of oh, wait a second, no, I'm going against them, I'm going against my family, I don't want that ... it's easier to stay where I'm at.

This becomes a very difficult stage and without personal empowerment, self-worth, and individual determination to change, can result in a regression back to gang activity and behaviour. These internal qualities become the building blocks for individuals to successfully desist from gang life.

Necessity of Proximity – The Need to Step Away. A vital component in the success of desistance is allowing for physical proximity from the gang life. In addition to the need for separation from the life, equal importance is placed on separation from those still involved or associated with gangs and criminal activity: *"Leave. Step away. That's the only way you are going to succeed."*

Gang involvement runs deep within many Aboriginal families. This makes the notion of desistance even more difficult to fathom. Not only do those who want to get out of the gang life have to step away from the pseudo family that they have created within the gang, they must, in most instances step away from their biological family as well, as the two are often heavily intertwined:

"You go back to the community, well guess what? Uncle's an NS (Native Syndicate), other uncle is IP (Indian Posse), next one could be affiliated with MW (Manitoba Warriors), how the frick do you escape when your whole family is so entrenched?"

For many, including James (as told as part of his story), this requires a physical relocation – the individual must separate themselves from the lifestyle and all those associated with it in its entirety: *"By walking away, means you're walking away from everything. Everything and everyone."*

Desistance from gang life and its members appears to paramount for success in desisting from the gang life. For James, he had to move to a different city where no one knew of his past affiliations and connections or any other part of his past. When speaking to his parole officer he stated, *"If I stay in this city, I'm going to fall. I got too much temptation, too much pressure. It's not going to work for me."* He felt that to succeed he had to be able to separate himself from the pressure and temptations that result from being around those who are still involved in the gang scene. The relationships that are forged within the gang become a strong force in preventing desistance. Pressures from within the gang to maintain membership are strong but are further compounded in strength if the biological family is also intertwined in the gang. Desistance from gang life is difficult in any event but becomes nearly impossible if one does not remove these temptations to fall back into the life.

Barriers to Desistance

Because the reality of it is that in a gang relationship, you're not meant to be an individual. You're a part of a unit, you're a part of an affiliation, you're a family. So that's where these guys get really dependent upon that sense of structure. They have a sense of purpose, now they have purpose and meaning and it's like, you want me to be on my own. That's why the success rate is very low. The other reason that the success rate is very low is because what do we really have for these individuals? Nothing. You look at this... we

build these guys up in an institution, we give em' the tools, we give em' some courage, kick em' out the door. What are we kicking them back to?

If getting out of the gang life were easy, there would be little need to examine this understudied phenomenon. Realistically, this is a process that is particularly difficult with incredibly low rates of success: *“the success rate is like 2%, which is really sad. The even sadder part about it is, is that with the 2% that make it out there, the struggles that these guys go through ---blows my mind.”* The barriers to desistance create powerful deterrent and obstacles in the process of successful desistance from gang life. The following subthemes from the data highlight the difficulties present to those attempting to desist.

Fear - Isolation and Individualism. When you think about desistance from gang life, you would assume that one of the main reasons for not leaving is the fear of being beaten out or even killed. Although, fear is a major deterrent, it is not fear of pain or punishment but rather it is fear of personal isolation and having to survive on their own.

For many young men involved in the gang scene, they found their way there by looking for somewhere to belong, somewhere to be protected:

It was more for a sense of protection...because they felt like the police weren't listening to them, here they are living in the North End, living in poverty...and their sisters are getting raped, stuff is going on. They created these gangs so that they could protect themselves and that's exactly what they've done.

Typically, that feeling of safety and belonging comes from one's family, but for many gang members they lack a sense of family connection due to the overwhelming level of dysfunction. Although still dysfunctional, when these young men or boys are recruited by a gang who offers them security that they have never felt before, they are drawn in: *“Because all of a sudden you're*

given a whole whack load of sense of family, responsibility, you're in a hierarchy where you're respected."

Once they have developed this sense of belonging, the fear of leaving can seem insurmountable, *"they've established such a strong fellowship of family that they're just - they're afraid to let go."* The gang becomes their pseudo-family, providing them with the basic needs that they have lacked in the past. While the gang life quickly proves to be vastly dysfunctional and dangerous, now that these needs have been met it becomes difficult to imagine a life without them, they are afraid of being alone:

To the point where they feel that if they let that family go, they feel like they cannot survive individually. They are so afraid of being alone, it's pathetic and this is the hardest thing about any typical gang member is that fear of isolation.

Jail isn't a Punishment or a Deterrent. From a prosocial perspective, incarceration is a tremendously powerful deterrent against the commission of criminal acts or gang activity. For those involved in gang life, it becomes a rite of passage, a normal progression in life or, sadly, an improvement in the quality of life for some: *"I get three meals a day, I get a roof over my head, I get all the medical attention taken care of, I get eye prescriptions. I've got more rights being in jail. Where's the punishment?"*

From an outside perspective, it may seem that incarceration provides the proximity from gang life necessary to desist. One may assume, from popular media, that those in prison spend most of their time in isolation, when in actuality, most of their time is spent in general population, associating with individuals with similar backgrounds and criminal mentality. In reality, incarceration allows for gang members to become further entrenched and increase their status or stature within the gang. Take for example, this explanation of gang tattoos:

The sad thing about it now is that these guys use the prisons as a stature. Now all of a sudden it becomes now more of that identity. Ok, so you get a normal IP (Indian Posse) member that's in the community. Ok, he just has an "IP" [an IP as a tattoo]. Ok, you've got an IP member who all of a sudden is in the institution, he's got "IP" with bars [as a tattoo]. Now he all of a sudden, he's got a whole different stature... Now look at me, I'm a somebody.

Distorted Values. Many individuals involved in gang life had a distorted system of values long before they entered the gang. Upon entrance, these values get more distorted and entrenched, *"...you're not meant to be an individual. You're a part of a unit, you're a part of an affiliation, you're a family."* Individuals often get into the gangs to fulfill needs that are not being met through a conventional, functional family or community structure. They look to the gang when they realize that their current stature in life is dismal at best:

I have no education. I've got a shit lifestyle at home, my parents. We live in the north end. We have absolutely nothing. The only thing that is guaranteed is a welfare cheque that comes at the end of each month.

As a result, they look to less conventional means to fulfill their needs.

We're at the point where 'let's get into drugs'. Started selling drugs. And then they are into the drug scene. Then all of a sudden getting into the themes of working with auto theft. They started working with that, with shops. And then they are stealing high-end vehicles, getting paid commission on that. All of a sudden they realize that hey, wait a second, there's some major money going on here.

This reality becomes a distorted sense of normalcy with a corresponding distorted sense of values.

Facilitators of Desistance

Within the process to desist from gang life, there are several factors that may assist, or facilitate the process. These factors or subthemes enable an individual's ability to desist from a gang and sustain desistance for the long term.

Support – You need to have Someone in your Corner. Change is a difficult process but it becomes practically insurmountable if you are required to do it alone:

How does anybody need to change? They need support. They have to have somebody believe in them for who they are...the reality is, if you don't have anybody to believe in you, you're lost – you're absolutely doing nothing.

For James, whether he wanted it or not at the time, he had people in his corner, striving to keep him on a path where he would be successful. From the time he was young, his friend's father pushed him and his friend away from joining the gang. The father was heavily entrenched in the life and knew he did not want the same future for the boys, so he stated simply, *"you guys join, I'll kill ya."* Although likely not a real threat on their life, it was a threat to make them fear the gang life. With that encouragement, James never became fully involved in the gang. Although he was affiliated through most of his teens and became deeply familiar with the inner workings of the gang, he had never been fully 'patched in'.

Although avoiding the gang life, James was unable to fully avoid getting into trouble with the law. He spent some time in jail and in treatment. He made a choice to change but still struggled with many of the challenging questions that presented themselves over the years. Although James sometimes objected and resisted, those around him continued to encourage and support him, continually inviting him to cultural ceremonies (e.g., sweatlodges) and other cultural events:

...there was two guys that were from that center, clung right on to me. And said, no, we'll take care of him. So what was really interesting about it was, this gentleman was from the states this elder, he was from the states and he was invited by these two gentlemen who ran this Treatment Center. Well, they latched right on to me and they were unbelievable. They did not let go. They were like two fleas - two ticks on a fricken hound dog. They just - constantly phoning me up, comin' out to a sweat, comin out to ceremony, and that's what they did. So I just - I kept givin' in. I said, well I'll meet you out there so I started sweatin' and sweatin'. And the more I started sweatin' the better I started to feel.

They were the support he needed to continue on the path to a better life. For him, it was culture and his true identity that he needed to find in order to live a better life. For others it may be simply someone in the community that is willing to provide the support when needed. Take for instance one young gentleman who was going before the parole board. James questioned him on potential community supports:

Who can we contact in the community? Who do you know? Who would give us the support that you want? He says why do I need that? I said because you'll need to have a community support. If we don't have anywhere to send you in the community, we can piss this all goodbye.

Culture and Identity. As previously mentioned it appears necessary for gang members to find purpose and meaning within themselves in order to proceed through the process of desistance. According to James, this comes in the form of developing a new identity separate from the gang. This transformed identity is often one that is reconnected with their culture. For James personally, the journey began with a very poignant question: *"When are you going to accept the fact that you are an Aboriginal, native man?"*

For James and others he counselled over the years, the journey for desistance (whether it is from crime or gangs) is facilitated through a corresponding journey to find one's culture and one's true identity - an identity separate from the gang. James' journey began with one extremely powerful spiritual experience:

What really tipped the scale for me, I was in a car accident, I got released. A buddy of mine, a little white buddy of mine come out, non-aboriginal, married an aboriginal woman, was very much into the culture. He told me 'come on, we're going to a healing lodge.' I said, 'you're going, I'm no.' So what happened was I go to this healing lodge, and...he talks me into it. I get there, I'm nervous. I know a little bit about the culture, I have this and that so far down the line. I get there, and...he's talking to the elder and says to them - comes to me and says 'we'll give you a chair.' 'No I'll sit on the floor like everyone else' and so far down the line. Don't give me no special treatment. Ya I'm sore, big deal, I don't care. But what was really interesting about it was it was a Grandmother Moon ceremony that they were doin'. I never met my grandma. My grandmother passed away when I was two years old. She was a full fledged Ojibwe woman. Ok...what was interesting about it was I was sitting in this room, the lights went out. He started praying, I can see him lighting, smoking his pipe. And I'm sittin' there like, what the fuck am I going to pray too. 'Cause I was atheist against everybody. I hated God, I hated churches, I hated - because I dealt with all that bullshit when I was younger. So I'm sitting in this room thinking, I'm totally alienated; I'm thinking what am I supposed to do. The only thing that came to my mind was, I said, 'you know grandma, if you're fricken actually damn well out there. I apologize that I'm on the drugs that I'm on.' Because I was on Tylenol 3's, on painkillers. And I said 'I know I'm not supposed to be in this circle at this

present time but god damn, show me somethin'. And that's exactly pretty much how I said it. Sitting in this room, and it was like all of a sudden, somebody, literally set - put a hand on my shoulder and I felt that somebody was sitting right beside me. But I knew that there was nobody in between me for quite a few - like three four feet. And it freaked the shit out of me. And the hairs on the back of my neck were standing up, and I felt uncomfortable. And I was like 'wow, what's going on here?' The ceremony ended and the individual running the ceremony says 'I have a message for this young man. Your grandmother forgives you for being on the drugs because she knows the pain that you are in. And, yes, that was your grandmother that was sitting beside you. She welcomes you back home with the Anishinabe people.'

James' was taken aback by the powerful experience and it caused him to question himself and begin to search for answers. From that point, he continued on a path to find his true self, away from the dysfunction.

I started sweating, I started fasting. I did everything that I was supposed to do. And the more I was doin' it, I was starting to actually find who I really was. Who I felt comfortable with.

Targeting the Youth. A common theme that James witnessed through his experiences working in corrections and with young offenders, was the hope associated with getting to youth before they become too heavily entrenched in the gang lifestyle. James has focused much of his works and efforts on working with youth, particularly in Aboriginal communities. Currently, he provides cultural services and sweat lodges for incarcerated youth at Saskatchewan Young Offender facilities.

We have a chance. They're not as hardened, they're not as criminally entrenched. They have enough history in front of them now to show them this is what you can be. You know, and that's what we need to keep doing. We need to keep pushing the youth.

Looking at the youth. Really provide them with more resources. Really start to encourage them and give them that sense of empowerment and sense of trust.

At a young age, youth do not have their values and beliefs fixed. At this point, although they are questioning and experimenting, it is easier to teach and alter dysfunctional life views before they become entrenched into dysfunctional, possibly criminal perspectives:

Between the ages of 13 and 17, I call it the stupid years. And the reason I call it that is because they're dibbling, dabbling all over the place. They don't know who they are. So that's where you want to catch them and that seems to be the ideal spot.

Inspiration from Within their Communities. The dynamics of Aboriginal communities throughout the prairies appear to be changing. According to James, an increased number of individuals within Aboriginal communities are obtaining an education. This has created a compound effect, as members of the older generations begin to become more educated, they become role models for younger generations to follow in their footsteps and become educated:

I listen to these young kids now in this day and age and it's like, I really try to say to them, you know, you are our next generation. You're the future for who we are. Now you guys ...you know guys, you know the dysfunction. You've seen the history, you've seen that. Educate yourselves. And that's what's really interesting about it is, ya it's sad that there's a whack load that's still afraid of education. But a lot of them now are starting to realize the importance of education. And the reason that I say that is, I look at my

community back at home within the last 3 years, which is absolutely astonishing, [graduation rates] went up 52% from our youth. Which is really just like...wow. Why? Why is that? And the only way they can honestly say that is they're realizing, they're seeing that certain family members are stepping away, leaving the communities, getting jobs, and are actually doing something with their lives.

New role models are emerging within Aboriginal communities, providing a new strength and direction for those growing up. New role models provide options outside the gang life.

Different role models, different things are starting to evolve, they're starting to see certain individual family members are realizing that there is a difference, there is a change and that people can do it. Which is absolutely fantastic. And it's a combination of just being of sick and tired of being sick and tired. Realizing that, hey, there is a difference.

As the communities and role models change, the opportunities to desist from gang life increase, as is the support necessary to abstain permanently from the gang lifestyle.

Summary

James Cooke struggled through and triumphed over many hardships through life, overcoming trouble with the law at young age and avoiding involvement with gangs, to become an advocate for youth and an authority in relation to gangs on the Prairies as a result of his culture, personal history and careers. James provides a perspective on Aboriginal gangs that is distinctive to the literature. Narrative thematic analysis revealed themes related to the overall process of desistance, as well as barriers and facilitating factors to desistance.

Chapter 5: Discussion

It would be so much easier just to fold our hands and not make this fight...to say, I, one man, I can do nothing. I grow afraid only when I see people thinking and acting like this. We all know the story about the man who sat beside the trail too long, and then it grew over and he could never find his way again. We can never forget what has happened, but we cannot go back nor can we just sit beside the trail...”

(Chief Poundmaker, John Howard Society, 2012, p. 93).

With the increase in gang presence in our communities and the popularity of gang culture in the media, it is not surprising that the topic of gangs has also become a focus in academic research and literature. The literature has shown that individuals join gangs for a variety of reasons and there are several social programs, government initiatives that focus on preventing individuals from joining gang life. The bulk of the research (Craig et al, 2002; Grant & Feimer, 2007; Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2006; 2008; Lahey et al., 1999) continues to focus on how or why these individuals have become involved in the gang lifestyle and how we can prevent their enrolment. Although the focus is on prevention, the literature illustrates that Saskatchewan has an ever-growing population of young men already engrossed in gang life (Criminal Intelligence Service of Saskatchewan, 2005; Public Safety Canada, 2007). Further studies have indicated that little can be done to inhibit individuals from joining a gang (Caldwell & Altschuler, 2001; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002), yet the focus of the literature remains on prevention. Using narrative inquiry, the current study examined and invites a dialogue on the understudied phenomenon of gang desistance.

In the previous chapter, a narrative portrayal of James Cooke’s life and experiences was presented. Specifically, this study examined factors affecting desistance and means for the

cessation of gang involvement through the process of an in-depth interview with an Aboriginal spiritual advisor and expert in the field of gangs throughout the Prairie Provinces. James provided insight from his own struggles with gang involvement and the law, allowing for a deeper understanding of means of desisting from criminal behaviour. Further, James was in the unique position to offer perspective about Aboriginal gangs and the process of desistance because of his role as an spiritual advisor and student of the culture as well as an individual who has spent many years working with and counselling gang members. James has spent much of his adult life working within the field of corrections, in both the adult and youth sectors. Through his own experiences, of working with individuals associated with the gangs, James was able to offer first hand and third party knowledge of gangs and the process for desisting.

James' narrative illuminates the struggles on the edge of gang life and the toil of many individuals to find themselves and their way out of the gang. Narrative thematic analysis brought forth several themes related to desistance, bringing a renewed perspective on desistance. The objectives of the discussion are to provide the reader with a general understanding of the themes present within the data (Polkinghorne, 1988) and to incorporate current literature and compare findings with previous research and theory. The current chapter serves to provide a discussion of the findings by examining the themes in relation to existing theory and research. In addition, this chapter will discuss conclusions and implications for future research along with outlining the limitations of the study.

Understanding the Phenomenon of Desistance

The overarching objective of this study was to gain a better understanding of the understudied phenomenon of desistance from gang life. Thematic narrative analysis of James

Cooke's story illuminated multiple themes and subthemes associated with desistance from gangs and extended our understanding of the phenomenon.

Of key importance was the emphasis on desistance as a process rather than desistance as an event or point in time. The facilitators and barriers that were identified through the data identify factors that are either beneficial or a hindrance to the overall process. In addition, by conducting an in-depth interview with not only an expert in the field of Aboriginal gangs but also an Aboriginal spiritual and cultural advisor, this study illuminated the importance of spiritual influence and cultural connection in the success of desistance from gang life.

The Process of Desistance

Creating Definitional Congruence. A relative dichotomy appears in the literature regarding desistance and the ways in which an individual is able to abscond from the gang life. Previous research (Jankowski, 1991; Decker & Lauritsen, 1996; Totten, 2009; Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008) has indicated relative discrepancies in means for desistance and modes for leaving the gang varying from violence or death to simply walking away. The dichotomy exists on a basic definitional level of desistance: whether desistance is defined as the event or moment that one can pinpoint as the cause for leaving the gang (Jankowski, 1991) or viewing desistance as a life course process (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Deane, Bracken & Morrisette, 2007). Jankowski (1991) speculated that there are a number of events that allow gang members to successfully leave a gang: age or mature out, die, go to prison, find legitimate employment, join other organizations or leave the gang as it subdivides or breaks down. According to Jankowski (1991), there is no discernible pattern in the way in which gang members left their gang. In contrast, Decker and Lauritsen (2002) postulated that desistance was a "more complex and variable process" (p. 120) than much of the literature, such as that

described by Jankowski (1991). Deane, Bracken and Morrisette (2007) describe desistance as “a dynamic process which occurs over time” (p. 129) and is usually the result of both internal and external factors. From this perspective, desistance is a lifelong battle between individual decision making about one’s future and the constraints and opportunities afforded by the immediate environment (Deane, Bracken & Morrisette, 2007). Data from the current study supports the notion of desistance as a complex process and indicates that desistance is a non-linear process that may exist throughout the course of life. James described desistance as a process that each individual must continue to battle with – one that has numerous steps forward as well as regression over time. For many of the individuals that James had worked with, a single act, such as being the recipient of a violent offense may indeed initiate the desire to extricate one's self from gang life but does not, in actuality, suffice as a means for liberation from the gang. Rather, desistance, as described by Jankowski (1991) appears to be a necessary part of the overall process but insufficient as a complete definition for desistance.

The Power of Personal Choice. The rational to desist from the gang will vary from individual to individual. The current data presented a number of reasons for choosing to desist including familial commitments, fear for safety, wanting a 'better' life and cultural and religious reasons. Past research on desistance has focused on this critical decision or event as how one may desist from the gang but the aforementioned event appears to be a preliminary stage in the overall process. According to James, this event often appears to initiate the process of desistance. For each person the motivation for wanting to leave gang life will be different, but regardless of what that motivator is, it needs to be strong enough to hold the individual true to the process when times become challenging. The notion that the individual gang member needs to make a choice to change is consistent with Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph’s (2002) theory of

cognitive transformation. This theory postulates that much of the desistance process must occur at an individual psychological level despite the effects of external factors such as violence or pressure from peers or family.

After the initial decision is made, the data indicates that for the process to continue, individuals need to feel empowered and find meaning and purpose within their new life, separate from the gang and those associated with it. A point to consider is that by the time many gang members have reached their mid-twenties, these men have had nearly two decades of exposure to a skewed set of values. Deane et al. (2007) expressed that desistance was a continual battle between internal decision making which is based upon one's core values and the constant pressures from the outside environment. The majority of the struggle to desist from gangs appears to be one that has been deeply internalized within the individual. Aboriginal people within our country, particularly on the prairies, have suffered immensely at the hands of the government and an unjust history. For years, Aboriginal people have been subjected to racism, prejudice, and marginalization within our society. As a result, an authentic sense of purpose and meaning has been lost for some individuals and much of Aboriginal culture as a whole has been decimated.

Since the onset of gang research, stemming back to Fredric Thrasher, much of the focus has been placed on the effects of marginalization and oppression and resulting gang involvement. Thrasher (1927) postulated in his theory of social disorganization, that individuals join gangs as a result of a lack of personal and community connectedness and therefore, youth look to other avenues to find the connection they are looking for. In other words, Thrasher attributes much of the allure of gang membership to an overall lack of meaning and purpose in the lives of young men. As revealed in James' account, the same phenomenon appears to be held in regards to

maintaining gang membership or desisting. The identity of an individual gang member transforms into the identity of the gang. Their purpose in life is the purpose of the gang.

According to James, many young men have gravitated towards gang lifestyle because they had nothing else to rely on other than a welfare cheque once a month. They came from a world where their family members were readily becoming victims of violence, they had no money, their families were dysfunctional, and if their family members were not physically absent then many of them were already involved in the gang lifestyle. The gang became the social structure they lacked. Once involved in the gang, these individuals had a pseudo family, community, and a sense of protection and purpose - they developed social organization.

It appears that for long-term successful desistance, proximity from gangs and their members is of critical importance. For James and many of the individuals he worked with, separation from the gang was paramount to the ability to desist gang life. Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson (2008) emphasized the difficulty presented by the familial and generational effects within the gang structure. This makes proximity vastly more difficult for many members as they have to step away from both their family and friends to increase the likelihood of successful desistance. The data reinforces the notion expressed by Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson. For James personally, he had to create physical and emotional desistance between himself, the gang association, and his family in order to create a life that was not associated with the gangs. James indicated that if this part of the process is not completed in its entirety, it may quickly transform into a barrier for desistance.

The notion of social capital as a powerful factor for desistance is present throughout the literature (Bracken et al., 2009; Deane et al; 2007). The data supports the need for the development of strong prosocial relationships through the process of desistance: "*How does*

anybody need to change? They need support” (James Cooke, March 2014). In his narrative, James indicated that the development of relationships with others in the community, away from those associated with the gang in any way, were paramount to successful abstinence from gang life. Deane et al. (2007) agreed, stating, “social capital and skill development along with cultural teachings may provide enough support for change almost in spite of the impact of an implicitly racist society and the effects of colonialism” (p. 62).

Factors Affecting the Process of Desistance

Barriers to Desistance. Numerous factors in the life of a gang member or former gang member can prevent or derail the process of desistance. Several barriers were identified in the data that have the potential to prevent individuals from successfully desisting from the gang including the fear of isolation and individualism, distorted antisocial personal values, or becoming incarcerated.

Totten (2009) suggested that a sense of loyalty in conjunction with a fear of violence or death were major barriers to desistance from gang life. Data from this study suggests that inter-relational factors are indeed a barrier to desistance but in a different manner than was suggested by Totten (2009). Rather, the data appears to suggest a fear of being alone, in isolation and being able to survive as an individual as a barrier rather than a fear of violence. Externally, both fears may result in similar actions but have different motives. According to James, fear of being ‘beaten out’ (assaulted as a rite of passage for dismissal from the gang) was not the most prominent fear of many of the young men he worked with in the prison system. Rather, a greater fear existed – that of being able to survive and function outside of the group and on their own in society.

James' narrative reinforces the results of Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson's (2008) study regarding the effects of the individual's family members being involved in a gang. Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson indicated that there is significant recruitment pressure from family members to join gangs, particularly on reservations. Once involved in the gang, familial ties, in addition to the already strong loyalty within the gang, make the bonds even stronger. In this scenario, the vast majority of relationships, both friends and family, are intertwined with the gang. This compounds the fear of being alone due to the fact that once one steps away from the gang, which has functioned as a pseudo family, they also must step away from their biological family if they are involved or associated with the gang.

By procuring involvement with a gang at a young age, the value system of these individuals is formed by the gang as opposed to their traditional family (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008). Further, traditional Aboriginal values have been dissolved as a result of the injustices of "cultural colonialism" (Bracken et al., 2009) experienced by the Aboriginal people throughout Canadian history and are further exacerbated by the continued isolation and separation of living on reservations (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2006). For James and the individuals he has counselled, they reported growing up in an environment of dysfunction. According to the narratives shared by James, for many of the individuals that he worked with, prostitution, drug trafficking, and violence are normal aspects of gang life. According to Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson (2006, 2008), these factors contribute to the likelihood of becoming involved in a gang. The current study indicates that these factors (i.e. marginalization, disenfranchisement, low standard of living, family dysfunction, and familial generational gang involvement) not only contribute to gang initiation but also create an obstruction to the process of desistance. James stated that this mindset is one of the most difficult barriers affecting

desistance. For the majority of the general population, the aforementioned acts would be terrifying let alone normal, but for gang members, it is an everyday reality. A life with this type of reality creates a value system that is highly distorted and dysfunctional (Bracken et al., 2009; Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008).

In addition, incarceration becomes a barrier to desistance in numerous ways. Although incarceration is readily used as a means for intervention for gang involvement with the intention to facilitate desistance, incarceration actually creates a barrier for desistance and helps to solidify gang involvement. Within the prison systems on the prairies, there is a disproportionate concentration of Aboriginal offenders and Aboriginal gang members (Bracken et al, 2009). Aboriginal overrepresentation in the correctional system in itself creates a difficulty for individuals to gain the needed proximity from negative influences in order to desist from the gang as they are constantly forced into interactions with allied and rival gang members. In addition, the prison system is a breeding ground for distorted values related to both criminal and antisocial behavior. Furthermore, once released from prison, recidivism is likely due to stigmatization by authorities and society (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008). From the narratives shared within this study, it appears that without gaining social capital, the weight of past incarceration and gang ties creates an obstacle to abstaining from gang life.

Our current judicial system uses incarceration as a punishment for criminal behaviour or gang activity. Based on Pavlovian theories of operant conditioning, providing a jail sentence as punishment for a crime or crimes associated to gang activity should create a negative association that deters one from such activity in the future. Based on my personal experience working in the prison system, I have seen that there are many individuals who do not fear jail time; rather it's almost an expectation and a norm of life. For example, one gentleman was so convinced that he

would return to prison in the near future that he asked if he could have the same room next time he came back. According to James, some of the individuals he worked with expressed similar sentiments. For example, James reported individuals would routinely comment that they wanted to "*get out for the summer time, enjoy a little summer*" but they expected to return to prison in the winter because they "*don't want to be out there, it's too damn cold.*" For many individuals, they are afforded more rights, privileges, and services while incarcerated than they ever received while they were on the street. Incarceration contributes to the distortion of values and allows the dysfunction to front as normalcy.

Factors Facilitating Desistance. In contrast to the barriers to desistance, several themes were uncovered by the current research that appear to facilitate the process of desistance. Findings from this study support the previous research by Deane et al. (2007). Deane et al. (2007) examined criminal behaviour and identified factors that facilitated desistance from criminal activity including social support and cultural identity. Similarly, the current study found that comparable factors such as creating a prosocial network, becoming involved in culture, and receiving support through counselling, facilitated desistance from gangs in a manner similar to how it facilitated desistance from general criminal behaviour.

The life that many of these young men have led has left them hardened and broken. They have fallen away from reality, from the difference between right and wrong and the way the world functions outside of the gang. These men are often in desperate need of healing – spiritually, emotionally and possibly even physically. Particularly in the Aboriginal community, a powerful means for healing is rooted in cultural and spiritual traditions (Deane, Bracken, & Morrissette, 2007). For James, the process of desistance was a journey about finding his cultural identity. This is also true for many others. Deane, Bracken, and Morrissette (2007) assert that the

experience of being an Aboriginal person in Canadian society is deeply significant in the process of desistance from crime. According to Deane and colleagues (2007), many individuals who have lead a life of crime and/or are involved in gangs, have had little exposure to cultural traditions and ceremonies. Often first exposure for many of these individuals has been while they were incarcerated through jail programs (Deane, Bracken, & Morrisette, 2007).

Gangs within Saskatchewan are predominantly of Aboriginal decent (Mellor et al., 2005), drawing a link between culture and gangs. This correlation is likely due to the disproportionate amount of suffering endured by Aboriginal peoples through the history on the Canadian prairies (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2006; Bracken, Deane, & Morrisette, 2009). Colonialism and assimilation practices have left modern Aboriginal individuals separated from their culture. Canadian history has contributed to the assimilation and devastation of Aboriginal culture through such practices as Residential schools. The destruction of culture and traditions are felt through the generations as Aboriginal peoples have lost traditions and teachings contributing to the struggles felt by the Aboriginal people. Loss of culture contributes to social disorganization, through the destitution of individual meaning and purpose. The lack of connectedness with culture and traditional practices, beliefs, and values resonates throughout the current research across various themes and subthemes.

The influence of culture and the significance of having an elder involved in the desistance process are seen through James' own life and through those individuals that he has helped through his work. Loss of culture corresponds with loss of identity, meaning, and purpose for many gang members and young aboriginal individuals. This cultural degradation in general is thought to be to blamed for much of the gang involvement on the prairies (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2006, 2008; Grant & Feimer, 2007). The lack of culture is seen as a contributing factor

to the distortion of values for young aboriginal individuals and in turn the increased draw to gang membership.

For James, the involvement in culture and the influence of elders and other strong members of the Aboriginal community, altered the course of his life away from gang association and delinquency to that of helping others and becoming a spiritual advisor himself. Now James provides crucial teachings, ceremonies, and knowledge for many high-risk youth and adults. The findings suggest that for the individuals James has worked with, engaging in a more prosocial life by becoming involved in traditional aboriginal culture, teachings and ceremonies, helped to alter their distorted value and belief system. James described the process of desistance for a number of gang members that he had previously worked with. In order for these individuals to be successful they required support through the process of desistance. In James' case, and with a number of the men he worked with, this support came from within their own community and from elders within the community. James currently provides such support to young individuals within the young offenders system throughout the Prairie Provinces. Through his work with youth, including teachings and ceremonies, James provides an alternative value system from the distortion that many of them have grown up with. The data reinforced the importance of providing services to the youth that decrease both gang and delinquency rates. In addition, targeting the youth serves to alter distortions in value systems before they become deeply entrenched and fixed into adulthood.

Culture appears as a common thread across many of the themes present within James' narrative. The loss of culture appears to be at the root of many of the themes such as a distorted value system that are at the source of gang involvement. By contrast, the incorporation of culture and tradition into one's reality appears to facilitate the process of desistance.

Suggestions for Further Research

One of the most significant contributions of this research is the bridge that was developed between the current literature base and the potential for future research. From this study, two specific avenues for further research have been identified: 1) conducting a longitudinal study with former gang members to follow the process of desistance in detail; and 2) examining the effects of cultural influences on gang involvement and desistance.

The results from this study provide valuable information regarding desistance from gangs on the Canadian prairies but further research is needed to verify the findings and to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Future research should re-examine desistance from gang lifestyle by speaking directly with former gangs members. This data collection method has been successfully utilized in a number of vastly informative and ground-breaking studies (e.g., Thrasher, 1927; Jankowski, 1991) in the United States. This would provide further detail from an emic perspective. Desistance research in Canada would benefit from the creation of a large-scale data set similar to that created by the St. Louis Project from 1990-1993 (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002). In addition, the development of a large-scale longitudinal data set would help to understand desistance as a life course process by being able to examine individuals at different ages and different stages of desistance. This would allow researchers to monitor the process and identify opportunities to facilitate desistance throughout an individual's life course trajectory.

Furthermore, the theme of culture re-occurred throughout James' account and appeared to have a considerable effect on the process of desistance. Culture, or rather a lack or loss of culture, is discussed in a number of studies (Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson, 2006, 2008; Bracken et al., 2007; Deane et al., 2007) but has not yet been examined thoroughly as to its role

in the process of desistance. It is recommended that future research should specifically examine the effect of culture or the effect that loss of culture has on desistance from gang life.

Although this study takes an important first step in understanding desistance from Prairie gangs in Canada, more research is needed to reinforce the findings. Further research into the various themes identified will allow the themes to be confidently incorporated into practice. For example, based on the information derived from the interview, it would be ideal to see the development of an intervention program that incorporates community supports, cultural counselling and programming, and prosocial community and employment opportunities that can further help individuals desist from gang life.

Strengths and Limitations

The results from this study identify a number of important themes and factors that may potentially aid in the facilitation of desistance. The study provides a compelling narrative depiction of gang desistance on the Canadian Prairies. Although the findings of the study suggest important implications for gang desistance, this research is not without its limitations. Some of the limitations for this study include the lack of in-depth emic perspective, risk of pan-Indian bias and assumption and lack of triangulation.

The study relied upon one key informant interview with an Aboriginal spiritual advisor who is also an expert on gangs on the Canadian Prairies. The participant was in a unique position to be able to speak to a multitude of narratives from his experiences working through the process of desistance with a number of gang members providing an in-depth detailed narrative. The unique situation allowed the participant to share several supplementary narratives about a number of individuals. The interview provided an individual first hand perspective on desistance but a secondary perspective in regards to the supplementary narratives. Although beneficial,

secondary perspectives present the potential for misinterpretation of data or a loss of meaning. To date, much of the gang literature has relied upon a secondary perspectives due to the inherent risks associated with interviewing current and former gang members such as risks to personal safety and security. Unfortunately, this creates a limitation and an increased potential for misinterpretations in comparison to using first hand narratives.

Many of the limitations arose due to the lack of triangulation – one researcher, one method, one theory. By collaborating with other researchers on the project, one could have reduced the bias and potential misinterpretation of data that is present with a single researcher. Further, by adding an additional method such as a survey to the data collection process or a different theoretical framework such as Aboriginal cultural based methodology, one may have provided a less biased interpretation of the data.

Further limitation presents as a single Aboriginal perspective was depicted. Although the interview provided rich information and increased understanding of desistance, it is limited to the perspective of the individual based on his cultural and spiritual background. There is much debate surrounding the issue of pan-Indian bias and caution is raised in regards to generalizing across Nations.

This study was a preliminary step in understanding desistance from gang life. Elders and spiritual advisors play a vital role in aboriginal culture and the maintenance and dispersion of culture and tradition. By gaining information and data from an elder or spiritual leader within the community, this study was able to provide unique insight into the connection between culture and gang membership and understanding the phenomenon of desistance. James Cooke's narrative, represents a unique and significant perspective on Aboriginal gangs. The interview of an aboriginal elder regarding gang existence and desistance in the community is of particular

significance and importance. James' experiences in life and his career make him uniquely qualified to comment on gangs as an expert in the field and a cultural teacher. The findings from this study create a catalyst for further research on this topic.

Implications for Educators

With the gang presence growing steadily amongst the young Aboriginal population on the prairies, the effects of gang membership are being seen more readily throughout the education system. As individuals get involved in gangs, truancy becomes more prevalent. When gang members are present in school, gang members are often delayed academically because of the truancy or may act out behaviourally.

This study provides insight into the experiences of gang members, particularly, one individual who struggled through his childhood to avoid gang membership. By highlighting the process for desistance, barriers and facilitators, educators can identify key factors that may help individuals desist successfully and provide the support that is highly necessary for desistance.

More importantly than the implications on formal education, is the effect that this study has on nonformal education for gang members and those who work with them. Nonformal education is a response to the need for "creating out-of school responses to new and differing demands for education" (La Belle, 1982, p. 160). Gang members present with a wide array of needs and demands that vary from traditional educational needs such as acquiring basic skills to survive independently. Many of their needs cannot be met in a traditional formal educational setting and require the consideration of a number of factors including the barriers and facilitators presented within this study. Although we can never stop trying to prevent gang involvement, educators need to begin to focus on helping those individuals who are already trapped in the gang life. James focused on the importance of community support and involvement and presence

of culture in the desistance process. Educators also need to be mindful of these factors when working with individuals and attempting to provide gang members with the supports necessary for their learning and success.

Implications for Future Researchers

Over the course of study, this research project changed dramatically, much as a result of the obstacles faced throughout the process. As an individual researcher, the process of interviewing former gang members became a logistical and ethical minefield. Much of the ethical and logistical barriers could have been eliminated, or at least reduced, through collaboration and teamwork, and thereby, creating triangulation. Bringing in additional researchers would reduce the personal risks placed upon a single researcher in terms of personal safety. Furthermore, the additional researcher, or researchers, would reduce the presence of research biases that occur from a study conducted by a single researcher/observer, with a single method, in a single theory study.

In general, a study such as this would benefit from collaboration. A one-to-one setting, such as that which was used for this study, may not be ideal for research with current or former gang members. The incorporation of a focus group as part or all of this type of study would be highly beneficial. The use of a focus group alleviates much of the personal risk for the former gang members and increases anonymity.

In regards to gaining access to a population such as gang members, it is a complicated task. The original idea for this study was to put up research posters in locations that high-risk individuals and former gang members may frequent. Although in theory, this may seem to be a viable technique, it was not likely to have been a very successful method due to the transiency of the target population. More likely, in order to be successful, future researchers may wish to use a

technique similar to snowball sampling. With the gang population, trust is an issue, therefore, having connections and developing rapport may prove to be vital in the success of future research. By contacting organizations or groups that work with former gang members, one may be able to get in contact with a liaison that is able to bridge the trust gap and facilitate the research process.

With hindsight, it is apparent that this research posed a number of issues and ethical obstacles along the way. With the experience and knowledge generated from this study, many of these obstacles may be avoidable for future researchers.

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Appendix A

Group/Gang Categories

Type A: Group of Friends

Peer groups who spend time together on a consistent and on-going basis. They engage in little or no criminal activity and rather engage in healthy and positive social relationships. These groups will spend time together while participating in organized and structures activities (ex: sports teams, after school programs, extra-curricular activities) as well as unstructured activities of common interest (ex: hanging out together). These groups are generally loosely structured, have little organization, can be mixed race or gender, and have fluid membership. Motivation for joining such a group includes companionship, sharing common interests, satisfying emotional, psychological and social needs. Recruitment is based on coming together based on common interests and there is no need for exit strategies as this is a positive social group and should be encouraged.

Type B: Spontaneous Criminal Activity Group/Gang

This group of youths is largely social in nature as they congregate to spend time together and “hang out.” The purpose of spending time together is generally not crime focused, although criminal activity sometimes occurs spontaneously and is situation-motivated. These groups may or may not have a defined group/gang name and do not generally define a territory or “turf” that they defend. Members are sometimes influenced by glamorized portrayals of gangs in news and entertainment media. These groups can be of any age, and of mixed or same gender. Type B groups/gangs are generally large in size because their power, popularity, and social image are based on the extent of their social or friendship networks. Many of the members of Type B groups/gangs have other options in life and are less committed to the gang or its culture than more serious type gangs. Also, much of this type of gang/group activity can be categorized as gratuitous violence and bullying by misdirected middle youth.

Type C: Purposive Group/Gang

Sometimes gang/group formation is planned with the purpose of carrying out specific criminal activity. These groups are often smaller in size than Type B gangs/groups, and the size is contingent on the type of activity that is being conducted or the purpose of the gang. Generally, these groups/gangs assume a lower (although still visible) profile in order to evade prosecution or police intervention. These groups/gangs can emerge from within existing larger groups/gangs or may come about for a specific purpose and may be disbanded once the activity or plan has been carried out.

Type D: Youth Street Gang

These groups of young adults come together as a semi-structured organization to engage in profit-driven criminal activity or organized violence against other gangs. Street gangs identify themselves as such through the adoption of a gang name; common brands, styles, colours of

clothing, and/or jewellery; and tattoos to openly display gang membership to other gangs. These gangs are not part of a larger criminal organization and often have a definite territory or “turf” that they claim and defend as their own. Graffiti is often used as a form of marking a gang’s territory and as a means of communication.

Type E: Structured Criminal Organization

Organized Crime gangs are criminal business organizations that are higher structured and sophisticated. These groups tend to be led by criminally experienced adults for the purpose of economic or financial gain. Type E gangs are cohesive entities that maintain a low profile in order to conduct their criminal activity with little attention. Organized crime gangs have national and/or international connections and are often affiliated clubs within an overarching criminal organization. Minors may be used for specific purposes such as running drugs, scouting, and home invasion because (especially those under 12 years of age) are rarely prosecuted

(Mellor et al., 2005, Pg. 8)

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Semi-Structured Interview

I am going to ask you a series of questions about your life, your work, your work with gangs and about gangs in general. These questions are used to spur on conversation about your experiences. The most important information that you can provide, is any information that you want to share. So feel free to talk as long as you like. At different times, I may ask you questions, ask for clarification or ask you to give an example just to get a better understanding and make sure that I have understood you correctly. If you have any questions at any time, feel free to ask. If you are uncomfortable answering any question, let me know and we can move on. If you need a break at any time, just let me know.

Demographics:

Location: _____ Interviewer: _____
Name: _____

Semi-structured Interview Questions:

General Information

- 1) Tell me about your experiences growing up?
- 2) Tell me how you ended up where you are now?
- 3) What is your role in the First Nations/ Métis communities?

Gangs

- 4) What has been your involvement with gangs?
- 5) Tell me about your experiences working with gangs, both in the community and in a correctional setting?

Desistance

- 6) From your experiences, are individuals able to get out of the gang life? If so, how?
- 7) Ways and Methods
- 8) Have you seen individuals get out of the gang life and be successful? If so, tell me about those situations?
- 9) From your experience, is there anything people outside of the gangs can do to help people get out and stay out of the life?

Appendix C

Transcript Release Form



Research Ethics Boards (Behavioural and Biomedical)
TRANSCRIPT RELEASE FORM

**Title: DESISTANCE FROM CANADIAN ABORIGINAL GANGS ON THE PRAIRIES:
A NARRATIVE INQUIRY**

I, _____, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my personal interview with [name of the researcher]. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to [name of the researcher] to be used in the manner described in the Consent Form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature of Participant

Signature of research

Appendix D

Participant Consent Form



Participant Consent Form

Project Title: Desistance from Canadian Aboriginal Gangs on the Prairies: A narrative inquiry

Researcher(s): Rebecca L. Wallis, Graduate Student, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, University of Saskatchewan, gangresearch2013@yahoo.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Laurie Hellsten, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, College of Education, University of Saskatchewan, 966-7723, Laurie.Hellsten@usask.ca

Purpose and Objective of the Research:

- To identify ways for gang members to find their way out of the gang.

Procedures:

- An informal, flexible interview will occur with each participant
- Interviews will vary in time (from approximately 60-90 minutes) depending on the individual and the information they wish to share. Initially, one interview will be conducted. A second interview will be conducted if deemed necessary after the first interview and if the participant is willing
- There will be approximately 1-5 participants interviewed throughout this study
- The participants role is to provide information regarding their experience of getting out of the gang and associated information
- Interviews will be audio taped and written notes will also be taken.
- Interviews will take place in a neutral setting that is comfortable to the participant.
- Please feel free to ask any questions regarding the procedures and goals of the study or your role.

Potential Risks:

- This study poses a number of risks to the participant including social harms such as breach of confidentiality, social stigmatization, threats to reputation or psychological harms (e.g. anxiety, regret or guilt feelings).
- To reduce the risk, a number of procedures will take place:
 - to reduce psychological harms, only answer questions that you are comfortable with
 - to reduce social stigmatization and threats to reputation, all identifying information will be removed from the data. In addition, interviews will be conducted informally to reduce attention.
 - As the information discussed has the potential to be of a sensitive nature and may be associated with emotional discomforts, please feel free to contact that researcher and arrangements for counselling in your area can be made.
 - Confidentiality will be breached if the research reveals information that is required by law to be communicated to a law enforcement or other agency (e.g. child abuse) (See Confidentiality section for details)

- If appropriate, describe the circumstances under which someone's participation in the study may be terminated
- To reduce further risk, participation in the study will be terminated, if the individual discloses information of a crime that they have not committed for, acts of abuse or neglect or suicidal or homicidal thought.

Potential Benefits:

- Although benefits are not guaranteed, there is the potential, by identifying means for desistance (ways out of) the gang, we may be able to help individuals get out of the gang life and prevent the perpetuation of gangs, reduce gang violence and presence in the community and reduce the hardships felt by families and communities effected by gangs.

Confidentiality:

- The data from this research project will be used for a graduate theses and has the potential to be published and/ or presented at conferences; however, your identity will be kept confidential. Although we will report direct quotations from the interview, you will be given a pseudonym, and all identifying information (ex: name, occupation, gang name and position, etc.) will be removed from our report
- Limits to confidentiality
 - In the case of disclosure of a criminal offence to which you have not been tried, cases of abuse, neglect or thoughts of suicide or homicide, confidentiality will have to be breached and the researcher is obligated to inform the proper authorities.
- **Storage of Data:**
 - After the completion of the interviews, data will be kept on the researcher's computer until completion of the theses. To avoid personal identification, consent forms will be kept separate from the data.
 - After the completion of the thesis, the data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at the university. Once the results have been disseminated, the data will be destroyed.

Right to Withdraw:

- Your participation is voluntary and you should answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time without explanation or penalty of any sort.
- Whether you choose to participate or not will have no effect on your position [e.g. employment, class standing, access to services] or how you will be treated.
- Should you wish to withdraw, you simply have to inform the researcher and the interview will be stopped and the data collected will be destroyed
- Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until results have been disseminated. After this point, it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.

Follow up:

- To obtain results from the study, please contact the primary researcher, Rebecca Wallis at rls527@mail.usask.ca or supervising researcher Dr. Laurie Hellsten at laurie.hellsten@usask.ca, and the results can be mailed to you

Questions or Concerns: (see section 12)

- If you have any questions or concerns about this project you may contact the supervising researcher, Dr. Laurie Hellsten (laurie.hellsten@usask.ca or (306)966-7723)

- This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office ethics.office@usask.ca (306) 966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free (888) 966-2975.

Consent:

SIGNED CONSENT

There are several options for you to consider if you decide to take part in this research. You can choose all, some or none of them. Please put a check mark on the corresponding line(s) that grants me your permission to:

I grant permission to be audio taped: Yes: ___ No: ___

I wish to remain anonymous: Yes: ___ No: ___

I wish to remain anonymous, but you may refer to me by a pseudonym: Yes: ___ No: ___

You may quote me: Yes: ___ No: ___

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

Name of Participant Signature

Researcher's Signature Date

Second Interview (to be signed only if a second interview is deemed necessary)

Name of Participant Signature

Researcher's Signature Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.