

**The Social and Legal Context of Female Youth Crime:
A Study of Girls in Gangs.**

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By

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ABSTRACT

Given the relative lack of information about female gang membership in Canada and the hidden nature of this population, a qualitative approach for understanding the lives of female gang members, through a life course perspective guided by feminist standpoint epistemology is utilized in this dissertation. The data for this study are obtained from interviews with fifteen girls and young women who claimed youth gang membership in their lives, from the cities of Saskatoon and Edmonton.

The critical feminist perspective serves as the theoretical framework for this study. It directs us to an understanding in which girls are regarded as active agents in their own lives and who are striving to better their lives albeit with the limited options available to them in the face of locally available constructions of opportunity and possibility. The analyses reflect the lived experiences of the respondents and illuminate the ways in which the personal troubles and daily lives of respondents are explicitly overshadowed by larger public issues. Through critical analysis, this study draws attention to the ways in which girls' experiences of ageism, racism, classism, and sexism interact, resulting in social exclusion, isolation from social institutions, and a subsequent involvement with youth gangs.

The study reveals a heterogeneity of respondents' experiences especially with respect to being treated as equals by their male counterparts. From the analysis, it is evident that gangs are highly gendered groups in which gender hierarchies force girls to find ways both to create personas of toughness and independence through participation in violent activities yet also to display appropriate feminine behaviours of sexually non-

promiscuous females. Importantly, the decisions to leave the gang are triggered by the negative affects of gang life. Once out of the gang, the girls under study seemed to refocus their efforts toward educational opportunities and obtaining job-related skills. In the end, my research indicates that awareness about the dangers of gang life including the negative consequences of gang membership need to form a core of prevention programs, especially those designed for younger girls and children.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1a. Introduction to the Issue

During the past two decades, there has been rising concern over female youth gang activities and their violent behaviour. Though the official statistics of girls' violent behaviour do not show an alarming increasing trend (Bell, 2007), in the absence of thorough public information, single incidents about young female offenders can lead to misinformation about the nature of their offending. In spite of the increased panic and discourses among both media and law enforcement officials about young girls' involvement with gangs, significant gaps exist in our understanding of the role of girls in gangs, the nature and extent of their victimization, and their involvement in perpetrating violence in the Canadian context.

Until 1990s, females were thought to comprise a relatively small proportion of the overall gang population and to play insignificant roles in the daily operations of gangs. Therefore, the neglect of females in gang research studies was attributed to the lower prevalence of girls in gang activities. From the early to mid-1990s, researchers in the United States began documenting higher rates of female gang participation than had previously been reported (e.g., Bjerregaard and Smith, 1993; Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Thornberry et al., 1993). As compared to the United States, there is very little research addressing the topic of youth gangs and female gang members from a Canadian perspective. Despite the paucity of Canadian social scientific research on female youth involvement in gangs and their delinquent behavior, girls and young women occasionally surface in Canadian media discussions of gangs and delinquency (DeKeseredy, 2000). Often these discussions contribute to moral panic because “condemnatory statements

about gang behaviour” (Schissel, 1997: 60) are frequently reported and, in general, members of visible minorities are the targets in these statements.

Most crime unarguably is committed by male youth, and evidence supports that females commit less crime and less serious crime than males (Bell, 2007). Likewise, young females are less violent and cause less trouble than male youth. In Canada, out of the total youth charged with violent crime in 2003, male youth constitute 74 percent while female youth constitute 26 percent (Juristat, 2004). But compared to their counterpart female non-gang members, female gang members are a source of concern for the authorities. A research publication by Correctional Service Canada identified incarcerated female gang members as having prior experiences with the criminal justice system for serious and/or violent offences as youth. They were identified as “high risk” and “maximum security” compared to non-gang members (Mackenzie and Johnson, 2003). The report concluded that significant factors showed female gang members (as compared to non-gang members) to be more aggressive and antisocial women, disrespectful of community property, and supportive of instrumental violence. We do not have official data on violence by female youth gang members, but the crime statistics on girls and violence support the emerging public issue of increasing violent behaviour of girls. The rate of female youth charged with violent crime has more than doubled. In 1986, 60 female teens per 100,000 were charged with a serious violent crime¹ and by 2005, the rate was up to 132 per 100,000 (Kong and AuCoin, 2008). With respect to less serious form of violent crime, categorized as common assault (assault level 1), the charge

¹ Serious violent crime was constructed by grouping UCR Survey codes for violent offences that comprise murder; manslaughter; attempted murder; sexual assault levels 1, 2 and 3; major assault (assault levels 2 and 3); unlawfully causing bodily harm; discharge firearm with intent; abduction of a person under 14, and robbery (Kong and AuCoin, 2008).

rates for female youth increased from 88 to 299 per 100,000 population between 1986 and 1993 and further increased to 483 in 2005 (Kong and AuCoin, 2008). These increases, as criminologists (like Reistma-Street, 1999 and Bell, 2007) argue, also correspond to changes in policies (for example, zero-tolerance policies for violence in schools) and charging practices over the years.

The gap in knowledge about young female offenders, their involvement in gangs and their violent behaviour can be partially corrected by gathering first-hand accounts provided by the females themselves. Little is known about what these girls experienced in their original homes, foster homes, families, neighbourhoods, and schools, and about how those experiences connect to their processes of deciding to associate with gangs and their subsequent violent behaviour. The purpose in this study is to address the interconnections amongst social institutions including family, education, social services and criminal justice, which both separately and cumulatively impact the experiences and proliferation of females in youth gangs in Canada. Having recognized the failure of the current social institutions to meet the varying needs of these girls, through critical analysis this study intends to draw attention to the marginalization and social exclusion girls face in their everyday interactions with social institutions. It uncovers the ways in which violence impacts the lives of girls either as victims or perpetrators of violence, and how the girls themselves perceive violence in their everyday lives and in gangs. Research is needed in this area because it plays a role in shaping the level and nature of programs generated for these girls, as well the social and law enforcement responses to this social problem.

This dissertation addresses the lack of research about girls who are involved with youth gangs by allowing girls and young women to tell us about their lived experiences

in their families, schools, neighbourhoods, and gangs. Their experiences are used to answer empirical research questions including: Why do they associate with gangs? Are they ignoring traditional feminine roles and adopting masculine images when they engage in violent behaviour? Considering the risks of victimization due to participation in violent activities and sexual victimization in gangs, why do these girls associate with gangs? And, finally, why do they decide to leave the gangs? It is my hope that this study will begin to provide some important theoretical and empirical answers to these questions.

Contemporary research in Canada offers little data on the prevalence of youth gang activity, the significant reason being the non-existence of any official national statistical data on gangs. Bell (2007) stated that in 2005, changes to the *Uniform Crime Reporting Survey* included reporting of gang affiliation; therefore, in future we may see official statistics on gangs and gang members. But so far our knowledge about youth gangs and gang activity is based on secondary accounts extracted from media and law enforcement documents. In 2002, the nationwide *Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs* estimated 484 youth gangs and 6760 youth gang members in Canada, with Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and British Columbia having the highest percentage of jurisdictions reporting active youth gangs. The largest concentration of youth gang members was reported in Ontario, followed by Saskatchewan. There are at least 12 known adult and youth gangs operating in Saskatchewan (Criminal Intelligence Service Saskatchewan, 2005). On a per capita basis, Saskatchewan reported the highest concentration of youth gang members (1.34 per 1,000 population) or approximately 1,315 (Astwood Strategy Corporation,

2003: 13-14). The Criminal Intelligence Service Saskatchewan (2005) in their report also highlights Aboriginal youth gang activity as an emerging problem.

The official records document a rise in gang-affiliated youth from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The *Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs* revealed that the largest proportion of youth gang members are African Canadian (25%), followed by Aboriginal (22%), White Caucasian (18%), East Indian/Pakistani (14%), Asian (12%), and others including Latino/Hispanic/Arabic/Middle Eastern (9%). A *Report of the Task Force on Security* by Correctional Service Canada (2002) estimated that 250 incarcerated Aboriginal youth are involved in prison gangs and up to 1,000 Aboriginal youth in street gangs. It is estimated that about “80% of all offenders affiliated with a gang (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) in the Prairie region were 25 years of age or younger upon admission to a federal institution” (Nafekh, 2002). In Alberta, an Edmonton-based task force identified 12 Aboriginal gangs in the city comprising more than 400 members and almost 2000 known gang associates (Dolha, 2004). Another research report by Correctional Service Canada concluded that the gang-affiliated offender population had been gradually increasing over the decade spanning 1993 to 2003 (Nafekh and Stys, 2004). Increasingly, gang affiliates tend to be younger at the time of incarceration, more likely than non-gang affiliates to receive longer sentences, and more likely to re-offend. This trend is more pronounced among Asian gang members, who are more often involved in drug-trafficking and weapon-related offences. Gang affiliation is also reported as a significant risk factor for violent behaviour within the correctional institutions. Gang-affiliated youth are more likely to be involved in assaults on other inmates and staff

members, as well as in drug and alcohol trafficking as compared to non-gang affiliates (Nafekh and Stys, 2004).

Even though immigrant youth gangs in North America have been present since early settlement, reports such as *Report of the Task Force on Security* by Correctional Service Canada (2002), Nafekh and Stys, (2004) and *2002 Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs* (2003) show alarming numbers of Aboriginal and “visible minority” young offenders in Canada to be affiliated with prison gangs and street youth gangs. Therefore, race and ethnicity have emerged both as a basis of classification of youth gangs and therefore also as a source of moral panic in Canada. Corresponding with the growing concern regarding increasing Aboriginal and female youth gang activity and rising violent behaviour (Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, 2003) is a lack of scholarly literature that focuses on the reasons for Aboriginal female youth gang involvement in Canada. Drawing on an integrated approach that combines both macro-level and micro-level causes, I aim to contribute a theoretical and empirical understanding of Aboriginal female youth gang involvement in the two Prairie Provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta. The historical scars of colonialization on Aboriginal peoples and the oppression of ethnic minority peoples have led to the present-day issues of loss of positive identity and subsequent self-hatred. The consequences of these issues have, in a broad sense, left the majority of young Aboriginal and ethnic minority youth to struggle on a daily basis for identity, status and respect. In modern Western society, adolescence is defined as a period where individuals are in the process of “making” a self within a peer culture in order to “become somebody.” It is significant to explore how negotiations to become someone and belong somewhere play out in the lives of

Aboriginal and minority children and youth in specific social, historical, and political contexts. Within the context of gangs, it is important to highlight intersection of age with other social relations of power such as race, gender, and class².

One of the most critical issues at the core of the study of youth gangs is the contradiction inherent in attempting to define “gang.” Scholars have examined the dilemmas surrounding the definitions of the terms “gangs,” “gang member,” and “gang activity” for quite some time (Klein, 1995; Horowitz, 1990; Curry, 1998; Decker and Kempf, 1991). Numerous definitions of the term “youth gang” have been offered and criticized in an attempt to reach a common understanding of the phenomenon and in the process, other terms have emerged, like, “gang affiliates,” “wanna-bes,” and “street gang,” in the hope to provide better understanding of youth gangs. Huff (1993: 4) notes that youth gangs historically were largely groups of adolescents, mostly males. But recently, age, gender, and other defining characteristics of gangs and their classification are changing. Mathews (2005) asserts that the age range of youth gang members is wide. It excludes the involvement of 12 to 17 years olds only, which is the legal definition of a young offender. Members of youth gangs can be either younger than twelve or older than seventeen. The *2002 Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs* defined “youth gang” as a “group of youths or young adults in the respondents’ jurisdiction, under the age of 21” (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2003).

Several major common elements can be found in the definitions, for example, identification of gangs as some type of organization with leadership, territory, continual association, and participation in some type of illegal activity. Gordon (2000) in his study

² Sexuality and ability are other identified social relations of power along with race, class, gender, and age that place individuals in dominant and subordinate relationships to one another. Sexual orientation and disability did not emerge as interactional factors in the analysis in this dissertation.

of gang members in Vancouver identified five groups based on their degree of organization: youth groups, criminal groups, wanna-be groups, street gangs, and criminal business organizations; with their level of organization and sophistication in the execution of criminal activity increasing as we move from former to latter. Mellor et al (2005) in their review of available literature on gangs listed five types of youth groups/gangs: group of friends, spontaneous criminal activity group/gang, purposive group/gang, youth street gang, and structured criminal organization. Each of these five groups has specific defining characteristics that include nature of association, age, and main type of activity. In addition, most gangs also have other behaviours in common including the use of graffiti to mark territory and to communicate with other gangs, the use of clothing to mark gang affiliation, tattoos, a specific code of conduct, a specific language, and a set of hand signs that help gang members recognize other gang members. Therefore, there are a wide range of characteristics that have been used to describe and define gangs. The use of these characteristic identifications can result either in exaggerating the youth gang problem when the broader criteria of identification is employed or in minimizing the problem when a more restrictive definition is used. Searching for consensus on the definition of gangs has led some researchers to focus on the aspects of criminal involvement and physical presence of gangs on the streets (Klein, 1995).³

There is overwhelming evidence that criminal involvement is one of the features of youth gangs (Winfrey et al., 1992; Bjerregaard and Smith, 1993; Esbensen et al., 1993; Thornberry et al., 1993). Clearly, there are variations in the extent to which a gang has

³ Klein (1995) stressed the street component more than age, because youth gangs have expanded to include members in their mid- to late-20s.

criminal orientations and individual gang members commit crime. Klein (1995) suggested two criteria to differentiate gangs from other peer groups: (1) commitment to criminal orientation and (2) self-identification. Esbensen and others (2004), in their study of school adolescents, noted that the most important factor distinguishing adolescents who were involved in serious crime from those who were involved in less serious crime was self-declared gang membership. Over the years, researchers have turned to self-definition as a reliable and valid measure of gang membership (Winfree et al., 1992; Bjerregaard and Smith, 1993; Esbensen et al., 1993; Thornberry et al., 1993; Esbensen et al., 2004). Keeping in view the support for self-definition as a measure of gang membership, I adopt this approach in my study. Young women and girls⁴ who perceived themselves to be members of the group and identified their group to be a gang and were criminally involved were identified as respondents for the study. The self-identification criterion does not rule out the fact that not all gangs are the violent, fear-inducing groups of the type sensationalized in the media.

The reason youth gangs have occupied a prominent position in the list of national issues is because of the reported increase in extent and nature of gang activity. Youth gangs historically were largely groups of adolescents engaged in “turf battles” and gang fights. But now youth gangs are increasingly involved in major crimes, especially those that are violent and drug-related and involve weapons in interpersonal and gang fights.

⁴ The terms “young women” and “girls” in this dissertation are used interchangeably and indicate females from 16 to 33 years of age at the time of interviews. Young women (in their 20s and early- 30s at the time of interview) were involved with gangs when they were adolescents with the exception of one respondent who became involved with gangs during her late adolescent years (18 or 19) and continued her involvement till early- to mid-20s.

1b. Critical Theoretical Framework: Integrating Micro and Macro

Understanding crime is a complex phenomenon thereby warranting an integrated approach in order to locate both the micro-level and macro-level causes. The Canadian Criminal Justice System and its policies based largely on the classical school of criminology highlight individual accountability and a person's free will as key factors in making wrong choices of involvement with gangs and committing crime. Therefore, offenders are held responsible for their behaviour in the form of punishment (retributive justice). A critical criminology paradigm, on the other hand, argues that social problems such as crime and gangs can be best understood if we explore the social, economic, and political contexts in which these occur; and that macro-level structural circumstances limit the choices individuals are able to make in their day-to-day lives. Comprising varying threads of feminism, Marxism, and critical race theory, a critical perspective underscores the importance of the macro-level structures of patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism in understanding why certain groups of people are involved in gangs, are labeled "trouble-makers," and are over-represented in the criminal justice system in North America. From a critical perspective, this dissertation provides the basis to link the micro-level and macro-level explanations to form a more comprehensive explanation of the functions of the gang for girls. Within this framework, I attempt to gain understanding of the social contexts in which females participate in gangs and of how they interpret their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Guided by a life course perspective, I examine how the interacting systems of age, race, class, and gender act as "structuring forces" affecting how people act and what opportunities are available to them (Lynch, 1996: 4). Critical

feminist criminology guided by a theoretical framework that recognizes multiple, intersecting inequalities is at the core of this project.

The theoretical framework of intersectionalities recognizes that race, class, gender, and other locations of inequality, for example, age, ability, and sexuality are dynamic, historically grounded, and socially constructed in power relations that simultaneously operate at both the micro-structural and macro-structural levels (Weber, 1998; Anderson and Collins, 2004). The systems of power such as age, race, class, gender, ability, and sexuality do not act alone to shape our experiences but rather are integrated, linked, and simultaneously experienced (Daly, 1993). These “structuring forces” shape opportunities for interaction and determine the others with whom we come into contact, and affect our definitions of violence and gangs as well as our perceptions of how others react to violence and the implications for using violence for identities of self. Violence has been inherently linked to the masculine in theoretical understandings, and in patriarchal society. This linkage has led to stereotyping and to the labeling of violent female behaviour as “unfeminine,” “mean,” “nasty,” and “liberated female” and to the major repercussions of allocating violent female offenders with harsher punishments as compared to those female offenders who commit non-violent crime (Hannah-Moffat, 2004). Within the Canadian context, these explanations come under greater scrutiny following media presentations of images of “violent female offenders” and references to the increasing numbers of young women arrested for major and minor assaults (Bell, 2007), including the highlighting of their involvement in gangs. Structural inequalities shape both the lifeworlds of marginalized young women and their attempts to define their

selves and the identities within social and political contexts, leading to a variety of outcomes of which violence is one.

The intersections of age, race, class, and gender become significant in the case of youth gangs because youth gangs are over-represented in the criminal justice system by racial ethnic minority youth belonging to inner-city neighbourhoods with lower-class economic backgrounds (Vigil, 1988). Exploring issues surrounding youth gangs in general and girl gangs in particular within a framework of intersectionalities allows us to connect personal experiences to the broader issues within society. Critical criminologists maintain that racism, sexism, classism, and ageism all function to create and maintain a context that supports violence. These “isms” have negative influences on the identity of marginalized youth and they adversely affect these youth’s life choices. In this study, I recognize that we live in a society where we (1) have racialized spaces (e.g., inner-city neighbourhoods), (2) have criminalized race (e.g., the overrepresentation of Black and Aboriginal people in the correctional institutions), and (3) have racialized crime (e.g., Ethnic youth gangs, terrorism). Therefore, explorations of gang behaviour cannot be examined in isolation but rather must be undertaken by exploring the systems that support and maintain violence in an oppressive society in which youth are often made to feel marginalized.⁵

This study attempts to provide a better understanding of (1) the experiences of girls who enter the male domain of gangs; (2) the exploitative, violent conditions associated with their involvement in gangs; (3) these girls’ adaptation in gangs; and (4) the challenges these girls experience once they decide to leave the gangs. A better

⁵ I use the word “marginalized” to include all who are disenfranchised on the basis of age, race, class, and gender oppression.

understanding of girls' lived experiences can potentially lead to (1) less punitive laws directed at female youth who display association with gangs and involvement in violent behaviour; (2) more effective ways to address the social, economic, and physical exploitative conditions experienced by girls; and (3) improved social service delivery for this population.

1c. Thesis Outline

Chapter one provides an introduction to the research project, with a concise statement regarding the scope of the study and an overview of the theoretical framework.

Chapter two introduces the theoretical perspectives that form the basis of this dissertation. Chapter two begins by illustrating the problem of youth gangs in Canada from a social constructionist view, focusing on the macro-level factors that lead to racialization and gendering of youth gangs. As the importance of race and gender is highlighted in the Canadian context, from a critical feminist perspective the study then connects these macro-level factors to the lives of young women in gangs. I discuss the importance of adopting an intersectional theoretical framework that recognizes multiple, historical, and intersecting inequalities of race, class, gender, and age in order to understand female gang involvement.

Chapter three presents a methodology for inquiry that is consistent with the theoretical framework presented in the preceding chapter. This study is based on in-depth interviews with fifteen young women. The methodological approach chosen focuses on the views of the youths themselves, presenting a qualitative analysis meant to expand existing knowledge of female youth gang involvement.

The analysis and findings of the study and interviews are presented in chapters four, five and six. The voices of young women are heard extensively in the analysis in the form of participants' narrative accounts. In chapter four, I examine the major correlates of female gang involvement including an in-depth exploration of some of the life experiences leading these young women to associate with gangs. These experiences reflect the meanings of gangs in their lives and are illustrated through four case studies. Chapter five explores gender meanings and roles within the context of gangs. My research illustrates the ways in which young women negotiate gender within the group, and also explains the girls' participation in violence and fights through the applicability of the "code of street" perspective to female gang members. Connections between their offending and victimization experiences are also explored. In chapter six, I examine the reasons and contexts within which girls decide to leave their gangs, and the challenges they face both during the process of leaving and also after having left.

Chapter seven, through a critical examination, explains the development of the process of marginalization of young women. Their perceptions offer insights as to how experiences of age, race, class, and gender in their lives interacted and led to social exclusion and isolation from social institutions.

In the concluding chapter, the study's conclusions, limitations, and strengths, as well as implications of the findings for policy and practice development and recommendations for future research are discussed.

1d. Research Objectives and Questions: Summation

The central objective of this study is to provide descriptive accounts of the lives of girls and young women associated with gangs. This aspect of the study is geared toward

creating a greater understanding of their experiences, with the aim of revealing how a girl's life experiences may contribute to the likelihood of her becoming associated with gangs and the related risks of increasing her encounters with victimization and violence. My study intends to understand and explain how girls define and conceptualize gangs and violence and what impact these have on their lives. The gap in knowledge about female offenders, their involvement in gangs, and their violent behaviour can be partially corrected by providing firsthand accounts by the females themselves. In addition, I develop a more comprehensive understanding of the social and legal system that plays a role in the marginalization of female youth, both within society and in youth gangs, based on their status of being girls, being of an ethnic minority, and (most importantly) being youth⁶.

This dissertation seeks to answer three particular research questions. The responses to these questions provide a comprehensive understanding of the causes and consequences of female gang involvement. The research questions are:

1. What are the major risk factors in girl's lives that bring them into association with gangs and violence? How do their lived experiences within the institutions of family, education, welfare, and justice system lead their way to gang involvement and violence?
2. Theoretical and societal perspectives have argued that girls who act violently in gangs are adopting masculine identities and are defiantly challenging feminine roles. I intend to explore how girls and young women in gangs make sense of

⁶ Different scholars provide different ways of defining "youth" depending on culture and society. Consensual definition of youth at the global level as adopted by the United Nations (World Youth Report 2003) is a phase when a person moves from a time of dependence (childhood) to independence (adulthood) and are often categorized as between 15 and 25 years of age. This transition is interconnected and influenced by a variety of factors specific to the local context.

- their participation in violent acts in gangs. Are they recalcitrant, and challenging gender-appropriate roles?
3. In what ways can the reasons that lead young women out of gangs can help the prevention and intervention efforts to deal with the problem of youth gangs?

1e. Scope of the Study

The purpose of this study is to focus on the experiences of girls and young women involved with gangs in Saskatoon and Edmonton. An ethnographic, qualitative approach is chosen because it will clarify girls' reactions to violence and victimization that best relate to the aims of this study. These propositions suggest that the right approach to investigating girl's experiences in society is to find out what motivates them to participate in crime and in turn how a socio-cultural pattern of poverty, racism, and limited opportunities influences their actions. Their ages range from 16-33 years at the time of interviews. Community organizations working with youth, residential facilities, and juvenile facilities were major sources for the sample population.

1f. Conclusion

The mainstream feminist argument charges patriarchy with driving young women to violence - behavior that paradoxically is seen as out of character for "the gentler sex." What is absent from these explanations is a theorization of how girls and young women present themselves, in other words, how racism, sexism, classism, and ageism place girls in dominant and subordinate relationships to one another and how these relations of power are maintained through gang affiliation and violence. The existing concepts concerning amelioration of escalating adolescent girls' delinquency and violent acts lacks an understanding of the ways in which violence works in the lives of girls involved with

gangs, a population who mainly live on the fringes of society. The findings of this study are intended to add knowledge to the professional arena working with adolescent girls. This analysis draws upon a critical feminist perspective of understanding the living experiences of young women and recognizing the interrelated social, familial, economic, and political systems of oppression that shape female gang involvement and young woman's experiences within the gangs.

CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

2a. Introduction

An overview of the research project is presented in chapter one. In this second chapter I discuss the fundamental theoretical concepts used in this study. The scholarly literature attempts to study youth gangs by adopting two parallel approaches and I present both in this chapter. The first approach concentrates on how social institutions and groups in society respond to gangs and gang members, and this is referred to as a constructionist approach (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994). The second approach looks upon gangs as an anti-social problem that is an outcome of certain social conditions, and focuses on etiological questions. I begin by delineating the youth gang problem in Canada from a social constructionist perspective. The discussion aims on how race and gender are constructed, in order to understand youth gangs in our society. A helpful factor is presentation of the macro-level picture for understanding female gang involvement and their violent behaviour. In an attempt to understand the social conditions that are responsible for female gang involvement, the next section of the chapter offers a theoretical explanation for female crime and gang involvement. An understanding of young women in gangs necessarily begins with recognizing their neglect in both mainstream criminology and attention in feminist criminology. Finally, I review critical feminist theoretical perspectives that acknowledge the interconnections among race, gender, class, and age. I underscore the importance of embracing an intersectional theoretical framework that recognizes multiple, historical, and intersecting inequalities in order to understand female gang involvement. The idea is to situate the reader within the

current orbit of understandings in order to provide an integrated explanation of female youths' associations with gangs, especially those of Aboriginal females.

I focus my discussions in order to examine, through the twin lenses of social constructionist and critical feminist theories, the phenomenon of “girls in gangs” from marginalized communities. The social constructionist perspective on youth gangs highlights that the questions of racialization and gendering are significant within the Canadian context. The critical feminist paradigm attempts to understand these macro factors through examining/considering the lived experiences of young women and girls associated with gangs. Doing so allowed me to venture beyond the conventional ways in which these young women have been characterized, i.e., through notions of individual deviance, individual criminality, and/or individual violence, and toward a more expanded construction, i.e., an understanding that incorporates both macro and micro factors.

2b. Social Construction of Race and Gender in the Youth Gang Problem

While the phenomenon of gangs is not new to Canada, the increasing concern expressed by communities, governments, law enforcement agencies, and criminal justice system personnel is relatively new. In this section I will discuss the extent of the problem of youth gangs in Canada, a discussion that brings to the forefront the processes of racialization and gendering of youth gangs and violence.

The “Ethnic Youth Gang” Problem in Canada

The information available from media and law enforcement documents presents alarming numbers of Aboriginal and “visible minority” young offenders in Canada to be affiliated with prison gangs and street gangs (Correctional Service Canada, 2002; Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2003; Dohla, 2004). Though I have briefly discussed the

problematic issues relating to defining “gangs” in the previous chapter, obviously the manner in which an organization defines “gang” and “gang activities” will affect the collection of data and statistics on such groups. But beyond definitional considerations, there are other factors that influence the collection of data relating to gangs. From a social constructionist perspective, social problems become such because an individual or group is able to draw attention to a particular definition of the problem and essentially “create” the problem. Social constructionists consider the impact of social, economic, and political contexts to the “creation” of social problems (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994) and critique the media’s role in the construction of social reality (Hall et al., 1978).

Stuart Hall and his colleagues in *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (1978) put forth an ideology that the media use moral panics to both define and distort social problems. Hall et al (1978) studied the reaction to the importation of the American phenomenon of mugging into the United Kingdom. Mugging was presented in the British media as a new and growing phenomenon, when in fact the crime was not new, only the label was. Official statistics did not support the view that mugging was rapidly growing; however, with a name for the crime now in existence old offenses were categorized as such, creating the impression of growth. Similarly, social constructionists would point to the fact that “gangs” have been a concern in Canadian society since the 1920s. Rogers (1945) produced the first recorded Canadian piece of work on juveniles in street gangs in Toronto. Canadian authorities were concerned with the “Boy Problem” - boys freely roaming city streets ostensibly looking for trouble - as early as the 1920s (Bell, 2007: 205). Significantly, the Canadian media has always played a key role in the propagation of information about gangs in the country. As Young (1993) found, gangs

have been depicted in Canadian newspapers as a subject of growing social concern and the product of an ailing society during every wave of urban street gang activity since 1945 (Gordon, 2000: 41). Currently our construction of youth gang activity in Canadian context comprises features including increasing violence, drug-related activities, gun violence, active recruitment, particular ethnic composition, and increasing female recruitment.

According to Hall et al. (1978), the media whipped up a moral panic around the “mugging” issue which served to legitimate an increase in punitive measures. Moral panics (for example, over mugging, violent youth crime, youth gangs) could thereby be ignited in order to create public support for the need to “police the crisis.” The term “moral” implies a perceived threat to the social order and the response is likely to be a demand for greater social control. A study by Jane Sprott (1996) examined public views of youth crime, and media coverage of youth crime and the youth justice system. She found that most (94%) of the stories regarding youth crime in the Toronto newspapers focused on violence. The media image of youth crime differs from official records of youth crime, and the study revealed that newspaper coverage of violent youth crime did have an impact on public perception of youth crime and the youth justice system. Sprott (1996: 287) concludes that “most respondents (88%) indicated that they believed that the Young Offenders Act was too lenient.”

Social construction theorists have also taken a particularly strong interest in the media’s representation of minority group “otherness.” It has been argued that media play an important role in shaping general public attitudes of receptivity or opposition to immigrants and ethnic minorities (Henry and Tator, 2002). Through their discourses,

often audio, visual and written media construct negative images and stereotypes. Social scientists have recognized that media are often key players in a process of racialization¹ that may negatively impact the interactions of minority groups with the institutions and values of the majority groups (Jiwani, 2001; Henry and Tator, 2002). Representations of youth crime and violence in popular media are largely depicted in racial terms; for example, the use of labels such as “Black,” “Asian,” “Vietnamese,” “Indo-Canadian,” or “Native” to categorize different gangs. The labels serve as tools to “paint the entire racial category with the same brush” (Schissel, 1997: 61). The ways in which the gang threat is portrayed and constructed in the media and by agents of social control affects gangs, their members, and members of the public. Part of the “construction” of gangs in the media and by politicians is to resort to stereotyping by ethnic group; various constructions dominate at particular periods in history and they vary by region. Most recently we are confronted by the “Asian” gang problem, the problem of Jamaican Blacks in the east, “Aboriginal gangs” on the prairies, Indo-Canadian drug gang wars in the west. Seldom do we hear of “Caucasian” or “White” gangs. On the contrary, “White” male criminal groups are referred to as “Biker gangs,” a discourse that avoids use of race as an identifier.

Racial and ethnic stereotyping leads to processes such as racial profiling and creates increased misunderstanding, labelling, mistrust, and hostility between groups. Significantly, however, lumping all these groups together and referring to them as various

¹ Racialization can be defined as “a political and ideological process by which populations are identified by direct or indirect reference to their real or imagined phenotypical characteristics in such a way as to suggest that the population can only be understood as a supposed biological unity” and “any process or situation wherein the idea of ‘race’ is introduced to define and give meaning to some particular populations characteristics and actions” (Miles quoted in Jiwani, 2001: 7).

components or pieces of “one big gang problem” (i.e., an “ethnic” minority problem) results in sensationalizing the problem and creating a dichotomy of “us” and “them” (Schissel, 1997). This process only makes differences more visible. Media constructions and exaggerations of the “otherness” of gang members, coupled with the invoking of racial and ethnic stereotypes, encourage a strong and authoritative response to the situation. This response includes calls to “toughen up” the Youth Criminal Justice Act, to send “bad guys” (and girls) to jail for very long times, to allocate youths with adult sentences for violent crime, and thereby (it is hoped) to keep the problem away from “our” homes and families. The misunderstandings of youth gangs are to a certain degree the result of socially constructed processes. Awareness of the social context and the role it plays in constructing the problem will certainly have to be part of constructing a solution.

“Rising” Female Gang Members and their Violent Behaviour

Beginning in the 1990s, claims about girls’ increasing violence and gang involvement began appearing more frequently in the media. Various news reports (a few are listed below, as examples) suggested that the popular moral panics often focused on girls’ behaviour, suggesting that increasing numbers of girls were joining gangs and that gang membership then led to increased violent activities.

“Ruthless Violence Part of Girl Gang Reality” (*Halifax Chronicle Herald*; September 23, 1995)

“Teen’s Torture Again Reveals Girls’ Brutality” (*Globe and Mail*; January 20, 1998: A1)

“Violent Crime by Females on the Increase” (*The Vancouver Sun*; July 23, 1998: A1)

“Girl Bullies Strike Dubious Blow for Gender Equality” (*The Ottawa Citizen*; October 21, 1999: A1)

“Swarming Girl Gangs a Crime Problem in Winnipeg” (*CTV News*, December 5, 2004)

“Violent Youth Crime Rising, Stats reveal Gangs and Girls now figure more often in incidents” (*Toronto Sun*, December 12, 2004)

“Number of Female Gang Members on the Rise: Police” (*CTV News*, May 17, 2006)

“More Girls joining South Asian Gangs: RCMP” (*CBC News*, June 13, 2006)

Current news media are featuring the “new problem” of increasingly violent, aggressive girls. There are stories about girl violence, “girl-to-girl cruelty,” girl gangs, girls who bully, and girls who murder.

In media accounts, feminism often is implicated in stories of girls’ aggression and girl violence, signaling a complex infusion of feminist discourse into the contemporary “post-feminist ‘gender regime,’” (McRobbie, 2004: 6). Girls’ increasing aggression is seen as a failed outcome of feminist goals generating backlash against women’s progress (Chesney-Lind, 2006). According to journalist Patricia Pearson, thanks to feminism girls are rejecting victimhood: in resisting sexism, girls have “gotten hip” to their capacity for violence. Thus she warns that women’s equality comes at a price (1997: 32). The panic about girls’ increasing violent and aggressive behaviour reflects a fear about changing masculine and feminine gender characteristics. The images of mean, nasty, violent, gang girls are in fact a part of “girl-power” discourses, “neo-liberal” claims that respond to liberal feminist expressions by claiming that “girls can do or be anything so long as they work for it” (Taft, 2004: 73).

Aspects of the liberation thesis (primarily, that the girls are increasingly violent because they are consciously becoming more liberated and are assuming the aggression of boys) has been rejected by many feminist social scientists, but are accepted and emphasized by the media. Hall et al. (1978) emphasize that the media, itself the secondary definer, obtains its information from the primary definers of social reality, i.e., those in powerful and authoritative positions. The media ensure that the dominant ideas or ideologies are constantly reproduced by relying on the information of the definers of the dominant ideology. Dorothy Chunn (2007: 57) in her examination of the media representations of feminism in English language Canadian newspapers during later part of the twentieth century found that resistance to feminism was universal and feminists were never the “primary definers” or “agenda setters” of the issues pertaining to equality. Susan Faludi’s book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991) documented the ways in which the critics of feminism used media to attack and dismiss a wide range of feminist goals by bringing up stories about “the failure to get husbands, get pregnant, or properly bond with children” including the stories about “bad girls” referencing that women’s movement has a “dark side,” which encourages girls to seek equality with boys in the field of crime.

Sensationalist representations of girls’ aggression, violent behaviour, and gang involvements do not emerge spontaneously in the public consciousness. Current depictions of girl aggression and violence are rooted in claims about girl’s aggression that have emerged out of a developmental psychological literature on girls’ “indirect” and “relational” aggression (Artz, 1998). These claims are drawn on by the media, contributing to a moral panic caused by depictions of girls as increasingly mean and

aggressive, and exacting a decisive hold over the public imagination. The CBC television and radio documentary series entitled, *It's a Girl's World*, similarly propagates this body of psychological research, with a promotional pamphlet proclaiming that “a hidden culture of aggression in girls is now being studied for the first time. . . . [a]round the world. . . . and shows that girls everywhere are motivated to use their closest relationships as weapons, regardless of class, race or family background” (quoted from http://www.cbc.ca/ideas/features/girls_world).

Unprecedented media attention also continues to follow high-profile cases of “girl violence”; for example, the Reena Virk murder, where a “gang” of teen-age girls were accused of murder. Despite the fact that a girl and a boy were charged and that the boy eventually was convicted, news stories proclaimed “violent crimes by girls rising.”

According to Yasmin Jiwani,

the tragedy of the Reena Virk case was used to highlight what girls do to other girls. . . . [and] quickly overshadowed the issue of male violence. Reena's death was held up as a symbol of how girls are not immune to violence. Story after story in the daily papers covered the issue of teen girl violence, quoting research to support the main contention that girls are just as violent as boys. Statistics confirming the rising incidence of girl violence were repeatedly stressed to emphasize in effect that girls are no different from boys. The overall message was that this is an epidemic. (Jiwani, 2000: 7)

Universal claims that “girls are just as violent as boys” also work to direct attention away from social, cultural, and economically differentiated experiences of aggression and violence for girls. In the Reena Virk case, where the story surrounded a group of white girls accused in the murder of a South Asian girl, the media hype about girl violence in general served to “erase race” and racism was promptly dismissed in the reporting and sentencing as a contributing factor as to why Reena was murdered (Jiwani, 2000). It has

been established that girls of colour are frequently described as gang members, whereas their white counterparts are rarely described as involved in gangs but are more likely to be described as in need of character development and guidance (Jiwani, 2000; Chesney-Lind and Sheldon, 2004). The difference race makes in the construction of specific types of girlhood is linked to narratives of gang culture and deviant female sexuality. Girls of colour most frequently appear in media when they have committed acts of violence or when they are targets of violence by men and women of colour. In media coverage of the murder of Reena Virk, it is no surprise that race was masked and in turn, the victim herself was attacked for “stealing a boyfriend” and for being “not able to fit in” in the mainstream culture and society.

Racialization and gendering of youth gangs are important components of the social stratification system in contemporary North American society. The normalization of linking gang behaviour to ethnicity calls for understanding the issue of race. The social constructionist perspective claims that girl gang involvement is seen as a social problem that is increasing, and this increase is commonly attributed to changes in the values of society and/or personal maladjustment of females, as well as to women’s increased equality with men. The nature of their gang involvement is associated with the commission of more serious crimes, typically “masculine” offences such as assaults, robberies, thefts, and auto thefts. On the whole, the female gang problem in Canada is seen as a break from traditional female delinquency, an interpretation that is intended to give newness to the problem. Such attitude highlights why we need to incorporate race and gender in our analysis to understand female gang involvement.

In the following sections, I review theoretical explanations of female gang involvement. The understanding of young women in gangs begins with their neglect in both mainstream criminology and attention in feminist criminology.

2c. Criminology Theory

The historical research on female gang involvement suggests a linear transition from andocentric research drawn from male gang members' perspectives to research drawn from the perspectives of the females involved in gangs. However, this transition is not yet fully accomplished in the Canadian context, as there is limited scholarship on the understanding of female gang members' perspectives. Female gang members and young female offenders have been paid little attention in the mainstream theories of deviance and crime. Criminology theory, developed almost solely from a male perspective (Chesney-Lind and Hagedorn, 1999), explained delinquency and crime in general, and gangs in particular, as a male phenomenon. The mention of youth gangs paints in our minds stereotypical images of males involved in various forms of violence, shootings, graffiti, and drugs. These criminal activities of youth gang members are seen as masculine traits and, therefore, females are assumed not to be involved in these behaviours (Moore and Hagedorn, 2001). Their presence is assumed either as "tomboys" or "sex objects" (Campbell, 1990).

Thrasher (1927) laid the foundation for the dismissal and minimization of women's place in the world of gang activity. In his study of more than one thousand gangs in Chicago, Thrasher asserted the image of girls as playing roles auxiliary to those of boys in gangs, with "tasks" such as carrying weapons and providing sexual favours. These stereotypical images of girls have been carried over to the contemporary representations

of girls in youth gangs. For Thrasher, gangs are “the spontaneous efforts of boys to create a society” (Thrasher, 1927, as cited in Delaney, 2006: 204). This assertion even excludes the girls as potential participants in gangs. Subsequent mainstream theories of crime and delinquency followed the pursuits of the historical era.

Many theorists after Thrasher also considered only male gang members. Shaw and Mckay’s (1942) social disorganization theory, Cohen’s (1955) strain theory, Miller’s sub-cultural theory (1958), and Cloward and Ohlin’s (1960) differential opportunity theory all showed little interest in female gang members and provided differing explanations for male delinquency and functions of gangs for male youth. The assumption that delinquency was predominantly masculine in gender had an important implication for theoretical explanations. It made males the only worthwhile choice for empirical research.

Females involved in crime were stated to have personal and psychological problems. Early researchers (e.g., Lombroso, 1895; Thomas, 1923; Pollack, 1950) placed the blame for female crime on the biological nature of women. Sexual offences, incorrigibility, and running away explained female delinquency, and their involvement in serious crime was negligible (Tanner, 2001). Sociological variables were interpreted within a psychological framework. Feelings of loneliness and low self-esteem in girls from troubled homes with absent or abusive father were associated with girls’ struggles to understand their sexual roles. Later biosocial theories (e.g., Moore, 1991) viewed gang girls’ psychological constitutions and family environments as important factors in gang-related behaviour. The gang girl came to be seen as a troubled girl who lacked love and supervision at home and had no positive and supportive peer relations. These

explanations further strengthened the stereotypes of female gang members and those persisted until the 1970s, when feminism began to challenge the overall masculine nature of criminology.

2d. Liberation Theory

In the mid-1970s, the growing belief that female criminality was on the rise in North America led Freda Adler (*Sisters in Crime*, 1975) and Rita J. Simon (*Women and Crime*, 1975) to embrace the idea that such criminality was an aftermath of the women's liberation movement. Adler correlated the rise in women's crime from 1960 to 1972 to the rise of concurrent women's liberation movement, and put forward the argument that where the liberation movement opened new opportunities for women to engage in public and employment activities, it also provided women with new roles in crime:

The changing status of women as it affects family, marriage, employment, and social position has been well documented by all types of sociologists. . . . In the same way that women are demanding equal opportunity in fields of legitimate endeavor, a similar number of determined women are forcing their way into the world of major crimes. (Adler, 1975: 13)

Referring to the rise in girls' criminal activities, Adler argued that the women's movement seemed to be "having a twofold influence on juvenile crimes" (1975: 95). She asserted that

[g]irls are involved in more drinking, stealing, gang activity, and fighting-behavior in keeping with their adoption of male roles. We also find increases in the total number of female deviancies. The departure from the safety of traditional female roles and the testing of uncertain alternative roles coincide with the turmoil of adolescence creating criminogenic risk factors, which are bound to create this increase. (Adler, 1975: 95)

Adler further asserted that the availability of limited opportunities to achieve economic goals equaling those accessible to males led females to adopt violent and

aggressive acts that had previously been labeled as “masculine.” This argument gained widespread support from opponents of the feminist movement as an explanation for female crime, and to date media frequently mention the same factor as an obvious cause of increasing violent behaviour of young girls. In defining the functions and meanings of gangs for girls, those supporting liberation hypothesis assert that gangs provide protection to girls from abusive and violent families and communities, opportunities for economic survival (Taylor, 1993), fun, excitement, and support for rebellion against oppressive race, class, and gender stereotypes (Harris, 1988). Hagedorn and Devitt (2001: 256) stated that

[b]asically, the liberation view suggests that changing female gender roles have had a major influence on gang girls, increasing the number of female gangs, and inducing young women to become more violent and more involved with male activities, like drug sales.

Taylor (1993), from his study of African American female gang members in Detroit, asserted that changes in gender roles of women were felt in the corporate world of gangs, where females actively participated in violence and in the drug trade and were concerned about making money. He concluded that women’s participation in drug-related crimes had led to “a new attitude of female criminal independence” (23). Another qualitative study, this one by Kitchen (1995), also argued a similar connotation: that female gang members actively participated in drug sales as a means of making money due to limited economic options otherwise available to them. She also concluded that young females in her study became involved in violence and carried guns as a necessity to protect themselves.

Liberation theory was strongly criticized by those feminist criminologists who were intent on acquitting the women’s liberation movement from any responsibility for

the increase in female crime (Moore, 1991; Campbell, 1990; Joe and Chesney-Lind, 1995 Miller, 2001). What resulted was the emergence of some of the more recent in-depth studies on young female offenders and female gang members. This body of scholarship, based on a standpoint feminist epistemology, looks at the lives of women involved in crime from the viewpoints of women and attempts to understand the distinct pathway of women's involvement in criminal and delinquent behaviour as a need for survival. That said, I would reiterate that most of these studies have been conducted in the United States and that our understanding of female youth crime and gang involvement in the Canadian context is limited to very few academic and government publications.

2e. Pathways to Crime and Gang Involvement: Socialist Feminism

The qualitative studies on female gang members, albeit mostly in an American context, attempted to understand the lives of girls involved in gangs within their living conditions and to some extent criticized Adler and Simon's liberation/emancipation theory by arguing that for the most part these young women do not belong to the social strata of society that has been influenced by the women's liberation movement (Harris, 1988; Campbell, 1990; Moore, 1991; Joe and Chesney-Lind, 1995). They also challenged the traditional images of female gang members as sexual objects, passive members, and/or tomboys. The theoretical influence for these ethnographic studies of female gang members was socialist feminism, which indicted the systems of capitalism and patriarchy as both separately and in union oppressing and marginalizing women. Socialist feminist perspective is grounded in the notion that gender and class combine to create positions of power and powerlessness (Chesney-Lind and Bloom, 1997; Messerschmidt, 1997). This body of literature highlights women's involvement in gangs

as resulting from the oppressive situation of females within a patriarchal and capitalist society.

Research studies by feminist criminologists (Daly, 1992; Joe and Chesney-Lind, 1995; Portillos, 1999; Miller, 2001; Gaarder and Belknap, 2002) maintained that girls enter gangs at relatively young ages (12 and 13) and take gender-specific pathways to criminal involvement. They argued for a victim-to-offender theory of female delinquency. According to the “pathways to crime” model, the childhood experiences of physical and sexual abuse increase the likelihood of subsequent criminal behaviour among girls. Acoca (1998) in her study of girl offenders in California asserted prior sexual, emotional, and physical victimization as precursors to contact with the criminal justice system. This body of research listed childhood sexual abuse as the most significant predictor of subsequent delinquency. Sexually abused females had higher rates of both juvenile arrests for violent offenses and running away as compared to rates for non-sexually abused females (Siegel and Williams, 2003), and also they were five times more likely to have had substance abuse problems than were girls who had not been victims of sexual abuse (Kilpatrick et al., 2003).

Campbell (1984) provided an in-depth study of female gang members in her research work in the New York area. She maintained that males still paved the way for female membership in gangs, and that boys controlled and monopolized the gangs. According to Campbell, there were five primary reasons why girls joined gangs, namely to avoid (1) a future of meaningless domestic labor with little possibility of educational or occupational escape; (2) subordination to the man in the house; (3) responsibility for children; (4) the isolation of the housewife; and (5) the powerlessness of underclass

membership (Campbell, 1984: 241). Girls joined gangs in order to escape the drudgeries of poverty and the limited opportunities available to them, and like any others they wanted to live the American dream:

No more suffering or poverty. No more lonely, forced “independence,” living alone on welfare in a shabby apartment. First, a good husband; strong but not violent, faithful but manly. Second, well-dressed children. Third, a beautiful suburban apartment. (Campbell, 1984: 267)

Joe and Chesney-Lind (1995) in their study of male and female gang members in Hawaii mentioned considerably less incidence of violent behaviour and drugs use among female gang members. Instead, gangs provided a social outlet for Hawaiiin girls from low-income backgrounds in the form of partying, drinking, and hanging out:

On the broadest level, both the girls and boys are growing up in communities racked by poverty, racism, and rapid population growth. The gang is clearly a product of these forces. . . . the gang provides a needed social outlet and a tonic for the boredom of low-income life. The gang provides friends and activities in communities where such recreational outlets are pitifully slim. (Joe and Chesney-Lind, 1995: 427)

In their qualitative study of girls in adult prison, Gaarder and Belknap (2002) suggested that violent and abusive family experiences led girls to drug use, prostitution, and gang involvement. Girls from those backgrounds were more likely to become involved with gangs because they viewed gangs as substitute families and as alternate socializing agents. Apart from the greater risk of offending and gang involvement, victims of childhood sexual abuse were more likely to have low self-esteem, to suffer anxiety and depression, and to use alcohol and drugs.

Supporting the pathway-to-crime theory of socialist feminist criminologists, the undisputed risk factor for girls’ involvement in gangs in most studies has been the history of victimization in their families prior to gang involvement (Campbell, 1984; Moore,

1991; Joe and Chesney-Lind, 1995; Fleisher, 1998; Portillo, 1999; Miller, 2001; Nurge, 2003). Childhood abuse and neglect, sexual abuse, alcohol and drug addiction problems in the family, family violence, experiencing death in the family, and incarceration of family members are some of the common themes that emerge in these studies. Moore (1991) compared male and female gang members and concluded that female gang members reported more incidents of childhood abuse and neglect as compared to male gang members. As compared to the boys, more girls in her study were victims of incest (1991: 96) and sexual assault. Miller's (2001) study of female gang members suggested that by comparisons with nongang girls, a higher number of gang members were likely to experience these multiple family problems.

Victimized girls use various survival strategies to deal with the consequences of the victimization that led them to the paths of alienation and offending. However, survival strategies including prostitution and gang involvement increases the risks of further victimization for females. Feminist research (Chesney-Lind, 1989; Gilfus, 1992; Gaarder and Belknap, 2002) theorized victimization as one of the many forms of marginalization that eventually resulted in women's offending and subsequent further victimization. Therefore, in this respect the relation between victimization and offending was indirect (Gilfus, 1992), as opposed to women's use of violence as self-defense in a direct response to their victimization (for example, domestic violence). Feminist criminologists proposed that the relation between victimization and offending was underscored by the fact that the criminal justice system criminalizes girls' survival strategies. Overall, the research on female offenders clearly suggests intimate linkages between childhood victimization experiences and subsequent offending. Katz (2000) even suggested that to understand

differences between males' and females' criminal offending behaviours, it would be important to pay close attention to female victimization histories. But at the same time, some criminologists have accused feminist scholars of overstating the role of victimization and of ignoring women's capacity for violent criminal behaviour.

The crimes individuals engage in are affected by those individuals' class and gender positions, which in turn reflect their levels of oppression (Currie, 1986). Within a socialist feminist perspective, "criminality is theorized as related to the interaction of patriarchy and capitalism, and to the structural possibilities this interaction creates" (Messerschmidt, 1993: 56). Due to the subordinate position of women in a capitalist society, their crimes are "powerless" crimes like shoplifting, frauds, and prostitution. According to Messerschmidt (1986: 43),

[t]he fact that females are subordinate and therefore less powerful in economic, religious, political, and military institutions worldwide means that females have less opportunity to engage in serious criminality.

Similarly, the marginal position of females within the gangs (e.g., as victims of sexual exploitation) parallels women's oppressed position under the structure of patriarchy explains their engagement in "powerless" crimes.

While he endorsed the socialist feminist position that women engage mostly in powerless crimes as a result of their oppressed roles in a capitalist patriarchal society, Messerschmidt (1986) pointed out that the feminists' explanations for women's violent behaviour were extremely limited. He stated:

Women confined to the home may reach the point where they can no longer endure the continued hardships of domination and therefore turn to isolated and self-destructive forms of 'deviance' not normally considered deviant: alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness, and suicide. These types of privatized resistance against their subordinate and powerless

position in patriarchal capitalist society is one of the more pervasive forms of 'antisocial' behaviour engaged in by women. (1986: 44)

Messerschmidt's work illustrated that with its focus on women's oppressive and powerless positions in our society, serious female criminality was interpreted as being anti-social and deviant behaviour. This identification of female criminality as "antisocial" contributed to the characterization of women as powerless and thereby lacking agency. Socialist feminist understanding of violent crime by females, other than that diagnosing it to be antisocial behaviour, is almost non-existent. This significant gap in understanding female violent behaviour led law enforcement agencies to impose stricter punishments for violent female offenders. Messerschmidt (1986: 80) claimed that

[i]ncreasingly, those women who do not act in a "feminine" way – that is, those whose behaviour indicates an erosion of traditional female gender-roles – are viewed as stereotypically nontraditional and therefore deserving of punishment.

Messerschmidt (1997) later identified the lack of socialist feminist explanations of violent female behaviour, when he mentioned that women can commit occasional violent crimes and when they do, such actions are not understood theoretically. He argued that "the criminological image of violence by women is based on that of male violence – macho, tough, aggressive; we have no ways of conceptualizing violence by women except in terms of its 'unnaturalness'" (1997: 68).

To summarize, socialist feminism explained women's powerlessness (i.e., commission of minor crimes within the capitalist patriarchal structure of Canadian society) but offered a limited contribution to explanation of women's major and violent crimes. This has led to a labeling of female violent crimes as "unfeminine" with the major repercussion of violent young female offenders being held increasing

“‘accountable’ for their ‘choices’” (Chunn, 2002: 427) and levied harsher punishments (Hannah-Moffat, 2004). Within the Canadian context, these explanations have been scrutinized to a great extent because media initiated their presentation of the image of “violent female offender” by referring to the increasing numbers of young women arrested for major and minor assaults (Bell, 2007), and especially highlighted their involvement in gangs. The Reena Virk 1997 murder case rendered support to the media-generated panic about growing violence among young girls and higher numbers of female involvement in gangs. However, there have been attempts by American feminist criminologists (Messerschmidt, 1997; Laidler and Hunt, 1997; Miller, 2001) to address the theoretical gap in explaining violence by females. These attempts have led to a situational explanation of violence known as “structured action theory,” in combination with “doing” gender (Messerschmidt, 1993). Messerschmidt begins with the premise that gender is a ‘situated accomplishment’ or ‘structured action’ in that women are actively involved in the process of constructing femininity (and men masculinity) in accord with their socio-structural position within classed, raced and gendered relations and their differential access to power and resources. As an outcome of this, he contends that crime offers a resource for ‘doing gender’ or socially constructing forms of masculinity and femininity in specific social contexts (Messerschmidt, 1993). Later he takes structured action theory one stage further to argue that crime is not only a resource for the situated accomplishment of gender, but also for simultaneously “doing class and race” in that gendered, raced and classed relations “arise within the same ongoing practices” (Messerschmidt, 1997: 3). Messerschmidt asserts that women participate in occasional

incidents of violent acts depending on the situation and on the meanings those actions have for them.

Due to the presence of inequalities and injustices that exist between men and women (and also between men) based on the possession of economic and political power in society, Connell (1995) asserted that violence is used to maintain superior position and to assert masculinity. Segal (1997) argued that the maintenance of male dominance leads to men's engaging in higher levels of violence, especially against women. From a gender perspective, the violence of men and boys and the gender gap in terms of violence have been described in terms of a masculine need to assert dominance and superiority in relation both to women and to other men, providing a way of showing that one is a real man. Symbolizing violence as masculine then provokes a fundamental question: How should the violence of females be understood? Due to the inadequacy or lack of theoretical explanations for female criminality and violence, few scholars have attempted to reconceptualize the way criminology analyzes offending with respect to gender (Connell, 1987; Messerschmidt, 1986; 1997).

Taking the concept of gender as a situated accomplishment, feminist theorists have made attempts to explain female crime and offending in the same context. Messerschmidt explained female involvement in violent gang activities as a way of enacting a femininity approved within the context of gangs. Girls decided to engage in fights and other activities based on their assumptions of how their actions would be judged and approved of by others around them. Within the context of gangs, those aggressive actions and displays of toughness were approved ways of displaying a particular notion of femininity, i.e., a "bad girl" femininity:

For girls in the gang, doing femininity means occasionally, and in appropriate circumstances, doing violence. However, because participation in violence varies depending upon the setting, girls are assessed and held accountable as “bad girls” differently. Given that gang girls realize that their behaviour is accountable to other girls and boys in the gang, they construct their actions in relation to how those actions will be interpreted by others in the same social context. (Messerschmidt, 1995: 183)

Their reputation offered girls a status of power within the patriarchal power structure of gangs. Adopting a “bad girl” or “tough girl” image gave girls a more flexible roles when they needed to defend themselves against male violence, and enabled them to construct their gender based both on different situations in gangs and also on commonalities with the boys (Messerschmidt, 1995). On the other hand, in her book, *One of the Guys*, Miller (2001) claimed that the commonality across gender resulted in girls in gangs embracing masculine identity. Messerschmidt refuted this by explaining that girls who demonstrate physical strength and toughness saw themselves not as masculine but as “bad girls” (Messerschmidt, 2002: 461).

Adopting a bad girl image and exaggerated toughness gives girls a more flexible role when they have to defend themselves against male violence. At the same time, they attend to responsibilities of pregnancy, motherhood, drug dealing to support their children, and improving the quality of life for their family in dangerous neighbourhoods where they reside. The “bad girl” is one possible construction for girls in gangs. While fighting may be considered unfeminine in most contexts, in the context of the gang it may be “encouraged, permitted and privileged by both boys and girls as appropriate feminine behaviour” (Messerschmidt, 1995: 182). In this sense, female violence is not an expression of masculinity but rather a reflection of the gang girls’ agency in negotiating and defining femininity in the context of gang life.

Another fundamental criticism of socialist feminist theory is its failure to address race. The following section introduces the initial 'race-blind' nature of socialist feminism and its attempts to incorporate race along with gender and class in explaining female crime in general and female gang involvement in particular.

The inattention to race within feminist theory was brought forward by the Black feminists (Segal, 1987). Segal stated that "they [Black feminists] argued, as have many other Black women, that white feminists used racist and stereotype perceptions of Black and ethnic women, or ignored them altogether, assuming unity across ethnic groups which does not exist" (1987: 62). An example of socialist feminism's need to address race is the disadvantaged position of Aboriginal women in Canada that cannot be accounted for by economic and gender oppression alone. This realization led to a restructuring of perspectives within feminism that included examination of the intersection of colonialism, race, class, and gender.

The current focus of feminism in addressing race is this intersection of race, class, and gender. Daly and Stephens (1995) argued that relations of inequality are structured and reproduced in law and legal process, and therefore should be at the center of analysis in criminology. Chesney-Lind and Bloom (1995: 51) stated:

Few efforts have focused on the issues of race, class and gender disparity as they relate to women in the criminal justice system; yet, precisely this sort of approach is essential if we are to understand how race as well as gender works in the lives of women.

Critical feminist theory recognizes that women differ from one another both culturally and in their positions in "hierarchical power relationships" (Harding, 1991: 174). Women's experiences in society and social institutions vary based on class, race, sexual orientation, age, and other aspects of their historical/social contexts. Critical

feminists assume that the social construction of gender must be understood within social, historic, and cultural contexts. By making the connections between individual experiences and social contexts, critical feminist theorizing of issues such as crime or violence or gang involvement emphasizes structural explanations over individualistic explanations of phenomena. Below I discuss the role of intersecting oppressions in explaining female violence and gang involvement.

2f. Addressing Multiple Inequalities: Gender, Class, Race, Age, and Crime

The intersectional perspective that explicitly focuses on the multiple inequalities of gender, class, race, and age, tends to see these inequalities as not additive and discrete but rather as an intersecting matrix of domination on many levels (Daly, 1997). The reported level of increase in female youth violent crime from 1989 to 1999 was 81%, which is more than 2.5 times the rate of increase for male youth (Bell, 2007). These data led to renewed focus on female crime, especially violent crime, even though feminist criminologists (like Reitsma-Street, 2002; Pate, 1999; Chesney-Lind, 1997) have criticized the selective presentation of official statistics that inflate increase in female violent crime rate. While some research has emphasized the importance of social control institutions and practices (or lack thereof) as central to understand increasing levels of offending among girls and women, the analyses have also included examination of the impacts of poverty and economic marginalization in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. For both males and females, violent situations tend to take place among the poor, the unemployed, and those with histories of deviance, and such populations are heavily concentrated in geographically poverty-stricken areas (Kruttschnitt, 2001).

Maier and Curtis' (1992) study of drug-using women in urban New York analyzed and situated offending and drug use in a context of multiple inequalities. Rather than framing the analysis of offending as a result of "liberation," "adaptive strategies," and "criminal opportunity structures," they highlighted how a "matrix of domination" created by the law, by economic structure, by race, and by gender shaped offending among females. Maier and Curtis' study involved a group of women who smoked crack and engaged in street-level sex work, and they described their analysis as "an attempt to situate their consumption of crack, their 'criminality' and their experiences of violence (both as perpetrators and victims) within the context of gender relations and occupational opportunities as they exist in the informal economy" (Maier and Curtis, 1992: 222). They argued that the use of crack by minority women has had enormous consequences by undermining both family networks and the resources for provision of care and support. As evidence of the gendered consequences of crack use, they concluded that substance-abusing women tend to have fewer social supports and greater familial responsibilities than both non-addicted women and addicted males. They further asserted that societal sanctions have been not only gendered, but also racist and classist. As a result of the "war on drugs," the proportion of women imprisoned for drug crimes in New York State increased from an average of 22 percent during 1980-1986 to 66 percent in 1989. Criminal and administrative sanctions by New York State directed at crack using mothers have resulted in a quadrupling of Family Court petitions of drug abuse allegations, and an overload of the foster care system related to revisions of existing laws on abandonment, parental rights, and foster care placements.

Baskin and Sommers (1998) collected official data on 170 women and conducted interviews with 49 females who had been arrested for non-domestic violent felony offenses in New York. A majority of the women were African American and Hispanic growing up in “hyper-ghettoized” New York City neighborhoods. Baskin and Sommers emphasize the interplay between gender, race, social structure, culture, and agency in their analysis of these minority females’ violence. They identified that deviant lifestyle patterns in which use of violence is an integral part had increasingly become adaptive strategies for females attempting to cope with extreme social and economic deprivation in the inner city.

These ethnographic studies clearly illustrate the importance of understanding crime within a societal context influenced by the intersection of gender, race, and class. This perspective has also been incorporated in research about male gang members. Vigil pointed to the role of multiple marginalities in his research about the proliferation of Hispanic gangs. Vigil (2001) emphasized the difficulties associated with immigration and asserted that the urban setting, with its breakdown in social institutions, served to hinder rather than help assimilation into the new culture. He positioned that the attractiveness of street life and gang involvement stemmed from youth’s longing for social acceptance and personal validation from peers during adolescence, especially when existing within both an old and a new culture. Persistent poverty, limited social mobility, school difficulties, and bleak job opportunities served to motivate a street gang culture and later to solidify its existence through alternative social norms and socialization patterns. Vigil concluded, “Multiple marginality encompasses the consequences of barrio life, low socioeconomic status, street socialization and enculturation, and problematic development of a self-

identity” (2001: 27). He maintained that gangs and gang membership must be understood within the context of those multiple marginalities.

Within the Canadian context, the multiple marginality and intersectional perspective is a “good fit” for exploration of the issue of Aboriginal youth gangs and a few related efforts have been made (Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, 2003) but in general the topic area is yet under-explored with regard to Aboriginal female gang members. A report by the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations on Aboriginal youth gang violence stated that youth gang involvement is

born out of necessity and daily survival of an oppressed and excluded group – Aboriginal youth. The many factors bearing down on a vulnerable youth expose this group to violence, abuse, inequality amongst our people and maltreatment of a variety of resources. (Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, 2003: 7)

The oppression of Aboriginal people in Canada is rooted in centuries of oppressive government actions. The life experiences of young Aboriginal women are shaped by the powerful structures of patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism (Comack and Balfour, 2006) and in any exploration of their gang-related involvements these factors must be investigated. In the following section, an overview of the racial oppression of Aboriginal people in Canada with specific focus on Aboriginal women and youth is provided. Some understanding of Canadian history is necessary in order to contextualize later and current residual effects of past domination.

Colonialism and Critical Race Theory

Colonialization in the Canadian context refers to the process of encroachment and subsequent subjugation of Aboriginal peoples since the arrival of Europeans. From the Aboriginal perspective, it refers to loss of land, resources, and self-direction, and to the

destruction of cultural ways and values (LaRocque, 1994). “Colonialization has taken its toll on all Aboriginal peoples,” maintained LaRocque, “but it has taken perhaps greatest toll on women. We can trace the diminishing status of Aboriginal women with the progression of colonialism” (1994: 3). Colonialization and racism go hand-in-hand. Racism has provided justification for the subjugation of Aboriginal peoples. Racism breeds hatred for Aboriginal peoples, sexism breeds hatred for women, and the objectification of women perpetuates violence where Aboriginal women are viewed and treated as sex objects. The dominant cultural myths as expressed in literature and popular culture have perpetuated racist/sexist stereotypes about Aboriginal women. A direct relationship between racist/sexist stereotypes and violence can be seen in the widespread, derogatory, and dehumanizing portrayal of Aboriginal women as “squaws,” a depiction that renders all Aboriginal female persons vulnerable to physical, verbal, and sexual violence.

Carter (1997) examined the cultural imagery of Aboriginal women in the Prairie Provinces of Canada in the late 1700s. She concluded that in Western Canada, harmful and oppressive depictions of Aboriginal women were used to justify repressive measures against them. She stated:

In the Canadian West, as in other settings, colonialism also functioned in a gendered way to develop powerfully negative images of the indigenous women, who were projected as being a threat to the white community. They were cast as the complete opposite of white women, as agents of the destruction of the moral and cultural health of the . . . community. (Carter, 1997: xvii)

One of the many consequences of racism is that over time, racial stereotypes and societal rejection may be internalized by the colonized group. This internalization process is one of the most problematic legacies of long-term colonialization. Many Black,

Chicano, and Aboriginal scholars have pointed out this problem. Understanding the complex working of the internalization process may be the key to the beginnings of understanding the behaviours both of the oppressed and also of the oppressive conditions in our communities. In his book *Prison of Grass*, Adams (1975) refers to the problem of internalization, which is a disintegrative process inherent in colonialization. Aboriginal peoples have subconsciously judged themselves against the standards of White society, a process he described as internalizing the standards, judgments, expectations, and portrayals of the dominant world. Many Aboriginal writers have pointed to the causes and consequences of having struggled with externally imposed images about themselves, resulting often in shame and rejection not only of the self but also of the similar other, i.e., other Aboriginal people. Further, Aboriginal men have internalized White male devaluation of women. Fisher (1983) observed:

Deprived of their ancestral roles . . . men began to move into areas that had previously been the province of women, adopting some of the white attitudes toward women and treating them as inferiors rather than as equals.

Many scholars (LaPrarie, 1995; York, 1992; Monture-Angus, 2000) have documented the link between the historical control of Aboriginal people and their current disadvantaged state. Postcolonial feminist theory addresses these issues through its attention to the contemporary experiences and circumstances faced by Aboriginal women as consequences of a history of colonialism. Within the context of government policy such as the Indian Act, Native women have faced negative and discriminatory experiences within all social institutions. In the male-oriented Canadian election system introduced in 1869, Aboriginal women were prohibited from voting or running for office, which led to the official silencing of Aboriginal women's voices both within their own

societies and also within the greater Canadian society as a whole (McGrath and Stevenson, 1996). To date, and in spite of an ethical-legal environment in which overt expressions of racism are more negatively sanctioned, many Aboriginal women still report experiences of discrimination. Such experiences persist in the form of racial slurs or of treatment based on negative stereotypes in education and law enforcement sectors. The recounting of Native women's experiences reflects Weber's (1998: 15) assertion that issues of self-identity and socio-political environment/factors are not only intertwined but "simultaneously operate at both the macro (societal) and micro (individual) levels." Subsequently, it is possible to connect experiences within group, community, and individual settings and recognize their locations within broader socio-political and legal domains.

There is significantly less analysis about the complex interrelationships between the gang experience and racial and ethnic relations in Canada. However, the social and economic conditions that currently prevail (both on- and off-reserve) and the cultural contexts in which marginalized Aboriginal youth live provide a breeding ground for youth gangs to flourish:

The reality of this existence leaves Aboriginal youth to meet the basic needs in whatever way and means necessary. For an undereducated Aboriginal youth disenfranchised from society, there are few options for survival. Sheer survival is a strong motivational factor that leads many youth to gangs. (Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, 2003: 7)

Lenin (1970) argued that colonialism was the final stage of capitalism. It involved the entire seizure of land by a small percentage of nations. In general, historically the colonized have been treated as second-class citizens and regarded as backward, inferior, lazy, and wicked. In Canada (and elsewhere), the impact of colonialization has

transformed original inhabitants from roles of being owners of land to being foreigners in towns and cities. The internal colonialism focus becomes social oppression, a concept emerging out of the imperialist era of classic colonialism. Barrera (1979) defined both colonialism and internal colonialism within structured relationships of domination and subordination. When repression tactics were reduced the situation became neocolonialism, a system wherein the government uses indirect mechanisms for maintaining the system rather than the direct measures inherent in colonialization. Consequently, Aboriginal communities frequently exist in a status of externally imposed powerlessness.

Aboriginal youth experience overt and institutional racism and economic exploitation to an extent greater than that of any other group in Canada. As a consequence, they turn to substance abuse, poverty, suicide, self-harm, and gang involvement. Their overrepresentation in crime statistics and at the receiving end of the justice system leads to the process of racialization of crime. Critical race theory asserts that social construction of race and racial identity itself are precursors to discrimination and marginalization of Aboriginal youth, and that these factors originate from social, historical, and political contexts. Capitalism, patriarchy, and neocolonialism frame young women's life contexts then go on to define and limit the choices those young women can make. The women either cope with their frustrations through addictions or find support systems of similarly situated other Aboriginal youth in gangs.

Understanding Youth

The concept of age has not been explored fully in the critical feminist criminology, including how age as a relation of power intersects with other social relations of gender,

race, class, and ethnicity in the lives of youth associated with gangs. In particular, adolescence has been both constructed and lived as a critical turning point within the Western narrative of selfhood, as well as a life stage wherein the gaze of the peer group matters most. In both academic and mainstream discourses, adolescence is perceived to be a period of intense physical, emotional, and cognitive changes, where individuals are wrestling with two primary questions: “Who am I?” and “Where do I fit in?” These concerns are extensively discussed in literature but without much accompanying recognition of their significance in terms of the asymmetries of power in adolescent peer culture, which are based on, but not reducible to, relations of gender, race, class, sexuality, and so on.

One of the most widely used frameworks for understanding youth identity and behaviour has been the sub-cultural theories of crime and gangs. Youth subcultural scholars (Cohen 1955; Miller, 1958; Matza, 1964) explored the cultural significance of the symbols, practices, and experiences of particular groups whose marginalized identities, because of age and socio-economic status, positioned them in antagonistic relationship to both parents and mainstream cultures. A subculture is a group of people within a society who share a set of ideas and ways of doing things that differs from the ways of dominant society. The subculture gives a sense of belonging and offers solutions to problems. Cohen (1955) felt that the delinquent subculture formed in order to provide a solution to the problem of status (or lack of status) for lower class youth, since in delinquent subculture “respect in the eyes of one’s fellows” becomes very important. The intersection of class with age and generation became the focus of sociological research on youth culture and this position was rapidly adopted by many sociologists of youth.

Subcultural theory's main contribution lay in its success in bringing adolescence and youth culture into the social science spotlight, demonstrating how youth culture was deeply embedded in the social struggles and inequalities of a modern class society. Over time, however, the major criticism of subcultural theories has been that the subcultural model of understanding of youth to some extent was not dissimilar to psychology's "troubled teen" conceptualization. It reduced adolescence to a period of rebellion, wherein youth expressed their alienated identities through a politics of style, and as a result their resistance was of little substantive importance. Also, subcultural approach's emphasis on the dual importance of age/generation and class did not allow for an equal importance of other social relations of power, e.g., race or gender, in determining the identity struggles that created youth subcultures. Subcultural research was, for a long time, interested only in the culture of white, working-class males and as a result, little was known about how working-class girls responded to the difficulties of being young and marginalized in a class society.

According to McRobbie and Garber (1975), the absence of girls from the general literature on youth was striking: when they did appear - momentarily - in accounts, it was through stereotypes that reinforced the images of women in a patriarchal society. Feminist researchers have done much to address the absence of gender analysis in studies of youth culture. Researchers such as McRobbie (2000) and Currie and Kelly (2006) have studied the ways in which girls respond to being young and female in class societies and the subcultural spaces that they created in response to the peripheral status they occupied in male-dominated subcultures, such as gangs. By combining a developmental approach

with a feminist analysis, researchers argued that adolescence is a highly gendered period of development that negatively impacted girls because of societal expectations.

One of the major contributions of the feminist literature has been its revelations of the diverse ways in which girls handle forms of gender and age subordination. Overall, barred from expressing anger or competing openly, girls resort to indirect forms to express themselves and thereby, engage in struggles over power within their social groups (Artz, 1998; Hey, 1997, Brown, 1998). These ethnographic researches opened youth theorists' eyes in regard to interactions that were previously considered apolitical. Over time, many of the assumptions of patriarchal silencing of girls have been challenged by post-structural researchers including Hey (1997), and Proweller (1998). They argued that adolescent girls do not passively accept cultural scripts of femininity or simply abandon their sense of self for others, nor do they always deal with conflict and power struggles through passive-aggressive methods. Post-structuralists combined developmental insights about the changing bodies and minds of adolescents with gender analyses that attempted to theorize the creative and emancipatory spaces that girls carve out for themselves and others. These explanations of female behaviour dominated the discourse on girls' violent behaviour within the subculture of peer groups.

A recent collection of scholarly research on girlhood, identity and power (Bettis and Adam, 2005; Harris, 2004; Jiwani, Steenbergen, and Mitchell, 2006; Kindlon, 2006) draws attention to the importance of girlhood, reminding the value of the emergent field of girls' studies for the theorization and exploration of identity, agency, and power. Engaging with ongoing intellectual conversations about gender, race, class, generation, and social change, these analyses of girls' power and identities make clear that girls'

studies is broadly relevant to feminist and critical scholarship. Engaged in challenging flat, one-dimensional images of girls and girlhood, these authors present a much more nuanced and textured picture of girls' multiple identities and their varied relationships to social, political, cultural and economic power and empowerment.

Jiwani, Steenbergen, and Mitchell's (2006) book, *Girlhood: Redefining the Limits*, via essays and research projects, aim at what it really means to be a Canadian girl in the new millennium. The editors emphasize the "acknowledgement of the complex power relations that weave through [girls'] diverse experiences" and "the obligation for work on girls and girlhoods to be intersectional and interlocking" (p.vii). The essays by contributors address the experiences of aboriginal, francophone, and queer girls; explore racialized violence, displacement and citizenship; and delve into the discursive and material nuances of resistance, aggression, style, and embodiment. The authors delve into the complexities of girls' agency, resistance, and empowerment by exploring the structural constraints faced by girls, as well as the ways girls not only navigate but also resist and critique these constraints. These contributions depict girls as both potentially powerful and empowered actors and as inhabiting a field of unequal power relations. Currie and Kelly's article on "meanness" deftly addresses "the ways in which youth culture, although a semi-autonomous sphere of adolescent agency, is marked by a heterosexist gender hierarchy and the sexual competition of mainstream culture" (2006: 170). Currie and Kelly also note that "while few girls questioned the truism that girls can be anything, most were also acutely aware that girls are judged by stereotypical double standards" (2006: 170).

Kindlon (2006) draws from interviews and surveys with a disproportionately white

and affluent group of girls, arguing that there is a new type of girl psychology emerging from this generation of North American youth--what he calls "alpha girl psychology." Kindlon's alpha girls are confident, self-assured leaders who believe that they truly can do and be anything they want. The psychology of the new alpha girl is "in sharp contrast to the largely negative, anxious, and defensive portraits of American girls that have dominated academic and popular psychology for the past twenty-five years" (Kindlon, 2006: xv). While Kindlon's attention to girls' potential social contributions makes an innovative contribution to how we see girls' power, his claim that contemporary girlhood is defined by opportunity, equality, and possibility erases and evades some very real and still significant social, political, and economic inequalities, particularly those faced by low-income girls and ethnic minority girls.

Contemporary scholars (Bettis and Adam, 2005; Harris, 2004; Jiwani, Steenbergen, and Mitchell, 2006; Kindlon, 2006) raise important questions about agency, power, and girls' empowerment in contemporary society. They suggest the need to move away from a vision of girls primarily as passive victims. However, they introduce some very important debates and differences about what this non-victim status truly means for girls and girlhoods. Kindlon argues that present day girl is living in a post-feminist world where "sex and gender, dependence and independence, and dominance and subordination are largely irrelevant to how she sees herself in the world" (2006: xv). In his view, girls are so empowered that they no longer feel constrained by sex and gender, but see only a future of equality. Kindlon's presentation of girls as active agents and empowered actors goes to a point where girls' lives are practically problem-free and that oppression, domination, and gender inequality no longer exist or, at the very least, are in dramatic

decline. Harris (2004) offers a direct response to Kindlon's alpha girl thesis. Harris explores the social and political centrality of discourses and images of girlhood in late modern societies. The discourse of the empowered, "can-do girl" obscures some of the very real challenges faced by girls, as it recasts success and failure as based on individual choice and responsibility rather than on economic and social resources. According to Harris, the discourse of the empowered girl not only places blame on those girls who do not "achieve," but is also deeply regulatory, producing a new kind of idealized young femininity. Harris argues that the idea that girls can now do and be anything is, in fact, part of a broader neo-liberal political and economic shift. The argument makes clear the dangers of the dualistic discourses of "the can-do girl" and "the at-risk girl" and their shared emphasis on individual choice and personal responsibility. This emphasis, Harris suggests, blames girls for their own supposed failures and obscures a "broader and more systemic analysis of young women's circumstances" (2004: 32).

This above mentioned scholarship on present day girls highlights that girlhood, like womanhood, is crosscut with differences of race, class, sexuality, location, religion, and ability; that being the case, it must be spoken of in the plural form, not the singular. There is no "typical" girlhood, but rather a great diversity of girlhoods. Jiwani and others (2006) are successful at engaging with this complexity and teasing apart the implications and mechanisms of the intersecting social forces that shape girls' lives. They refuse to simplify the category of "girl." The issues of age, race, class, and differences among girls have been increasingly central to this growing field of girls' studies, and offer an intersectional rather than simply additive approach. Embracing the complexities, tensions, and contradictions of girlhood and girls' lives has led to much more innovative

and theoretically rich scholarship. Using intersectional analyses and approaches, the research on girl power, girls' empowerment, and resistance has challenged perceptions of girls primarily as passive victims without the capacity to influence the world around them.

While the various strands of research have made important contributions to our understanding of how minority youth cope with difference. I assert that we need a clearer understanding of how young girls experience race, class, and gender, particularly during adolescence, the stage wherein the modern Western self is in the process of becoming somebody and belonging somewhere. The narratives with young girls (upcoming in following chapters) allow us to understand how girls, as coping mechanisms in their identity struggles and relations with peers, use diverse and creative strategies. It is well understood that girls' struggles with belonging and identity are shaped by the larger social, cultural, and political contexts in which they live, and that these struggles are more intense for Aboriginal and ethnic minority girls.

2g. Conclusion

Given the claims that increasing numbers of ethnic minority youth are involved in gangs (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2003) and that girls are becoming increasingly violent and are striving for equal status with boys in gangs (Felon, 2004), questions of racialization and gendering of youth gangs become significant in the Canadian context. The overview of this chapter is that the macro-level issues of race and gender are significantly important in our understanding of youth gangs. From a critical feminist theoretical perspective, I embrace the importance of linking these macro-level factors to the daily lives of young women involved in youth gangs. The socialist feminist

examination of female crime and young women's involvement with the criminal justice system offers a promising base in this regard; however, the theory's neglect to incorporate violent crime by females and its initial failure to address race is an important drawback. Based on the fact that racialization is present in public and legal discourses when the link between gang behaviour and ethnicity is normalized, it becomes important to understand the larger social issues that influence racial and ethnic minorities. Therefore, race must be added to the factors of oppression of gender and class in women's lives in order to accurately assess "the interlocking systems of oppression" (Collins, 2004). There needs to be a deconstruction of the larger systemic issues of oppression that perpetuate and maintain the silence surrounding girl violence, through the imposition of hegemonic notions of femininity. This information can then assist service providers and the community in general in determining strategies that can address the girl gang problem and also challenge the systemic issues that perpetuate violence. There must be an examination of young women in gangs within the context of their lived experiences and their social realities. The lives of young women and girls in gangs need to be politicized, including recognizing their positions within the historical context of sexism, racism, and oppression within Canadian society and how these maintain barriers to their lives. This understanding is significantly important when discussing Aboriginal females.

The overwhelming majority of the literature within feminist criminology has focused on female youth offending as closely linked to previous victimization. Women have been largely viewed in terms of their victim status, rather than as perpetrators of crime. While proposing a paradigm of victimization and pathway to crime, feminist criminologists have been criticized for having failed to acknowledge the agency or choice

in the lives of women and their potential to engage in violent and criminal behaviour (Shaw 1995). There is mounting evidence that offending and victimization are strongly correlated in the lives of female offenders. But as Miller (2001) stated, in some situational contexts, young women use violence and/or actively participate in criminal activities within or outside the context of gangs not in response to victimization but rather for economic gains, recognition, excitement, or alleviation of boredom. Poststructural feminist research on youth highlight the everyday struggles of being young and female. This understanding is reflected in public perceptions, which blame the women's liberation movement for having caused the increase in involvement of girls in gangs and their increased use of violence. What seems missing from both media depictions and academic publications is an integrated understanding of both macro- and micro-level structural influences that condition and limit the choices that these young women make in their everyday lives, while at the same time being active agents in their lives. In the following chapters of this dissertation, I propose to explain the involvement of young women in gangs and violent activities not as a "pathological individual" problem or an "ethnic group" problem, nor as an issue of "the new breed of postfeminist criminal." Using a critical feminist paradigm, I attempt to locate these young women and girls in a larger political and social context that marginalizes and forces their social exclusion from the social institutions of society, into a position where their involvement in violent activities is not about constructing femininity or masculinity but rather is about finding their social position within a patriarchal, capitalist, and racist adult society.

My intent is to situate the personal lives and problems of the young women and girls who are involved with youth gangs within the sphere of wider public issues in an

attempt to make a connection with how girls' lives are affected by the society in which they live. As such, I am also concerned with the absence of women's voices on the subject of youth gangs and youth violence, especially when females are associated with them. Using a standpoint epistemology methodology as described in next chapter, I listen to their views of their lives.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3a. Introduction

The basic purpose of my research is not merely a description of the females within the gangs, but an understanding from their view of the functions of the gangs for these girls. How do female gang members describe their lives in the context of larger socio-political structures of society where racism, sexism and poverty come to play their part in the lives of these girls? In this chapter, I will provide an overview of the methodologies that were used to understand the effects of socio-structural influences in the lives of female gang members, discussion of sampling procedures, ethical considerations and implementation of in-depth interviews. Also I will discuss the strengths and limitations of these methodologies.

3b. Methodological Considerations

The research focus of this study of female youth in gangs is to shed light on the social context within which girls decide to join a gang and/or associate with a gang and the nature of gender dynamics and violence in these gangs. This study was designed from a feminist perspective which proclaimed that young women's lives matter, but they are often misunderstood. There is very little research on girls in youth gangs in Canada (DeKeseredy, 2000). Instead we have the development of many media and cultural stereotypes that are used by teachers, social workers, police, criminal justice professionals and average citizens to form opinions about these young women. Girls and young women occasionally surface in media discussions of gangs and delinquency that contribute to moral panic. The media stories provide minimal understanding of the context of the lives of young girls in gangs. In the book, *The Everyday World as*

Problematic: A Feminist Sociology (1987), Dorothy Smith explains that the marginalization and silencing of disempowered groups of people is maintained through the relations that regulate society. Her standpoint feminist approach recognizes that “women’s voices and descriptions of their everyday experiences have not been included in the making of sociological categories” (Barron, 2000: 32).

The methodological approach that I have chosen for this project is feminist standpoint ethnography. Research conducted from a feminist perspective is grounded in the notion that “women’s lives are important” (Reinhartz, 1992: 84). This dissertation seeks to affirm the belief that the lives of girls and young women who associate with youth gangs are important, their voices need to be heard, their lived experiences valued. According to Curry (1998), the research on female gang involvement has moved closer to a feminist approach that involves understanding female gang participation from the point of view of the females themselves rather than from an externally imposed male perspective. Nelson (1990) argues that feminist work represents a paradigm shift towards standpoint theories. Standpoint epistemology asserts that the disadvantaged groups or less powerful members of society have an important view of social reality. Feminist standpoint epistemologists believe that people with less power in society are often able to see a more “complete” picture of society than those with more power, specifically because they are less powerful (Harding, 1991). Annas (1978) calls this “double vision” – “a knowledge, awareness of and sensitivity to both the dominant world view of the society and their own minority” (as quoted in Nelson, 1990: 10). Nelson (1990) suggests that the implication that comes out of standpoint epistemology is that studying the understandings of oppressed group(s) “will lead to more accurate, more complex

knowledge” (pg. 23). Oppressed people have few opportunities to express the way they construct the realities of their lives. Allowing them a voice and an opportunity to share their experiences would give them some form of empowerment (Thomas, 1993).

Feminist methodologies assert that the use of traditional forms of research methods will continue to silence the experiences of women in lower-class communities. Therefore, we, as a society will never understand how these women construct their reality based on race, class, gender and age. A feminist approach to delinquency means construction of explanations of female behaviour that are sensitive to the lived experiences of females in a male-dominated patriarchal society.

An ethnographic approach is chosen to investigate the girl’s experiences and to find out what motivates them to associate with gangs and violence particularly socio-cultural factors. An inquiry into the lives of these girls by listening to them allows us to better understand how a gang facilitates survival in their world which is shaped by an array of economic, educational, familial and social constraints. The aim of an ethnographic investigation according to Reinharz (1992) is to document the lives and activities of these girls in gangs, to understand their experiences from their own point of view and to conceptualize these girls behavior within sociological contexts. While an ethnographic study of girls in gangs suggests a picture wherein these girls solve their problems of gender, race and class through gang membership, a critical analysis would strive to connect these interpretations to broader structure of social power and control. The critical focus of this research is to speak on behalf of these girls and give authority to their voices, else the study of girls and gangs remains traditionally anthropological. The approach of standpoint epistemology from a feminist perspective reduces the invalidity of

an outsider looking in. The research project based on this epistemology realizes that those who best understand gangs and who can best express the context of gang membership are those involved.

The label “youth gang” is a metaphor for a number of behaviours, including truancy, school failure, adolescents’ disenfranchisement from parents and the mainstream community, drug use, drug selling, street violence, and teenage pregnancy. However, every behaviour has a cause and a context (Fleisher, 1998). I used a qualitative methodological approach with semi-structured interviews with female gang members to search for the causes and socio-economic contexts of their gang behavior. The qualitative research allows us to arrive at an explanatory understanding of motives, decisions, rationales that emerge within a particular context of meaning that are significant to and reflective of the individual whose action is being studied. Understanding the context of gang culture is essential to understand activities of gang members and for this reason qualitative research is a particularly useful tool for research in gangs (Harris, 1988). This approach is appropriate for exploratory research on a poorly understood issue, given the relative lack of scholarly knowledge and theory on female gangs in Canada. In depth interviews are an appropriate and ideal means to gather rich, contextual information about the gangs, activities and gender dynamics.

A semi-structured interview protocol was used as the basis for the interview. Semi-structured interviews “involve the implementation of a number of predetermined questions and/or special topics” (Berg, 2001: 70). This type of interview structure allows the interviewer and the respondent the freedom to digress from the set of questions being

asked and permit the interviewer to probe in greater detail, while still following a predetermined set of topical questions. Patton (1990) writes that

The purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in and on someone else's mind. The purpose of open-ended interviewing is not to put things in someone's mind... but to access the perspective of the person being interviewed. We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe.

With the above mentioned goal in mind, I conducted interviews that were semi-structured and open-ended, to provide an access to the context of girls' behavior and a way to understand the meaning of their behavior as perceived by them. The behaviour of girls becomes meaningful and understandable only when placed in the context of their lives and lives of those around them (their family, friends, school and neighborhood). Semi-structured interviews ascertain the manner in which the girls become gang members, how they function within the gang, the patterns of behaviour within the gang, sanctions imposed on the members and the meanings girls derive from their participation in gangs.

3c. Sampling Procedures

There is an accepted tradition within qualitative research that allows for purposeful sampling, that is, the identification of a sample group that reflects the phenomenon being investigated (Oberle, 2002). The population sample is drawn from local community agencies, residential facilities, alternate schools, and juvenile justice facilities in the cities of Saskatoon and Edmonton, to get a diversified sample for the study. The study looks at fifteen females from 16 to 33 years of age. Gang membership was determined by self-definition, i.e. if the girls and young women claimed to be associated with the gang (or gangs or delinquent groups) at some point of time in their lives.

Interviews were conducted with 15 young women from Saskatoon and Edmonton during the period August 2003 - March 2004. Initially, I had planned to conduct the data collection from Saskatoon and Vancouver. Although Saskatoon's gang problems are less severe than other major cities of Canada, the ethnic composition of this city's population provides an opportunity to better understand and explore conflicts between and among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth in Canadian society. Vancouver's street gang activity has been widely recognized and stories of ethnic gangs are often in the news when notable cases arise, primarily based on immigration as the journalistic focus. I spent months in contacting every possible community agency and organization working with youth in Saskatoon and Vancouver, with very little support from the outreach workers. I was not able to access any respondents from Vancouver. So finally Vancouver was dropped from this project. I started data collection in Saskatoon and as many as eight interviews were conducted with girls who self identified themselves to be associated with gangs in the past. I had originally planned to interview anywhere between 10-20 females who had been or were still active in gangs. The Ethics Review Board restricted my sample only to those girls who had been associated with gangs in the past and at the time of interview they had no association with gangs and gang activities. The reason was the concern for the safety and security of the active gang members from their fellow gang members and friends in response to their participation in the interview. Also because of the security of the respondents I was not allowed to do snowball sampling technique to find referrals for potential respondents. I had to rely only on the community organizations working with youth in general for my search of respondents.

However, once I began to collect data, I realized how difficult it was to access young women who admittedly had associations with gangs in the past only in the city of Saskatoon. Therefore, I started contacting agencies in Regina, Prince Albert, Calgary and Edmonton. Despite repeated attempts to the outreach workers in various community agencies, some promised to cooperate, with others the process would have had to go through a hierarchy of channels, and some did not respond at all. The experience of the cities of Regina, Prince Albert and Calgary was more or less the same and I was not able to access any respondent from there. But a very different experience was encountered in Edmonton. Dr. Les Samuelson contacted two agencies and they willingly agreed to help me with my research. I explained my research objectives and requirements to the outreach workers and they immediately came up with contacts of females who had association with gangs in the past and as many as seven young women agreed to meet me to share their stories.

Of the eight interviews in Saskatoon, one respondent was contacted through John Howard Society, five were from Kilburn Hall, a closed custody remand center for young offenders in Saskatoon and one was from Community Training Residence, a half way home for women serving time. One young woman in Saskatoon came into my contact through Dr. Bernard Schissel and she was willing to share her story with me. In Edmonton, three interviewees were contacted through Boyle Street Community Services Cooperative, a multi-service community center and an alternate school for troubled youth to get back in education along with other problems they have. Four respondents came from a safe house operated by Catholic Social Services for Women. Most (eighty percent) of the respondents, both in Saskatoon and Edmonton were of Aboriginal descent

(six respondents self identified themselves as First Nations, four as Metis and two as Cree).

3d. Ethics Approval for Conducting Research with Human Subjects

The content of the interview and the involvement of research participants in criminal activities in general, and in gangs in particular, presented a great obstacle to get ethics approval for the study. The permission to conduct the study was granted by the University of Saskatchewan's Behavioural Research Ethics Board in March 2003 following approximately 8 months of negotiations. There are numerous ethical issues that arise when we conduct research on gang members that are noteworthy of discussion. These include parental consent, legal risks of disclosing criminal involvement, disclosure of child abuse, confidentiality, protecting the identity of participants, ensuring safety of the participants and the researcher.

The main issue when interviewing adolescent youth especially under 18 years of age is parent consent. The act of seeking parent consent means the risk of informing parents of their child's involvement in gangs. Decker and Van Winkle (1996) document that youth involved in gangs are reluctant to reveal their gang membership to parents and they often succeed in concealing it. Moreover, it is difficult to get a signed consent from parents because most of the street kids live separately from their parents. To deal with this problem, after discussions with the Ethics Review Board Committee, it was decided that for participants below 18 years, every effort would be made to get a signed consent from their parents or guardians. But for girls who had lost contact with their parents, in such cases participants themselves were asked to give the signed consent to participate depending on the statement of the outreach/social worker that the participant has the

ability to understand the consequences of agreeing to participate in the study. Because of this, great diligence on my part was required to assess the girl's voluntary participation and informed consent.

Girls under sixteen years of age were excluded from the participation and particular care was taken with those under eighteen years of age to assess their competence to provide informed consent. The outreach worker of the agency first approached each participant. When they expressed interest in participating, they were introduced to me. All the participants were informed the main objectives of the study and were given an outline of the focus of research study. Each potential participant was given a consent form, explaining the purpose of the study, issues surrounding their confidentiality and anonymity, and the voluntary nature of participation, including the right to refuse participation, to refuse to answer any questions and to terminate the interview at any time. I read the consent form to the potential participants and then asked if they would like to participate. In all cases, the interviewees gave their written consent to be interviewed after going through the consent form.

Subjects who are interviewed about their criminal involvement must be protected from legal consequences that may result from information disclosed during interview. Prior to each interview, all the participants were warned that they should not tell me any unreported crime in which they or their friends had been involved in the past and any information about planning to hurt someone in the future should not be disclosed to me. Moreover, every care was taken during the interview that such information is not disclosed to me and I did not ask any question that would bring forth this type of information. I maintained the anonymity of the respondents, their friends and associates

by not eliciting and recording their names. I assured them that I would not disclose any information given to me. I did not share any individual information with family, friends, and agency personnel regarding any topic covered in the interviews. Every effort was made to keep their responses as unattributable as possible.

One of the risk factors in gang membership is the exposure to violence especially in case of females. So, to assess the experiences of violence by the young women may expose child abuse and sexual abuse experienced by these women and/or by any of their friends and relatives. The law requires mandatory reporting of abuse cases. But if there was prior and on-going intervention, reporting was unnecessary. This was in fact the case in all situations in which the issue of abuse came in the interviews, perhaps, because I dealt purposely with a population of young women identified through agencies. But had the need arisen, I planned to report abuse when the intervention had not occurred. This situation did not arise in any of the cases.

In doing research with delinquent groups (such as gangs), there is always a concern of the safety of the participants and the researcher. This concern was greater because initially I aimed to interview females who were currently or previously associated with gangs and approach them through community agencies and snowball sampling. The Ethics Review Board at the University of Saskatchewan expressed the concern that the young women in gangs who have participated in the study as well as the researcher may be subject to retribution by other members of the gang. This risk is more pronounced when we intend to find potential participants through a snowball sampling technique. Therefore, to minimize this risk I restricted my sample to those girls who had been associated with gangs and/or delinquent groups in the past and at the time of the

interview, they had no association with gangs, other gang members and gang activities. Moreover, I opted not to do snowball sampling technique to find referrals for respondents. I relied only on the community organizations working with youth in general for my search of potential respondents.

3e. The Interviews: Talking to Young Women

After providing an oral and written explanation of the project's aims and interview procedures, personal consent was obtained before each interview (Appendix: Consent form). It was also explained to the girls that their participation in the study was voluntary and they had the right to refuse to participate at anytime during the interview. Interviews took place in a private setting that the respondent agreed upon – either an office in the community agency, or their home, to encourage openness and create an atmosphere of comfort and security for the respondent. Before referring a young woman to me for the interview, the outreach worker from the agency would explain about me and my research project and address any of their concerns and would make initial judgment about their consent to participate. I would then talk to her on the phone to set up a time and place for the interview. All except two interviews in Saskatoon took place in the private meeting room in Kilburn Hall and Community Training Residence. Of the two, one took place in college campus office and one took place in my house. (The girl neither wanted to talk to me in her house, because of the presence of her housemate, nor did she want to meet me in any public place, even the agency through which she was contacted). In Edmonton, three interviews were conducted in the office of outreach worker of Boyle's Co-op and four in the homes of the respondents. I consider that the informal settings at home helped to create a more casual and friendly atmosphere.

The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed by myself. All the respondents were asked if they had any concern about recording the interviews. None of the respondents objected to recording. However, notes were also made about each interview session. They were informed that the tape recordings of all the interviews would be subsequently destroyed. The interviews lasted somewhere between an hour to three hours.

The in-depth interview schedule was developed to gain a greater understanding of the nature and meanings of gangs from the point of view of these young women. The informal, conversational, semi-structured interview style allowed for an open ended and non-intrusive conversation with young women that reflected upon their experiences prior to getting involved and/or associated with gangs and/or delinquent groups, while being part of these groups and after getting out of these groups/gangs. The questions were framed under four set of topics that emerged from the research questions and objectives of the study and as emphasized by the review of literature. The format helped to ensure that the various topics were covered, but I gave myself and the interviewees enough liberty to discuss other topics that emerged from original topics. This offered a more natural flow of conversation than a structured protocol would allow. The protocol was used as a guide and the questions and the sequence of questions varied depending on the interviewee's responses.

Interviews began by their self-identification as a gang member or member of any other delinquent group in the past. They were asked what 'gang' means to them, how would they define a 'gang', their pathways to gang involvement, how and when they decided to join and what other things were going on with their lives at that time (family

and school). Interviewees were asked about their contact with justice and legal systems of society. The next set of questions was about the gender dynamics within the mixed gender gangs, violence, and activities they engage in and also about initiation and leadership within the gangs. Finally, we discussed getting out of the gang and their attitudes towards the future. To ensure the validity of the interview protocol, first two interviews from the sample were set for pretesting. After analyzing these pre-test interviews, minor additions were made to the protocol.

3f. Strengths and Challenges of the Methodology

There are several limitations when we interpret the study findings. The findings of this study are specific to females associated with gangs in Saskatoon and Edmonton only, given the fact that gangs vary greatly from region to region and city to city. Moreover, the sample does not include girls from every neighbourhood and therefore, is limited in its representativeness. Being a qualitative study, the goal is not generalizability, but a rich analysis of the nature of and meanings girls attribute to gang involvement and the personal, familial, social, legal, and community contexts in which it occurs. A characteristic of qualitative interviewing is that it provides us with a means of understanding the social world from the point of view of the research subjects (Smith, 1987). In this study, an attempt is made to understand how girls define and conceptualize gangs and violence and what impact it has on their lives. My concern with these in-depth interviews is the extent to which I have successfully captured the meanings these young women attribute to gangs and violence.

Moreover, the study does not follow these girls over time and does not allow for an in-depth analysis of one or more gangs or delinquent group of youth. A street

ethnography can only place young women's statements within "the social context in which they were spoken" (Fleisher, 1998: 227). The interplay of issues of gender, race, and class within a gang could have been explored more fully in a street ethnography or had I followed, observed and studied a particular gang or group of young women for a larger period of time.

Feminist research (Kitchen, 1995) suggests that it is very difficult to cross race, ethnic background and class lines. I would like to mention how these social differences might have shaped their responses to me. Compared to the most of the interviewees, I was older than them. I was of the same gender but of a different race (I am East Indian and majority of my interviewees were of Aboriginal descent). However, most of the young women were remarkably open during the interview. I was like a stranger to them and these girls gossiped quite openly knowing they would most likely never see me again. Intimacy grows out of security and trust creates that security. A few young Aboriginal girls seemed hesitant about talking to me in the beginning but later on as the conversation progressed they opened up and in two cases I remember the interview had to be extended into a second session. Most spoke freely, and seemed interested in telling a stranger their story, especially their lives on the streets and their gang life experiences.

The social distance that did exist between me and the interviewees worked to my advantage in some situations. The "otherness" allowed me to probe and follow up on issues without being considered too annoying. My ignorance regarding certain issues affecting their lives brings forth more detailed explanations of those issues. Interviewees were encouraged to share their expertise and they enjoyed the opportunity to be an expert. This position can be empowering to these young women as they can speak about

their life in ways not often available because the “social location of class, gender, age, and for many, race or ethnicity, places them in a socially marginalized position that does not grant a public hearing of their experience, strength, or knowledge” (Taylor et al., 1995: 18). Overall, I believe that I was successful in establishing rapport and gaining the trust of the young women I spoke with.

The interview context certainly affects the image some girls presented of their lives in gangs in particular ways. I believe that interviewing girls in Kilburn Hall, which is a closed facility for youth, affected the girls’ responses. Two girls presented some uncertainty about their present and future association with gangs and group of friends who were involved with gangs. Being in a closed environment they were unable to “hang out” and have fun and were experiencing negative consequences of their behaviours. They kept swinging their views between attachment to the gang peers and willingness to “be good” upon release.

3g. Data Analysis

Interviews were taped for accuracy of information. After the interview, tapes were transcribed and the names were changed to ensure confidentiality. Also I tried not to include any particular event from the interviews that risks the participants by jeopardizing their identity. The transcripts were analyzed for recurrent themes, similarities, and differences to discover the extent to which attitudes, beliefs and experiences of respondents varied.

3h. Conclusions

In the following chapters, I try to make sense of what these girls revealed about their views on gang association and their subsequent engagement in delinquent acts. The goal was to create an academic forum in which the voices of young women and girls who

associate themselves with street gangs/delinquent groups can be heard. By approaching the study this way, the knowledge therefore generated can be applied to create some practical solutions to the reality of these girls and young women.

CHAPTER FOUR: PATHWAYS TO GANG INVOLVEMENT

4a. Introduction

The qualitative data presented in this and the following chapters provide an in-depth understanding of the process of girls' gang involvement. This chapter focuses on young women's life experiences and the events leading to their decisions to associate with gangs. In the following sub-section I begin with presenting a demographic profile of the respondents, followed by their perceptions of the meaning of gang for them. An understanding of what gang means for these young women will help us to understand the function of gang and/or group in their lives. The objective of this chapter is to gain an understanding of the patterns of life contexts that influence young women to associate with gangs and/or delinquent groups. I discuss some of the common themes of young women's perception of what influenced them to become involved or associate with gangs and/or delinquent groups. Then I discuss, through case studies, the processes through which young women's life circumstances led them to gang involvement, i.e., shed light on the context of the pathways that led them to gang association.

4b. Demographics

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of interview respondents. The interview population consisted of fifteen young women: eight from Saskatoon and seven from Edmonton. The ages of respondents ranged from 16 to 33 years. The sample arbitrarily consisted of two groups of respondents: one group comprising eight girls ranging in age from 16-23 years and the second group comprising seven young women ranging in age from 27-33 years. Of the respondents from the group consisting of younger girls, all except two had been placed in remand or were serving time in a

halfway house in Saskatoon at the time of the interviews. These girls expressed their desire to leave gangs on completion of their incarceration time. Two out of the eight respondents from this younger group of girls and all respondents (seven) from the older group had given up the life of gangs and delinquency a significant time earlier and were successfully proceeding with their lives at the time of the interviews.

Table 1: Names and Self-reported Demographics of Respondents

Name	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Level of Education
Saskatoon			
1. Abby	17	Chinese Caucasian	Grade 12
2. Debbie	23	First Nations	Grade 12
3. Tammy	31	Métis	Post-graduate degree
4. Mia	17	Métis	Grade 11
5. Sharon	16	First Nations	Grade 9
6. Sam	16	First Nations	Grade 9
7. Cathy	16	Cree	Grade 9
8. Natasha	16	Métis	Grade 9
Edmonton			
9. Julie	16	First Nations	Grade 9
10. Sandra	30	First Nations	Grade 8
11. Nancy	33	Cree	Diploma
12. Marie	30	Métis	Grade 12
13. Crystal	30	First Nations	Diploma
14. Karina	27	Caucasian	Grade 12
15. Sonia	29	Caucasian	Grade 10

4c. Meaning of Gang

Prior to asking the respondents about their life experiences and involvements with gangs, I asked each young woman to express her personal opinion of the meaning of gang. The issue of defining gangs is a pertinent empirical question in the context of understanding and devising programs responding to gangs. Different views exist amongst the research community, service providers, and law enforcement officials about what a gang is and what distinguishes gang activity from group activity. Seeking a better

understanding of how young women and girls define a gang provides an insight to their perspectives of the meaning and functions of gangs for them.

The larger portion of respondents (twelve out of the fifteen respondents) defined their gangs in terms of criminal involvement, along with discussions of bonding and loyalty with their gang member friends. In this sense, the gang may act like a substitute family for some gang members. To illustrate, one gang member stated: “The real family is not your family. The gang family is your real family because you can’t associate with anyone other than gang member” (Debbie). Another gang member claimed that “It means you are not alone. You are in group of people who watch your back. If anything bugs you, they will take care of that” (Karina).

Six respondents described gang in terms of attributes that emphasized the cultural aspects of the group where themes of common identity, commitment, belonging, and connection to similar other youth were loud and clear.

For me, it was something, a common identity with people, where I didn’t have to try to fit in. They [other gang members] didn’t come from good homes either. We do have common interests; we didn’t have to hide or to be ashamed of what our families were going through. No one really ever talked about it. We did what we wanted to do, we didn’t try to fit in. (Tammy)

A group of tough kids. They stick together and wear colours. (Sandra)

I think, love the people you are connected to. Just stick together with them, stick with the crew you are enrolled with. (Mia)

For me, it means one hundred percent commitment, be a part of a very controlling and demanding group of friends that you are always with. (Abby)

Respondents (seven out of the fifteen respondents) also described their gangs in terms of criminal involvement and mentioned the criminal activities that gang members had been involved in:

It means to be a part of group that is involved in crime. (Sharon)

No other way to get money, get into crimes and robberies. You want to be known and don't want other people to mess with you. (Cathy)

Its like bunch of people and doing all kinds of bad things. (Natasha)

Drugs, prostitution - they make a gang. Drugs come first. (Crystal)

I think it's friends for backup, getting high, sell drugs, have name. (Sonia)

A respondent, who was thirty years old at the time of her interview and had been actively associated with a group of delinquent friends in her teen years, also described her group in terms of crime and mentioned that:

Back then, they were not really called gangs but were operated nearly the same. We were involved in crime and organized crime activity, prostitution, and all different types of activities. (Tammy)

A younger respondent who claimed herself to be a part of a group explained how her group attained identity by means of a name, and she explained the function of gang for protection:

Sam: A group is someone you hang around with. A group is a group. But it depends because gang can be considered as a group. I usually hang around with my relatives. We are called “. . .” girls. People just call us “. . .” girls. It's my last name. We hung around together, we got this group identity. Well, our group is also same like a gang like we watch ourselves. For me gang means that you are using someone's back to protect your back.

Interviewer: So your group has both boys and girls?

Sam: Yes, but they are all my cousins.

As determined by these responses, gang means a range of different things for these young women. Concepts of gang include that of a group of individuals which acts as a family with strong bonds of loyalty and commitment underlined by common identity. Gang was viewed as a primary reference with whom member respondents spent most of their time. These connotations support the literature indicating varied functions of gang for youth (Campbell, 1984; Curry and Decker, 2001; Vigil, 1988), and suggest that gangs provide social support systems for their members including identity, belonging, status, excitement, and a way of adapting to constraints imposed by social and economic environments. The distinction between a gang and a group of friends (or clique) warrants further explanation and this is one of the limitations of the current study since there were not many girls (only two) in the sample of respondents who explicitly described themselves to be part of a group (or clique), thereby precluding a rich analysis of the varying perceptions of differences between a group of friends and a gang.

4d. Precursors to Gang Involvement

The in-depth interviews with young women suggest that their life experiences coupled with social and environmental factors influenced their choices to become involved with gangs. Their experiences suggest a metaphor of “getting caught up,” as their choices and actions always occurred within a larger, collectively influenced realm of what was possible. The pathways to gang involvement followed different routes, and some of the variables related to gang involvement for the girls in this study uncovered through initial analysis emulated research findings from other studies on female offenders and gang girls in the United States (Quicker, 1983; Campbell, 1990; Miller, 2001). In this section, I examine those correlates of female gang involvement.

Table 2: Personal and Structural Contexts of Gang Involvement

Context of Gang Involvement	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Family Problems		
Domestic violence	10	66.6
Experiences of abuse	11	73
Drug and/or alcohol abuse by parents	12	80
Multiple family problems*	11	73
Foster care	10	66.6
Family member(s) involved with gangs	8	53.3
Neighbourhood		
Presence of violence and gang activity	12	80
School		
Bullying, victimization, discrimination	7	46.6

*Multiple family problems include domestic violence, experiences of abuse, and alcohol and drug use by parents.

In line with previous research in the United States into the backgrounds and characteristics of young female offenders and girls involved with gangs, the preliminary analysis of the current study (see Table 2) uncovered that nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of the young women I spoke with reported multiple family problems like domestic violence, abuse, neglect, and regular alcohol and drug use by parents and more specifically by mothers. Ten out of the fifteen (66.6 percent) young women reported having stayed in more than one foster homes either after running away from their original home or due to the interference of social services in response to family problems. More than half (53.3 percent) of the young women had one or more immediate family members in gangs, most often a brother, cousin, father, uncle and/or an aunt. In addition, the young women (80 percent of the respondents) came from neighbourhoods where gang activity and violence were visibly present. Almost half of them did not mention positive experiences during their school years, but did perceive school completion as one of the preliminary steps in achieving a future good life.

In the following section, I discuss variables under the categories of family, neighbourhood, and schools.

Family

The institution of family always comes at the forefront in efforts to explain involvement in gangs and delinquent behaviour among youth. Young males from female-headed households are more likely to join gangs in an attempt to find male role models outside their families. In low-income urban families wherein the socio-economic needs of their children go unmet, gangs fulfill those needs. Feminist explanations of female gang involvement focus on histories of abuse and victimization of young girls in their homes at the hands of immediate family members or relatives or family friends. Relative lack of parental attachment, less family supervision, family violence, drug-addicted family members, and gang involvement of other family members all contribute to young women's gang involvements (Moore, 1991). Family disorganization among Aboriginal communities is an important cause behind youth's gravitating toward street gangs. The home, ideally a place of love, care, nurture, and support, had become a place of hate, abuse, and neglect for most of the girls in the present study. There is no systematic research that examines the relationship between family characteristics and female gang involvement in Canada.

With regard to parents, only four respondents had their biological parents, both mother and father, present in the home. One respondent had been adopted at birth and lived with her adopted parents, while the remaining ten young women had only their real mothers along with their siblings in the home. In those cases, the father figure was either a stepfather or their mothers' boyfriends. Most of the respondents had been victims of

physical and sexual abuse at home, a factor that deteriorated their relationships with their families. Almost half of the girls (seven out of fifteen) had experienced sexual abuse at the hands of their primary caregivers and/or close family members. For Tammy, Crystal, and Karina the primary cause motivating gang involvement was the sexual abuse occurring at home. While these three were not the only women who reported abuse in the family, for them the abuse led to their removal from their homes. Whereas Tammy landed in a foster home, Crystal and Karina landed on the streets where they eventually met other gang members. Tammy spent most of her teenage and youth years moving from one foster home to another, and in her own words, “For the most part of my life I have been staying with foster families and not my real family.” Sonia underwent both sexual abuse from her real father and severe physical abuse from her mother. When asked about her family life, she replied:

My real dad, he pimped me from the age twelve to eighteen. My mom would beat me. My dad molested me. He prostituted me. My brothers were treated nicely. My mom didn't want a girl. I don't know why. My mom would lock me in my room most of the time. I runaway from a couple of times because I didn't like the situation at home at all. And my mom would blame everything on me. She would beat me. She was alcoholic, she would burn me, whip me, torture me, humiliate me in front of people, made me do lots of things. Finally I got sick of it and took off couple of times. When I was brought back home, my mom would beat me up again. I was twelve when I first run away.

Sonia is among the ten young women who reported a presence of domestic violence in their homes and eight out of these ten reported being victims of this violence, usually by their caregivers (i.e., mothers, stepfathers, mothers' boyfriends, grandparents, and foster parents). Said Karina, “I was sexually abused a lot and beaten up a lot. My mom would lock me in my room all the time. I grew up being very angry. There is lot of anger in my family, like lot of hitting, yelling, stuff like that.” Karina explained that she

had no reason to love her mother and she blamed her mother for all that happened in her (Karina's) life – abuse from her father, that caused her to run away, and end up on the street and get involved with gangs. The majority of the respondents reported experiencing some type of childhood abuse in their families. A significant amount and level of violence within the home was reported by two-thirds of the young women. They described witnessing regular incidents of violence between their parents (and/or caretakers), most of which was attributed to their parents' alcohol abuse. Mia explained:

My family [pause], it's into drugs, violence. People getting beat up, people getting robbed in my house. Drinking, partying with drugs. My mom always had a boyfriend around. They would get drunk and end up fighting.

Drugs, alcohol, and violence were common themes in the girls' family lives. Of note is that a majority of the respondents started drinking and using drugs in their homes, rather than after joining gangs. Mia asserted, "I was using drugs before I met these people [gang]. I was smoking weed." However, the intensity and/or severity of using drugs and alcohol increased after associating with gangs: "I started hardcore drugs on the streets and before I just used to drink sometimes" (Marie). Eighty percent of the respondents (twelve out of the fifteen respondents) mentioned the presence of drugs and alcohol in their homes and a majority of them were already into habitual drinking or drug use by the ages of twelve to fourteen years. Sonia described her family as alcoholic: "Most of my family is alcoholic. Lot of alcohol use. I used coke, marijuana, LSD, dope. It started at the age of twelve. I got them from my dad."

Sharon, who ran away from her home, lived with her friends for some time, then was on the streets by the age of thirteen, described her parents' affiliation with biker gangs and also described her childhood memories:

I remember sitting there as a child and my mom and dad drinking with bunch of Hells Angels. Its kind of cool but not cool for five-year-old child. Its kind of scary. My mom and dad dealing with Hells Angels and any gang member coming in and out buying stuff [drugs]. You kind of get used to with that kind of stuff when you grow up. It was normal for me and my brother.

The presence of gang members in their families was another factor that emerged in more than half of the interviews. Eight young women mentioned that close family member(s) were involved with gangs, that member being either a brother or father or cousin or other relative (uncle and/or aunt). For half (four out of those eight respondents), these other gang-involved family members were also adolescents, so gang membership carried strong appeal to the youth. For two out of eight of the young women mentioned above, their gang-involved family members were adults and this appears to have shaped the context of their gang involvement. For the final two young women, both elders and adolescent family members were involved with gangs, so they learned about crime and gangs via adults and other youth in the family. Six of the above eight women lived in Saskatoon and of these, five were Aboriginal. Intergenerational gang affiliation represents an important pattern for examination. As Saskatoon matures in its problem of gang affiliations, intergenerational dynamics may become more prevalent. These findings correspond with those of by Nimmo (2001), who also noticed the same patterns of generational gang affiliation in Manitoba.

Adult family members' affiliations were mostly with Hell's Angels, and family members frequently served as drug dealers. Both Sharon and Sam exemplified typical cases of intergenerational gang affiliation. Sharon explained her family members' association with gangs:

Everybody in my family is in gangs and drugs. I know my dad associates with Hell's Angels. From my mom's side, there are lots from her family, her brothers, cousins, they are in IP [Indian Posse]. My cousins are in IP. My uncle died being with Hell's Angels. My brother, he is trying to get in a gang called Crazy Cree. We like them. I have lot of friends in Crazy Cree.

Sam described her family as “drug dealers.” Her grandparents had raised her while her father served a sentence in the penitentiary, and her mother was never present. She gained information about gangs from her father, who she says “was in ‘Manitoba Warriors.’ He would tell the stuff about it. I came to know about gangs from him.” She further asserted, “My uncle is with Hell's Angels. My other uncles and cousins are in other gangs. . . . My family is a drug dealer. My grandfather, my uncles, and some of my aunties are drug dealers.”

Because of the gang affiliations of family members, girls were not naïve about gangs and drugs: “I was always sure what the gang is because my brother is in gang. He is in jail now. My whole family is into gangs and drugs” (Mia). Most often, girls who associated with gangs and had older sibling in gangs were girls who wanted to be like the others and were lured to gangs because of the parties and fun associated with them.

Cathy, a young sixteen-year-old girl, had lived with her mother and brothers. Her two brothers were associated with different gangs in the city and one was serving time in an institution. She mentioned that her mother and brothers were very protective and did not want her to associate with gang members because of the risks associated with such involvement. She gave the reason for her brothers' gang involvement as a need for money to support the family. Her reason for joining gangs was for the fun, and to imitate others around her:

My mom is always worried about me wearing colours. She is scared and does not like it [joining gang]. My brothers are in gangs. They don't want me to be like them. They don't want me to get into fights and gangs. I ran away because I want to have fun. I want to drink. I want to be just like other kids.

What is interesting is that these young women were aware of the dangers associated with gang involvement yet still became involved. After being in gangs for a while, however, they started realizing what being in gang “really means.” This realization was the main theme that emerged from the interviews when respondents were asked about their reasons for leaving the gangs. This area is discussed in detail in chapter 6, where I discuss the pathways out of gangs.

Neighbourhood: “I grew up with them”

For most of the young women in the study, their decisions to associate with gangs seem to have emerged from their exposures to gangs and violence in their neighbourhoods and/or through friends. Joe and Chesney-Lind (1995) asserted that one of the major functions of gangs was to alleviate the boredom experienced by inner-city youth who have few options for recreation and fun. Quicker stated, “To be in a gang is to be part of something. It means having a place to go, friends to talk with, and parties to attend. It means recognition and respected status” (1983: 80).

Out of the fifteen respondents, all except one mentioned the presence of fights in their neighbourhoods. Mia, a seventeen-year-old Native girl, lived in an inner-city neighbourhood of Saskatoon: “I grew up in neighbourhood with cops always around. People getting hurt at parties. People getting stabbed. People getting drugged on the street. Always that kind of stuff going around” (Mia). She further asserted that this influenced her and her friends, and they began doing the very things they had seen: “That’s what I was doing with my friends, we all were just partying around.” These

friends she mentioned all were affiliated with a known gang in the city, and after a while Mia decided to become part of a gang through formal initiation. Eighty percent of the girls had lived in neighbourhoods with a high profile presence of gangs and gang fights. Debbie was born and raised in Edmonton in a neighbourhood that she described as a “hood,” inhabited by poor people who did not have enough food to eat. Gangs were all around with members (and “wannabes”) belonging to all age groups, and Debbie commented that “I grew up with them [gangs] since my childhood.” Sharon is a fifteen-year-old Native girl raised in Saskatoon who described her neighbourhood as follows: “It was an IP [Indian Posse] territory. I lived in an old IP house. . . . If you are walking, a kid stalking or stopping a girl or guy, it’s all normal in the Westside area of the city [Saskatoon] and hood.” Sam grew up in Yorkton: “On my street, it was always a Native kid on a White kid, or it was ‘skateboarders’ [a group of White kids with skateboards] against Natives.” For most of these young women, the presence of violence, gangs, and fights was a common occurrence in the inner-city neighbourhoods, and for them that environment became a normative part of growing up.

The influence of peers within the neighbourhood context provided an important gateway to violence and gangs during respondents’ childhood and adolescence years. Abby, a seventeen-year-old, Chinese-Caucasian girl, described her neighbourhood as appearing to outsiders to be small, quite and nice. Everyone “was there” for each other, and “All the kids hung out together and the older ones were involved with younger ones, were there for younger ones.” The older kids in her neighbourhood were the resource persons for information and contacts with gangs: “They were the one who teach us all about gangs, drugs, fights, and all the stuff you couldn’t find from anywhere else”

(Abby). With limited opportunities for fun, excitement, and recreational activities available to youth in inner-city poor neighbourhoods, watching gang fights was a popular recreation. Abby explained:

There were lots of fights between different groups of friends. The big kids would tell us [the younger ones] about gang fights that were going to happen and all the kids get together at the place where the fight is supposed to be and sit at side in circle to watch the fight maybe not in our neighbourhood but in other one. Everyone will be excited and telling others and discussing the fight they watched.

The group of girls who ran away from their homes as an escape from abuse, started working on the streets then came in contact with gang members through friends who also worked the streets and were gang members. Marie grew up in an inner-city neighbourhood of Edmonton: “I grew up in inner city. I started working on streets when I was thirteen and started on drugs. I had lot of friends in gangs on street. I met them through my street friends.” Many of the girls who started working on the streets got associated with gangs because of the need for protection. Crystal came to Edmonton after running away from her home in Yellowknife (Northwest Territories) when she was sixteen years old. To survive, she started working on the streets of Edmonton and there she came into contact with other girls who worked the streets and who also were gang members. She explained, “Gangs have territories not just to sell drugs but where their girls can work. If you happen to land on their block or where we are not supposed to be, face the consequences. You have to have back up [affiliation with street gangs] in order to survive and work.”

Schools and Education

The literature strongly supports that female gang involvement is associated with poor school performance and low expectations for completing school (Bowker and Klein,

1983; Bjerragaard and Smith, 1993). In the present study, all the respondents dropped out or were suspended from schools at least once during their pre-teen and teen years.

Though, they went back to school during their later years. One of the main reasons cited was their drug addictions, which led to frequent suspensions and finally dropping out of school. Mia commented: “I liked school until I got into drugs. Everything just dropped and I didn’t care anymore about people around me. I started getting high and that made me skip school. Then I dropped.” Similarly, Julie from Edmonton asserted: “I was in school for a while and then I just stopped going to school. I was always on the streets doing drugs. I started drugs when I was thirteen.” Though a few of the young women mentioned the presence of gang activity and drug dealing in schools, they had never associated with those gang members or drug dealers in their schools.

After a deeper look at their experiences with school, it was revealed that respondents developed negative attitudes towards school because they always got into trouble at school. By trouble, they meant being involved in fights with other students and undergoing negative experiences with teachers and authorities. The lack of “acceptable” attitude on the part of school authorities alienated them further from school and from education itself. Sam explained: “I didn’t want to learn anything. I would go to school high and get suspended. I never liked the school. I was always into trouble.” Karina from Edmonton described herself as suffering from Attention Deficit Disorder and was on medication. Because of problems at school associated with her health, she developed a strong dislike for school: “I never liked school. I hated it. And you have these people [teachers and counselors] telling you, you can’t do. Most of the teachers didn’t even like me. I was a ‘troublemaker’ all the time.”

Sonia, also from Edmonton, was a victim of severe physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her parents. For her, it was primarily reasons related to her abusive experiences in her home that led her to develop a dislike for school:

I had no friends in school. Because my mom wouldn't take care of me good. My mom would only let me take bath only once a week. She wouldn't take care of me. I had no good clothes and never kept on my appearance. I didn't like school, studies. I didn't have time for studies really because I was being beaten up and I was kept like a little, how could you call it, like a little slave. I had to clean the whole house every day. I never had time to study; no one would help me with studies. So I never really liked school.

For these young women, school served as another place where they experienced physical and emotional abuse, discrimination, and violence. Explaining abuse and violence within the school, Abby said

Since I was very aggressive, when I started going to school, I got into fights. When I started getting picked on as every other child gets picked on and I used to fight back. Then I get picked on more and I fight back more. I went to a Catholic school and I wasn't Catholic so they pick on me for that. I was Chinese and everybody else was White, they pick on me for that. They will pick on me for my last name as they feel it sounded funny.

Because of these regular violent incidents Abby would be suspended from school, and during those "days off" from school she used to hang out with other kids who were associated with gangs.

Despite having articulated experiencing strong disliking for and alienation from schools and the education system in their adolescence years, most of the respondents in the older group (five out of seven) successfully completed high school in their later years mostly through alternate schools. Abby was set to go to university in the next fall session, Nancy had completed her diploma in social work, and Crystal would soon be completing her final exams for a diploma in business management and marketing. Tammy, after

completing her post-graduate degree in social work was a social worker, lecturer, and researcher at a postgraduate institution. One might ask whether, because of their previous lives' experiences, these young girls might have "immature" perceptions of what is actually possible in terms of education and career goals. However, very possibly as they mature and grow older, the examples of others with good jobs and successful lives might help the young women to realistically hone and shape their sense of what can be accomplished and what is possible to expect in life.

4e: Case Studies

In this section, I present detailed case studies of four of the girls I interviewed, namely Abby, Tammy, Mia, and Crystal. The intent of choosing these case studies is to shed light on the diversity of background experiences of young women in gangs and also the similar life contexts that influence their choices to associate with gangs. I will forefront the characteristics shared by young women which have structured their life courses and guided them into similar outcomes in their lives, i.e. association with gangs (Daly, 1998). The girls made more or less "free" choices to associate with gangs and exercised a more or less "free" will to participate in violent behaviour; however, they did so in a world of already predisposed choices, options, and possibilities.

Abby

Abby is an eighteen-year-old Chinese Caucasian girl who had associated with different gangs since the age of twelve. She lived with her parents and a younger brother throughout most of her childhood. Her childhood had been filled with violence at home. Because of "the different ethnic backgrounds" of her parents, recalled Abby, her parents did not get along well with each other and "were always fighting":

My family always fought, every day. My mom and dad had a bad relationship, they fought all day. . . Always argue, and by the end of the day it would usually turn into a physical fight. They do not get along with each other and after fighting for the whole day, they would snap on us. My mom had the worst temper of all and sometimes she would throw things at me and smack my head.

Her mother's bad temper strained Abby's relationship with her, but Abby spoke of liking her father: "he was always trying to comfort me, trying to teach me things, and help me. He is the one who took us to parks, play games."

Abby described herself as a physically aggressive child, and she was attending an anger management program offered by a community organization at the time of her interview. She blamed her violent temper on the fights at home. She stated, "It came a lot from the fights in my family, my house. I'm pretty sure that's what started it. Even when I was five I was very aggressive."

Abby started smoking and drinking at an early age. Apart from the presence of violence, she also was exposed to alcohol and cigarettes at home:

I tried smoking because my parents smoke and they left the cigarette lit in ashtray and I went up and tried it and I liked it. So I started smoking. When I was about six and a half I started smoking marijuana and then I would make a little trip to park or back alley to have my smoke. I always had alcohol around me like I had couple of drinks here and there. From the time I was six to the time I was twelve, I was drinking pretty heavily. When I was eleven or twelve, it became a big problem. I started drinking and using drugs very heavily. I used marijuana, and morphine. At twelve, I started drinking all the time.

Abby had a few cousins and relatives who were associated with gangs and drug dealing. But her exposure to gangs and gang members started in her neighbourhood and foster home. The older kids in her neighbourhood were the gateway to gangs, gang fights, and drugs. Due to social services intervention because of the violence in her home, Abby

was placed in a foster home, where she came into contact with gang members through other kids in the foster home:

I moved into a foster home when I was eleven and met a lot of other kids in foster home and it turned out that a lot of them were gang members and ended meeting their gang through them.

Her violent behaviour would result in suspension from school and during those suspensions, she started hanging with friends who were gang members:

I always went to school every day and never skipped. And I always did fairly well in school but I used to fight a lot. For lot of reasons, I was always in a fight and always get caught. They would kick me out of school for few days so I come home and stay in my neighbourhood and hang out with kids who were not in school or who have skipped the school and were associated with gangs. I always hang around with them and I always wanted to know and they would tell me about gangs. When I met more gang members then I started hanging around with them more. I became friends with them. I didn't just go to party with them and go watch the gang fight, I go to their home, their relatives, I go shopping with them, I play pool with them, swimming with them and then I gradually started hanging with them all day, and then all week and then some of them became my best friends at that time. I was finally one of them.

For Abby, gang involvement was a slow process and initially it was based on friendship with gang members. Rejected by the institution of school and being only loosely attached to her family, her friends were the only meaningful relationships during her adolescent years. She felt acceptance and belonging with her gang-associated friends. She was totally committed to her friendship circle and it was the fear of losing her friends that made her stay in the gang. She later on decided to leave the gang because her friends were no longer in the gang: "The only thing that made it interesting here in the first place was that I had my friends here but now all started to die and maybe I don't want to do this anymore." Abby spoke at length about the violence and other activities in gangs. She described herself as a fearless person and was "always willing to take on fights" in the

gang. Because of her ability to fight, different gangs in the city willingly accepted her. Though she was not Aboriginal, her strong commitment as a friend and to the gang made her a popular gang member of Aboriginal gangs in the city.

At the time of her interview, Abby was completing high school and was planning to enter university as a science student in the upcoming fall. She was living independently with a friend and had moved to a quiet neighbourhood. She sometimes visited her parents, who had separated by that time.

Tammy

Tammy is a twenty-nine-year-old Métis woman who had associated with a group of friends when she was a teenager and in our interview compared that group with the youth gangs of the present time: “It was pretty much the same, group activities, crime, violence, drugs, prostitution.” She and her siblings had been raised by her mother and her real father was absent throughout her life. Tammy recalled that her childhood had been “really nice” until her family moved to Saskatoon: “That’s when the trouble started. Everything started falling apart. There was lot of racism and stereotyping going on, people calling derogatory things about being Native. It was a big effect on me.”

Apart from experiencing racial abuse at the hands of society as a whole, Tammy also suffered physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her mother’s boyfriend: “My mother started dating this guy who was very abusive; he was emotionally abusive, physically abusive, and he was sexually abusive as well. So we went through a lot of problems, me and my siblings, with this man.” Unfortunately, Tammy’s suffering did not stop when she told a social worker about her experiences of abuse:

I told social worker that he was sexually abusive; they didn’t do anything to him. Their response was to take me out of the home and put me and my

brother and sister into foster care. This seems like a punishment against me for what he did. And I was not allowed to go back home to my mother till he is gone from our house. It was like negative consequence for me.

Her sister and brother were both placed in different foster homes. This separation from her siblings was a big setback for Tammy, who to some extent blamed herself for having separated her siblings from herself and her mother. This also deteriorated her relationship with her mother, who according to Tammy did not leave her boyfriend because of “reasons well understood.” She was alcoholic and drug addict and needed him to support her habits. She had her own set of problems.” This separation from her family and journey through different foster homes continued until Tammy was sixteen, at which point she began moving back and forth between foster care and her mother. During this later period she went through drug over-dosing, selling drugs, prostitution, fighting, and became part of a group of friends who were involved in criminal activities.

Because of her mother’s troubled life, i.e., alcohol and drug addiction, Tammy felt dejected. Her personal family life, socio-economic status, and ethnicity all played roles in deteriorating her experiences in school. At school the White middle-class family was fore fronted as the ideal, a value reinforced by both teachers and the other students:

When I was younger and things were going okay at home, I was always classified as gifted students and I always tried to do the best things. But if you went to school you are told that “good moms don’t drink and they don’t try to do this or that. Let’s make a Father’s Day card. If you don’t have a dad they reinforce that over and over and over. So it was easier to be with kids who didn’t have those things and didn’t have to pretend and fit in.

Because she was distanced from family and school, peer acceptance and fitting in were of great significance for Tammy, who found comfort “finding similar and finding a place where you were no longer told how awful you were.” Her decision to be part of a group

of friends resulted from a search for belonging to a similar group and finding common identity: “It was little easier for me to hang out with kids who shared somewhat of a same backgrounds; where I do not have to fit in.” Emphasizing their common bonding, Tammy described her friends: “They did not come from good homes either. We didn’t have to hide or to be ashamed of what our families were going through. No one really ever talked bout it.”

Tammy tried her best to fit in with her new friends, who had defined their own values and criteria for acceptance and respect: “It was no longer cool to be smart and I didn’t want to be known for that. The more violent you got, the better reputation you had. More crazy you could be, the better it would be. I wanted to be that. I did my best to be bad, pretended that I was really dumb. It was more of a peer acceptance.”

Being in the group of friends that Tammy emulated with a present-day gang allowed her to develop a sense of belonging, establish identity with similar kids, and experience respect and status: “Respect is big one. When you get respect for doing things. It was lot quicker than anything else I had ever experienced before.” Despite the respect, status, and belonging that Tammy experienced as a result of being in a group/gang, she also suffered a great deal from her childhood history of being a victim of violence and sexual abuse. The death of her brother had a great impact on her and she began drinking and using drugs heavily. This downward phase of her life changed when she became pregnant: “I think baby was the only way to put my life on track.” However, Tammy described her desistance from violence and group/gang as a slow process. She successfully left her group, completed a post-graduate degree in social work, and

currently works with youth as a social worker and with interest in Aboriginal traditions and culture.

Mia

Mia is a seventeen-year-old Métis girl who had been a gang member since the age of twelve. Her two older brothers had been gang members for years. Mia's one brother died as a result of gang violence and other one is serving time. She was not a member of her brothers' gangs but had been exposed to gangs, crime, and drugs from an early age. Her brothers' friends had been at their home all the time and had both dealt drugs and partied there. She recalled growing up as part of that environment: "People getting beat up, people getting robbed in my house. Drinking, partying with drugs." Mia has never met her father and she has a close bonding and relationship with her mother and younger sister. She began using drugs at an early age and as a result she dropped out of school in grade 7. She ran away from home several times and stayed on streets for a while.

Mia says that she joined a gang for popularity, fun, and excitement. She recalled, "I thought, it was cool to be in gang. That's where everyone belonged." She and her best friend were initiated into the gang on the same day and had to perform armed robbery as an initiation.

I went to a party. There were whole bunch of guys there. My girlfriend and me went there. They asked us to go and do an armed robbery. We did it. They gave us approval. We just know each other for six years for now. Me and my people. Nobody else. We just stick with each other like we are family.

Before joining the gang Mia had not been hanging out with that group, but she was attracted to the fun and excitement attached to gang membership: "I have known these guys from school. My girlfriend and me have always wanted to hang out with them. I

wanted to be associated with these people for a long time. I was kind of attracted to them as I thought they are always doing things that I like.”

Mia’s gang remained a very close-knit group of six friends at the time we spoke. It was comprised of Mia and her boyfriend, a girlfriend and that girl’s boyfriend, and two other close friends. Mia’s boyfriend was a gang leader and she acknowledged the privilege of her position. Her boyfriend was at that point serving time in an institution, and she enjoyed the respect she received as a girlfriend of a leader. This increased during his incarceration because then she was in charge of all the money that flowed through the group. For Mia, “Money is good.” Money and respect were the reasons why Mia remained committed to her gang. Her status was not ascribed solely from her boyfriend’s position, she emphasized, because it was also achieved through fights, robberies, and drug dealing. She had on previous occasions served time for robberies.

While she reported enjoying the fun, excitement, and respect from gang membership, Mia was ambivalent about remaining in gang for much longer. She was concerned about the risks involved of getting caught and being sent to prison. At the time of her interview she was in remand, and she clearly expressed her unhappiness at being there. She said that she missed her mother and her little sister. Though she expressed a desire to leave the gang after release, she also indicated that her decision to quit would depend on whether her boyfriend was willing to leave the gang because she was committed to her relationship with him.

Crystal

Crystal is a thirty-year-old Aboriginal woman who had associated with Hell’s Angels in Ontario and a local youth gang in Edmonton. By comparison to most other

respondents in the study, Crystal had been first exposed to gangs at a later age, i.e., at eighteen years of age. She was born in a small town in the Northwest Territories. When she was sixteen or seventeen years old, she ran away from her home to escape from a physically and sexually abusive stepfather. In that home Crystal had two younger sisters and her mother, and her mother did nothing when Crystal told her of the abuse by the stepfather:

She didn't have time to deal with anyone. If I need help or anything, she's never there for me. I let her know what's going on [sexual abuse by stepfather] and she didn't do anything. I don't think she was happy. I think she was trapped. Even now she is so concerned about herself and her own life. She's got anger and lot of different issues. I ran away from home at sixteen. I was leaving home before and going to friend's houses and refusing to go back home. My stepdad was very abusive. That ultimately made me leave for good. I never went back.

Crystal had had no exposure to gangs, violence, or drugs until she left home:

There were really no drugs till I get to city. It was really hard to find things like that because of small town. There was not much drugs and gangs. Nothing like that which is why I think when I came to city I fell into it even more because I was so curious about it.

Crystal's life events through the streets of Edmonton, involvement in prostitution, and association with gangs followed a typical pathway to seeking gang involvement in order to gain protection on the streets. To escape sexual and physical abuse from stepfather, Crystal and her girlfriend [who left her abusive husband] had run away from her hometown and fell into the street life of Edmonton.

We came here [Edmonton] with no money, nowhere to go, nothing, nowhere to stay. I had money just to get on plane. We ended up sitting on airport until a cab driver felt really sorry for us and he ended up paying for our room in motel. From there we went into prostitution. It was kind of choice but the situation we were in, it was horrible. We thought it was better than situation we were in back home. We didn't care but we just want to leave. When we got here we had no food, no clothes, no place to live, no nothing. When we saw money that was it.

Crystal and her friend stayed in Edmonton for six months. When she experienced a really bad date, she decided to leave the Edmonton streets and went to Ontario to work as a strip club dancer. There she came into contact with Hell's Angels, fell in love with one of the members, and became girlfriend of a biker:

I went to Ontario and worked for an agency, they put us in hotel. I started working in clubs. . . . I thought well it's safer than I was on the streets. I was outside in cold, now I'm inside. That's where I fell into drugs. I came in contact with bikers because bikers they sell drugs in this community in clubs, watch the girls. Sell drugs; get girls selling drugs for them. That's what I was doing. I started selling drugs for them to other girls who were working in the club. I didn't even realized what was happening to me. I went there I was young. I trusted everyone who came along that was willing to help me. To me I was so alone and they take advantage of girls like that in that situation. They use girls for sex, money, drugs. I thought it would be cool to be in a biker gang, riding along on Harleys.

Crystal thought her biker friends would protect her whenever she was in trouble, but she had been "looking for support in wrong place." After getting gang-raped by those "friends," she lost all trust in them. However, she ended up working on the streets for them until she was arrested for trafficking and soliciting and was sent back to her parents. She stayed at her parents' place for some time then again ran away and returned to Edmonton. Recalled Crystal: "Things had become quite different on the streets now. I met lot of girls working on the streets for youth gangs. I didn't want to be in gangs because of the experience with bikers." But she was not able to refrain from gang affiliation for long: "One day I was working on the street and there were four girls. They pulled up in a car and they got out and beat me up." When I asked Crystal why these girls had come to fight with her, she promptly replied, "Because I was working on their street, the street where they were supposed to be working. They weren't there that night, so I thought I'll go there, which is against the rule."

This confrontation with girls belonging to a youth gang did not end at that one fight. Crystal was kidnapped by the males of that same gang, another horrible incident from which she managed to escape. She then joined a Lebanese youth gang in order to seek protection and work in a defined territory without fear. Crystal and other girls in the sample mentioned that different youth gangs have territories not just for selling drugs but also for where their girls work. According to the respondents, girls who do not have pimps and are not associated with gangs have a really hard time working safely and avoiding becoming victims of violence from gang members.

Through her affiliation with the Lebanese gang, Crystal met a young man who had a strong faith in his religion and this influenced her. Crystal explained that she quit prostitution, drugs, and gang all in one day without any triggering event, but prior to that she definitely had done a lot of thinking about the bad dates and violence she faced on daily basis. She converted to Islam, strictly followed that religion, and married the man from the Middle East. At the time of our interview, she was preparing for the final exams of her diploma in business management and marketing.

4f. Intergenerational and Geographic Legacies of Social Disadvantage

The findings presented in chapter 4 draw attention to the young women's precursors and pathways to gang involvement. The reasons for young women's and girl's involvement with gangs highlights the various social, emotional, and protection needs that gangs meet in their lives. To sum up, disruptive family backgrounds, histories of physical and sexual abuse, the involvement of family members in gangs, and/or exposure to gangs through neighbourhoods were common correlates in the lives of the girls in the sample. These factors overlap in their lives. The accounts of these girls' experiences

provide elaboration of a gradual and relatively inescapable escalation of their involvement in gangs and crime. The case studies both tell the stories of respondents and also illustrate the broader patterns of life experiences that make gang involvement a viable “choice” for some young women and girls. The majority of the respondents reported having experienced some type of childhood abuse in their families of origin. They came from families in which serious problems such as violence, alcohol and substance abuse, and presence of gang members existed. These problems in general disallowed a stable and supportive family life, which in turn impaired the emotional and physical needs of the girls. Through gathering in their own words the views and experiences of the young women, it can be concluded that girls’ gang involvement is the product of an interplay of social and cultural factors that collectively explains the limited options available in their personal lives.

The stories of childhood initiation into substance use, drug dealing, violence at home and on the streets, and gangs describe choices made and actions taken by young girls in the face of locally available constructions of opportunity and possibility. This assessment is premised on the belief that a person is not born with a sense of what is possible and of where opportunities can be found. People come to understand the opportunities that surround them as well as what might be possible in their lives as they are socialized and cultured and as they come into a sense of themselves and of their unique relationships to others in society. Young women described early childhood memories of family including parents, older siblings, and other relatives who were involved in drugs and gangs; their families’ struggles with poverty and unjust social institutions. Consequently, girls talked about getting involved with gangs, drugs, and

violence in terms of intergenerational and geographic legacies of social disadvantage; i.e., how young Aboriginal girls in Western Canada grew up surrounded by or immersed in poverty, violence, drug dealing, and gangs. The girls' and young women's stories highlight the particular environmental and/or contextual factors under which their choices were made and actions taken.

Chapter 5 discusses their lives within the gangs and illustrates the roles of social and cultural influences in their participation in violent behaviour.

CHAPTER FIVE: LIFE WITHIN THE GANG

5a. Introduction

The previous chapter described the risk factors associated with young women's involvement with gangs and the contexts within which they decided to associate themselves with gangs. Their life courses based on the intersections of age, gender, race, and class limited their choices and paved pathways to gangs. This chapter presents an examination of girls' experiences within gangs, and the ways in which gender shaped their experiences. With a broader objective to exploring the lives of girls within gangs, the focus of this chapter is twofold. The first goal is to understand whether gangs serve as a place of gender equality for girls and how girls perceive gender power relations within gangs. The second goal is to understand how girls make sense of their involvements in violent behaviour.

Of the total youth charged of violent crime in Canada in 2003, twenty six percent were female youth as compared to seventy four percent male youth (Bell, 2007). Though youth violence is disproportionately a male phenomenon, there have been an increasing number of media accounts portraying young women as becoming increasingly violent. Some journalists produce reports without clearly substantiating their claims. McGovern's (1998) "Sugar and spice and cold as ice: teenage girls are closing the gender gap in violent crime with astonishing speed" banner statement is an example of an exaggerated headline in media reporting. McGovern (1998: 27) goes on to claim that "Canadians are still reluctant to accept that emancipated young females are capable of the same horrors as their male counterparts. Yet teenage girls are the fastest-growing criminal group in Canada." Statements such as these equate female liberation with female crime. These conceptualizations include one-dimensional images of girls in gangs as becoming tough, violent, aggressive, bullying, and strong, and as emulating the male gang

members. From a social constructionist perspective, media serve to characterize social problems in particular ways by emphasizing certain aspects or stories. Girls' involvement in gangs is not the only driving concern for media, for the public, and for law enforcement, but it is their participation in violent behaviour that is a issue apparently worth immediate attention of a kind that generates panic regarding "violent gang girls." The sensationalized media attention that labels girls in gangs as "new violent female offenders" (Chesney-Lind, 1997) has led to a specific public concern that is about not only the girls' violent nature but also about their violation of appropriate femininity. The violent girls are seen as defiantly challenging traditional images of femininity as a result of the women's liberation movement. In this chapter, an attempt is made to understand whether gangs serve as a place of gender equality by offering equal status to girls and boys alike. How do girls make sense of their participation in violent activities (like physical fights, robberies, home invasions), given that such acts can very possibly result in their criminalization and victimization? In the following section, I discuss the girls' perceptions of their status within their groups. This discussion will help us to understand whether the girls themselves perceive gender equality in gangs.

5b. Status of Girls in Gangs: A Reality Check on Gender Equality

The prevailing perception held by media and public is that more and more girls are joining gangs and that they are engaging in activities similar to those engaged in by male gang members. Being members of all-female gangs and auxillary gangs¹ offers girls more freedom and opportunity to be involved in violent activities as compared to the possibilities for violence when girls are part of mixed-gender gangs. In all-female gangs, there is no domination of female gang

¹ The common typology for female gangs addressing their gender roles in gangs can be: (a) auxillary groups affiliated with male gangs, for example; in Harris's (1988) study of Latino girl gangs, the girls report that they are separate from but part of a male group; (b) mixed-gender groups comprising both male and female gang members; (c) independent all-female gangs.

members by male gang members and in auxillary gangs, there is respectively less domination of female gang members by male gang members as compared to mixed-gender gangs where males dominate the overall organization and functioning of gangs (Kitchen, 1995). Given the fact that all respondents in the study were members of mixed-gender gangs (both males and females were members of the gang); my concern was to discover whether girls enjoyed the same freedom and status as that of male gang members. The research by Miller (2001) in Columbus described the female status in mixed-gender gangs as “somewhat equal” to that of males; I am interested in knowing how the girls in the present study perceive the gender power relations in their gangs.

From the analysis, it emerged that fewer than half of the respondents (six out of the fifteen respondents) believed their status to have been equal to that of the male gang members in their groups. The remaining nine respondents were reluctant in defining their status as equal to males and rather believed themselves to have had status lower than that of the males. The analyses of the interviews concluded that female gang members gained status and “sway” within the mixed-gender gangs in several ways. One of the most common means described by respondents was via achievements, i.e., by displaying and proving their own worth. Another way was through their connections to male gang members, in the form of a relationship either as a relative or a girlfriend. Finally, status could be gained through a combination of both, i.e., girls could be related to male gang member but also gain status by showing their worth. All six respondents believed that they had achieved high status in their gangs by proving their worth as tough fighters. On that basis, they described themselves as “real gang members.” Abby, Debbie, Mia, Sharon, Sam, and Cathy all reportedly had proved their worth as “tough fighters” for their respective gangs, and they had enjoyed the resulting status. Debbie became the leader of her gang, which had both males and females as members: “I had crew of fifty, thirty girls and twenty

boys, and they all hand cash to me and answer me.” Mia, though she initially had earned her status as a tough and “true” member, believed that part of the reason she was given respect was because she later became a girlfriend of her gang leader. At the time of her interview, her boyfriend was in jail serving time for a serious crime. As a result of his incarceration, in addition to the rise in the status of her boyfriend (for having gone to prison), Mia also enjoyed a raise in her status: she was given control of the gang’s cash and was assigned the responsibility for governing the activities of her closely knit group members in her boyfriend’s absence. Mia, in defending her achieved status, stated, “They know who I am, I earned it.”

The remaining group of nine - the respondents who reported that the boys in their gangs enjoyed status higher than that of the girls - were also involved in prostitution. Their primary reason for associating with gangs was to access the protection offered by gangs while working on the streets, and had been working the streets prior to becoming friends with gang members. They had realized that working on the streets was dangerous without the support of either a pimp or gang members. Threats came not only from bad dates but also from other gang girls working on the streets. Gang affiliation therefore provided both protection and friendship. Although these nine respondents believed that their status was lower than that of boys in their gangs, they did not describe themselves as being “sexed in”² to the gangs. They rather ascribed their affiliations with gangs as due to tight friendship relations and their willingness to work for their gangs. These girls also mentioned fighting with other girls as a common occurrence due to personal confrontations and/or to defend their work territories.

² One of the common ways for girls to get initiated to a gang is to have sex with male gang members. Girls entering the gang by being “sexed in” lose their status as respected members and instead are viewed as sexually promiscuous girls.

The girls who described themselves as “tough girls” had experienced relatively equal status with males in their gangs and higher status as compared to that of the girls who were not tough. They assessed their association in gangs as having been “just like that of boys.” They had been eager to fight gang rivals and to take other risks for the gang. By doing so, they had differentiated themselves from the lower-status girls and saw themselves as equal to the gang males. By doing so, they had been able to justify the exploitation of lower-status girls at the hands of male gang members. From the girls’ descriptions, it appears that male gang members definitely offered equal status to tough girls. The tough girls articulated the belief that their gangs had been places where males and females were equal, and that both boys and girls in their gangs could achieve the same status by displaying their worth. Abby explained that in some of the gangs she had known and been associated with, girls had become leaders by doing activities similar to those done by the boys, and in that way both sexes had equal access to positions of leadership:

There are other gangs also where girls are the bosses, I mean leaders. Some gang members believe in equality. They don’t think boys are better than girls or girls are better than boys. They have a hierarchy and you have to work through way up and girls just happen to be the ones who made it to the top and become the leader. Everyone obey her. If you lose the spot, it can be boy or girl who can take the spot.

The respondents who described gangs wherein girls enjoyed status equaling that of the gang males at the same time were aware of the exploitation and degradation of girls in other gangs. They told me names of the gangs in Saskatoon where girls did not have access to equal status. Female membership in those gangs reportedly was basically for purposes of prostitution, and was characterized by sexual exploitation and victimization. Abby described the status of girls in those gangs:

Depends on the gang. Some gangs I know, girls have no power. The boys have all the power; they push around girls all the time. They do it in a very manipulative way that girls don't even realize that they are getting pushed around. Some gangs in which girls only get in to get prostituted. The boys look down on the girls a lot. They think they are nothing but a whore. They call them whores and bitches. They push them around. They make fun of them, they don't do anything for them.

The "tough girl" respondents agreed that when girls in their gangs had not achieved equal status, it was due to their attitudes, the things they did, and how they had gotten initiated into the gang. This criterion for judging the status of girls in gangs is supported by previous research on female gang members in mixed-gender gangs (Kitchen, 1996; Miller, 2001). The girls who were initiated into gangs in "normal ways," i.e., by doing activities similar to those of the boys such as taking beatings, committing armed robbery, or doing home invasions - in other words, acts displaying their courage and physical strength - enjoyed higher status than that of the girls who got "sexed in" to the gang. Almost all the "real" girl gang members (the tough girls enjoying higher status) differentiated between themselves and the "other" girls (the girls having lower status). The tough girls supported the status hierarchies in their gangs and looked down on the lower-status girls. They showed disregard for the girls who used their gender as an excuse for not fighting to defend their gang while instead fighting over the boys. Tough girls described themselves as different from the "other" girls and regarded themselves as "one of the guys," "tough," "real," and "strong." Mia differentiated between the two groups of girls by explaining, "Girls who are not into prostitution are the respected members of gangs. They are just like the boys. They do all the stuff like boys do. They go pimping other girls too. There are not many who can get into the gang like as a guy. Like as a respected ones."

From their descriptions, it appears that in the opinions of the “tough girl” respondents, the girls who were “sexed in” and were degraded in gangs deserved the treatment they received from the male gang members. Though none of the girls described themselves as having been “sexed into” their gangs they described other girls who had. They referred to those others as “hos” [a variant of “whore”], and said the role of those others was to “get passed along” for male gang members. Also, the respondents reflected that those “other” girls did not seem to resent their poor treatment. Mia stated, “I don’t think they care. As long as they get their drugs, they are happy.” Another of the respondents’ assessments was that those disenfranchised girls were “dumb” and that they didn’t even realize what was happening to them; that the boys were very manipulative and knew how “to trick the girls,” and so the girls who fell for those tactics were “dumb.” In Abby’s words, “They are just stupid. They don’t even get it; don’t even realize if it’s going on. Sometimes they realize but it’s too late. They already are into it and can’t get out.” Sharon placed the responsibility of their exploitation on the girls themselves: “I don’t think that bugs most girls. These girls do out of their free will because they can’t get into gangs in a normal way. We make money by jumping, AR [armed robberies], drug dealing, and having normal jobs and they sell their bodies.”

The girls who did not have the physical ability to fight nor the intelligence to command male respect experienced narrowed options and became the subjects of exploitation by the male and the other female members in their gangs, who could command respect. The subordination of weaker girls by “tough” girls is referred to as patriarchal bargains by Jody Miller (2001), whereby tough girls actively participate in the exploitation of other female members in order to increase their status among male gang

members. The females who were almost equal to the male gang members maintained their relative positions of power and sustained those positions. They distinguished themselves from the girls who were of lower status, demonstrated the ways in which they were superior, and commanded more respect. Sharon reported that, "I'm different from all those girls. Because, I'm like 'one of the guys.' I do all the stuff boys do." It seemed easy for the tough girls to draw distinctions between themselves and the lower-status girls. Following is my conversation with Debbie, who distinguished herself from lower-status girls:

Debbie: "Very few are 'real' girl gang members. Others are whores, who hang with guys."

Interviewer: "Real" means what?

Debbie: Those who have got more power. I was one of them.

Similarly, Cathy explained:

You get the respect by the stuff you are known for doing. They know what you are about. In tough times, you really were violent and had been in jail for armed robberies. They start calling you "homegirl." Others, they don't get much respect. They have to do what they are told to do. And those girls can't get out of the gang. People keep on bothering them.

Most discussions with tough girls revealed that they differentiated themselves from "other" girls. They felt that the girls who had been sexually promiscuous had deserved "what they got." Tough girls held those "others" accountable for their own mistreatment, and created a rigid dichotomy between themselves and the "other" girls. To illustrate themselves as being respected members of gang, they described themselves as being "one of the guys."

Contrary to the above-mentioned views, the group of respondents who believed that boys had more power in gangs attributed their explanations to the physical strength

of boys, and described gangs as basically male podiums to which girls had begun to belong only recently. In the girls' own words:

It [gang] was a guy thing and females like started joining lately. (Nancy)

Boys have, because they are strong, brave to do things. Girls need boys' backup all the time. (Natasha)

Boys are stronger, they have more strength. They do more stuff, more tougher things. Girls just do simple things. Rules are kind of harder of girls. It was mainly a boy's thing and then they started initiating girls. It is sort of equal but not really is. It is sort of more guys' thing. (Julie)

No, I don't think girls are treated equally at any time. When you are out there, men are so dominating. Women are treated as some "missiles." They are not treated fairly at all. (Karina)

From these explanations, it is evident that physical strength and willingness to take risks for gang was a definite asset in gaining status and power. Physical strength made boys powerful. The girls who displayed toughness and who took risks by engaging in violent activities were perceived to have achieved status equal to that of boys, and sometimes higher. But even the tough girls did not enjoy the same freedom as the boys did with regard to sexual relationships. In general, tough girls' status was in jeopardy if they became involved sexually with male gang members. Cathy, one of the girls who described herself as enjoying equal status explained: "You can't hook up with anyone you like. Boys can check out any girl but girl can't check out any guy." Abby, who described herself as enjoying status equal to that of the boys, stated:

That's [boys' treating girls as their possessions] true for some of the gangs. I hung out with a Spanish gang in Vancouver. I was OK because I was their friend and I wasn't dating any of them. I was just their school friend. If I had been girlfriend of any of them, I would be just like his possession. I had to do what my boyfriend says. If he wants to get rid of me, he can but I can't walk away from him. I am his not like he is mine.

Many respondents expressed frustration about male gang members' double standards and sexual exploitation of other female gang members. Some reflections on whether males and females had equal power in gangs described boys having treated girls as their possessions and part of that treatment involved the girls' being sexually abused by the boys:

You [girl] get to pay back [as a punishment]. Its kind of true in my gang. I broke up with my boyfriend. He got pretty obsessive. May sound pretty weird though, they are little bit too controlling and obsessive. In my case, I can't even go outside and smoke with someone. Boys basically, they think they can go anywhere. (Marie)

The boys look down to at girls like they are nothing. They just think girls as sex objects like you can play around, swing around and throw. (Cathy)

Boys make them work on streets, make them sleep around, make them to give up their money. (Natasha)

Girls were abused, degraded, and intimidated by their boyfriends and by other boys in the gangs. The abuse was evident in the names that the girls were called. Girls were forced to obey the boys and were made to do things that they didn't want to do:

Girls are definitely treated as possessions. They are pushed around, physically abused, beaten by their boyfriends, intimidated. (Nancy)

Women out there are intimidated very easily. If you don't listen to him, he can get at you or get his guys to beat you up. (Crystal)

They [boys] would say, "Come here bitch." Girls are treated as shit all the time and girls can never say a thing. (Karina)

Girls get picked on for all different things. They have to do what guys tell them to do. Like if the guys say, "Go do this beating other girl," and girls have to do. (Sonia)

Although many of the respondents acknowledged double standards and unequal treatment within their gangs, on the streets, and in society in general, most viewed this to be inevitable. Tammy pointed out that girls fought in an attempt to gain power equaling that

held by the boys: “Boys are the ones who hold the power. Men have power everywhere. Girls hate it. They want to be like a male, so they fight.”

Overall, gangs are mostly patriarchal groups. Boys govern the gangs and so they thereby govern the girls’ activities. Very few girls in gangs enjoy freedom and equal status. The young women in gangs are continuously navigating through social worlds of unequal power, where many are constantly attempting to create identities and empower themselves. Affiliation with some (rare) gangs gives them the opportunity to do so. Some gangs display a distinct status hierarchy among females, and those females at or near the top enjoy the higher status. They define themselves as “tough,” a characteristic highly valued within the gang milieu. A number of the respondent girls described their reasons for joining gangs as the gaining of power, recognition, and status. Their identity as “tough” gave them access to that power and status. Fully aware of the sexist nature of the gangs, those young women adapted their own behaviours in order to maximize the degree of respect afforded to them within the confines of the sexist setting of gangs. Like many other females in our society, these young women were adaptive to the patriarchal nature of the society and dealt with it accordingly.

Through our discussions about gender power relations within gangs, it became evident that the girls gave high priority to being treated with respect. Involvement in violent acts gave them the status of tough girls, status carried respect and recognition. In the next section, I discuss how the girls perceived their involvement in violent behaviour and explored the concept of a female “code of street.”

5c. Girl's Violent Behaviour³ in Gangs: A Search for a Female "Code"

I explored the issue of violent behaviour and fights among girls in order to get an in-depth understanding of why young girls participate in violent behaviour within the context of gangs and street life. Data revealed that fights arose mainly due to issues relating to respect. Consistent with the research such as Anderson (1990; 1999) on young men and the "code of street," disrespect was considered to be a major personal violation by and to these young urban women. Disrespect warranted a direct and immediate response, which often was manifested in a physical confrontation. I wanted to know whether a female code of street existed. Due to ethical constraints, I did not ask the respondents specifically about their involvements in criminal activities and violent behaviour. During the course of the interviews, however, themes related to girls' violent behaviour emerged and the young women explicitly discussed them. While I listened to them carefully, at the same time I was vigilant that the information respondents shared did not violate the ethics guidelines for disclosing specific crime-related incidents. From the interviews, I learned that maintaining one's respect was a principal concern and a daily struggle for young women in gangs and on the streets. This finding is consistent with Anderson's (1999) research on lower class and ethnic minority urban males. The acts of disrespect included name-calling, bad-mouthing ("talking shit"), dirty looks, and rude gestures.

³ The categorization of violent behaviour is broad in the legal context, and the scholarly literature describes female violence as ranging anywhere from aggressive behaviour to assaults to murders. For the purpose of this study, references to violence by girls represent their involvement in physical fights, assaults, and armed robberies, modes of violence that are more prevalent within the context of gangs.

Girls' violent behaviour in gangs – A reality

Through this research experience, I came to realize that girls are not isolated from the violent subculture of gang life. They are not merely “weapon carriers” or “sexual objects.” When I asked whether girls in gangs fought, all the responses were positive. The main theme that emerged from analysis of their responses was that the girls related their use of violence to the presence of violence within the context of gangs. Julie justified her response and provided the gang context for violence. “Gang is what pretty much about – fights, beating other gang members, and get prepared to take back.” When asked if girls were as violent as boys, out of the fifteen respondents two replied that the boys were more violent. Three of the young women held the view that some girls were as violent as the boys. But a majority (ten out of fifteen) clearly stated that while girls were as violent as the boys, some girls were even more violent than the boys. Those respondents used the terms “hardcore,” “worse,” “tough,” “solid,” and “bad” to describe the intensity of girls’ violence. But the respondents agreed unanimously that girls’ violence was not as deadly as that of the boys, and that girls mostly fought without weapons. Reported Tammy, “I was [as violent as boys] [pause], but I never wanted to kill somebody. I wanted to hurt them bad enough.”

Most of the early research on females in gangs found that girls in mixed-gender gangs seldom participated in the gang violence and crime (Campbell, 1984; Joe and Chesney-Lind, 1995), or that they played only peripheral roles in the violence. This was not the finding in the present study. Many of the respondents cited their own active involvement in robberies, drug sales, car jacking, car theft, and home invasions. Although

the findings from the interviews did not suggest that all girls in the gangs were involved in gang violence and the above-mentioned criminal activities, they did suggest that there were girls in mixed-gender gangs (in both Saskatoon and Edmonton) who were involved in those activities. However, this trend would provide support to media discourse on increasing violent behaviour of female youth in gangs. But it is important that such a claim should be accompanied with an explanation of the context of girls' participation in violent activities. Further, my findings indicated that female participation in the violent activities could not always be attributed to a desire or need to prevent victimization or a need to get money for survival purposes. This is in contradiction with previous explanations of violent crime by females in gangs by Campbell (1993). She explained that the main reasons for girls' involvement in violence as follows: "Girls in gangs are far less involved in money-motivated crimes of violence. Aggression in their lives is a means of survival. Reputation is about preventing victimization, not about flashing a wad of bills" (1993: 140). Campbell further stated that "robbery is a characteristically male crime. . . . it is alien to women in both its cold-bloodedness and its monetary goal" (1993: 87). Even if some of the respondents' involvement in violence could be linked to survival and preventing victimization, not all participation in violent and criminal activities could be characterized as such.

Through assessing the backgrounds of all respondents, a link emerged between their personal offending and victimization experiences. However, the connection was not a traditional one whereby females engaged in violent behaviour only in order to prevent victimization. The respondent girls who engaged in violent behaviour spoke about experiencing feelings of power and control during the violent incident. Although their

violent acts were not in immediate or direct response to victimization episodes, the feelings they expressed with regard to being in charge and control logically correlated to their experiences as victims. Girls' violent behaviour as a consequence of the past abuse was reflected by Sam, who had experienced physical, sexual and emotional abuse at the hands of her grandfather and her male cousins. She justified her reasons for fighting with boys:

The reason I fight boys is because I want to prove that its not only the guys who hate girls. When I get into a fight with a guy, I can't stop. I has to go to their face and make sure their face is all bloody before I do any damage to their other body. I make sure they are ugly. That satisfies me. The reason I do that to boys is I'm sick and tired of watching girls being hit by boys.

Apart from the feelings of power and control, another theme that emerged related to violence was of the respect and status that girls were accorded from displaying violent behaviour. In the next section, I discuss the reasons for girls' fighting.

Reasons to fight: A search for a female 'code'

Research on young urban lower-class male youth has uncovered the existence of a code of conduct (Anderson, 1990) or lower-class cultural values (Miller, 1958) governing their daily behaviour. Anderson coined the phrase "code of street" while observing and interacting with young urban males as a part of his study of Philadelphia neighbourhoods (1990; 1994). Subsequent explorations by various researchers have confirmed and elaborated on the situational dynamics of interpersonal conflicts among male youth (Fagan and Wilkinson, 1998). The studies have revealed that the code of street provides rules and symbols for communication and defines appropriate behaviour for particular circumstances. Respect is an essential law of the code and youth are taught to earn it, to maintain it, and to react when attempts are made to take it away, i.e., when one is

“disrespected.” Respect, honour, status, toughness, and reputation all are emphasized as key features of male code of street (Anderson, 1990; Miller, 1958). When exploring the reasons for female fights, these features of male code of street became evident in respondents’ interviews.

To the open-ended question “What do the girls fight for?”, the majority of respondents listed (dis)respect (both individual and group/gang), money, drugs, territory, and boys. The main reasons for girls’ fights were issues related to group/gang disrespect and to perceived attacks on their personal integrity (individual disrespect). The girls fought mainly with other girls, but they did also fought with boys. The reasons for girls’ fights as listed by the respondents were to an extent gendered: girls fought for their boyfriends, fought “gossips,” and fought other girls whom they didn’t like. Other girls, as did boys, fought for drugs, for money, and sometimes simply over stolen goods such as clothes and jewelry. One respondent who had worked on the streets and had associated with street gangs mentioned that girls fought for territory on the streets. Those females’ “territory fights” were not related to drug dealing but rather for protecting exclusive zones for prostitution. Each gang had their own territories for purposes of drug dealing and also for where the girls from their gangs could work the streets. Most other incidents of violence performed by girls stemmed from their gang associations, such as performing initiation rituals on other girls that involved beating new entrants for specified periods of time, themselves going through such initiations, performing armed robberies, and participating in home invasions. The girls described these violent incidents as requirements essential for gang membership. One girl was extremely explicit: “If you can’t fight, or take beating, or do AR [armed robbery], or HI [home invasion], you don’t

need to be here [gang]. They [who don't take the above set of initiations] have to sleep with guys and work [the streets] to be part of group." These findings reflecting violence by young females were somewhat contradictory to those uncovered by Campbell (1993) in her analysis of New York female gang members. Campbell found that females' fights were mostly related to domestic issues, i.e., a fight with a boyfriend, although the females in her study also fought for respect, too.

As stated previously, in the research literature violence and physical aggression continue to be viewed as male-specific behaviour. Anderson's (1999) and Brezina et al (2004) research on young urban lower-class male youth uncovered the existence of a code of conduct governing their everyday transactions. The study stated that matters of respect are the reasons attributed to males' engagements in physical violence and aggression. Such reasons did not govern girls' fights, since girls fought mostly over "silly gossips" and over boys. Certainly, girls in the present study did say that girls in gangs fought over boys and over "he-said/she-said talks"; however, their reasons for fighting were much more complex than simply enactments of traditional feminine roles, expectations, and rivalries.

As did male gang members, the young women in the present study placed a high premium on being treated with respect. They also emphasized that if they had allowed other people to disrespect them, they would have been left with nothing. The girls consistently asserted the importance of responding to acts of disrespect. Much of the young women's violence appeared to have been motivated by the desire to gain and/or maintain respect. Through her description of the following incident, Tammy placed great

emphasis on the factor of respect above all else. She explained how she first got “the taste of respect,” from a display of violent behaviour that involved stabbing another girl:

Respect is big one. The crazy you can be, the better off you are. For me, I got respect when my friend got beat up. I picked up an ice pick and stabbed the girl. I did that for no reason other than she beat my friend. But I got instant respect. “Don’t mess with this girl, she’s crazy.” It was lot quicker than anything else I had ever experienced before. I got something for nothing. It was a quick way to do it.

Respondents said that they would look to fighting to make statements about who they were. As Sharon explained, “Tougher you can be, more you are respected. If you are a prostitute, you get no respect, anywhere. You are just a ‘rat’ and ‘junkie’.”

Displaying an image of fighter earned the girls status and respect, but that image of fearlessness was also important in situations where girls potentially could be victims of violence. A girl showing courage was well respected in the gang subculture. Reported Natasha, “Once I ran into a fight with this girl, I was thirteen and she was like maybe twenty or so. She beat the hell out of me, she punched me, kicked me for at least two hours. I was totally beat up. Then she pulled out a knife and she said, ‘I’m gonna kill you.’ I said, ‘Go for it.’ At that time, you just don’t care. I didn’t want her to think that I was scared of her.” However, not every fight that the girls mentioned was for purposes of respect, aggression or self-defense. Parallel to boys and as described by Anderson (1999), fighting for girls associated with gangs provided a site for identity enhancement. Sonia concurred:

I used to take on fights . . . with anybody who comes my way – at pubs, parties, streets, while hanging around with my gang friends. I was tough, so I would take on fights around my friends and everybody liked it. They would cheer me up. I had the feeling, “Yeah! I’m tougher than anybody else.

Clearly, for the respondents the context of gangs and their positions amongst their friends provided the only social place for negotiating identity, since other avenues for doing so were scarce. Normally, the gangs served as places of gender stratification where girls had lower status as compared to boys. As Debbie noted, girls fought in order “to be like boys, as boys have more power in gangs.” She went on to say that in order to enhance their status, “Girls have to prove more. If you take on a guy, if you beat the hell out of boys, you are respected more.”

The females who reacted most violently to disrespect were less likely to be further challenged. This finding corresponds with Messerschmidt’s (2002) construction of “crazy girl” femininity, an image that prevents future victimization. A combination of popularity and reputation would safeguard girls from constant fights, according to Julie: “I never had to fight because I was in a position that no one dare to mess with me at the first place. But I have to be ready to fight, a lot of times.” Consistent with other research (Campbell, 1993; Baskin and Sommers, 1998; Harris, 1988), girls like Julie adopted the “crazy girl” type of image in order to prevent future attacks involving disrespect. Such reputations also enhanced the girls’ status on the streets. For some of the respondents, fights fulfilled a simple desire to experience thrills, fun, and excitement, and fighting for those reasons seemed to enhance the girls’ reputations. Even though most of the respondents identified specific causes for fighting, there were a few who said that they had fought purely for the pride and pleasure of the fight experience.

From respondents’ accounts fights amongst same sex gang members were neither common nor acceptable. However, girls did fight with other girls within the group as defensive actions linked to issues of respect and/or over “stealing boyfriend.” Though

most of the respondents said that they themselves had never fought over boys, they reported that other girls had. Most of the girls expressed the opinion that girls should not fight over boys. Sam offered an example of what happened when girls fought over a boyfriend:

Girls fight over the man. “That’s my man, that’s my man.” Boys, they watch, they smile, they laugh. They would be “wow” and comments like “give it to her, give to her face.” That’s stupid, why fight over boys, they don’t deserve.

Other respondents expressed similar sentiments. Other than for reasons of boyfriend-related rivalries, fights between girls from same gangs were not common. While fighting over boyfriends may on the surface appear to have been a gender issue, on closer examination the issue clearly was more accurately about acceptance, respect, being valued, and having status. These are issues more closely related to adolescent development during teen years. Girls who do not have the sufficient physical power to prove their worth instead use the trump cards of being girlfriends of male gang members to establish status. Therefore, fights over boyfriends indeed implicate a need for identity because identity is related to acceptance and respect.

Most of the respondents stated that walking away from a fight would have caused damage to their reputations. However, they agreed that they might have opted out or not bothered to fight back to attacks on self-respect when attackers were drunk or drugged to the point where they were not “in their senses” or where the attacker did not have a worthy reputation.

Consistent with the male code of street, the young women in the study revealed that there had been well-known values and norms exerting strong influence over their everyday interactions with violence and with other gang members. These young women

regarded respect as a valued commodity and they struggled to possess and maintain it. They admitted that they sometimes had disrespected and hurt others in an effort to raise their own status and rank, and also to enhance their own reputations. The statements of the respondents revealed that they cared about status and respect to the same extent as did the young males. However, while the norms and values appeared largely the same for both genders, maintaining a respectable reputation reportedly was a much greater challenge for the girls. Young males normally had to establish their tough reputations via displays of physical and mental strength that established their identities and intimidated people from messing with them (Anderson, 1999). For females, respect involved more than just toughness and physical strength. It also was implicated with others' perceptions of their sexual availability and/or sexual activity. The sexual behaviour of males was not a source of concern since promiscuity might well have enhanced their status among other males. But sexually promiscuous behaviour by young women had a negative impact on their status. They were readily labeled as "sluts" and "hos," and lost both respect and good reputation. Abby, who perceived herself to be a well-respected fighter, stated that "The only way you don't get to treat like that is if you don't fool around with any of the boys at all." Nancy described the characteristics of a young, well-respected tough girl who was the leader of a gang that included both boys and girls. According to Nancy, this girl gang leader actively participated in defending her gang territory and regularly sent "her crew on missions":

She is witty, smart, beautiful, very intelligent. She knows how to handle herself. She knows how to use her ability and intelligence towards what she wants and carries herself well. She is smart, she is not phony. She has self-respect.

Therefore, similar to male gang members, females wanted their reputations to be exhibited, but they had conflicting images to present. They wanted to appear tough and strong and also feminine, yet not too sexy as this might deem them as being promiscuous.

Learning the code

Apart from the features of the street code (Anderson, 1999) that were obvious in the respondents' statements, the subcultural context in inner-city neighbourhoods (Miller, 1958) provided the necessary medium for familiarizing the girls with "the code" and the lower-class cultural values beginning in their early lives. Female violent behaviour has often been explained by media discourse as a uniform phenomenon, without taking into account specific social settings. The reason that fighting by girls was so common place in inner-city neighbourhoods can be explained by taking into account the larger social realities and cultural norms that were involved in shaping the behaviours and feelings of the young women respondents. Most middle-class girls engaging in fighting would be defying the culturally endorsed feminine values and social expectations (Artz, 1998). However, those same factors did not seem to operate to inhibit violent behaviour on the streets among the young women in the present study:

Well some parents didn't mind if their kids fight. When I was growing up, I thought it was cool to fight but the kids in other neighbourhoods didn't think in that way. We fight, we didn't care, we liked it, we had fun, and we took one step further. We all learnt how to fight and all gang members wanted us as we know how to fight. While in other neighbourhoods fighting wasn't accepted. Our parents didn't stop us. I know so many people, kids of my age, who think going out and acting as a little criminal is cool and going to parties and drink all the time is cool. (Cathy)

The influence of peers within the neighbourhood context formed an important gateway to violence and gangs during the respondents' childhood and adolescence years:

All the kids hung out together and the older ones were involved with younger ones, were there for younger ones. They were the one who teach us all about gangs, drugs, fights, and all the stuff you couldn't find from anywhere else. (Abby)

With few opportunities for fun, excitement, and recreational activities available to youth in inner-city poor neighbourhoods, watching gang fights served an important function of recreation. Abby described:

There were lots of fights between different groups of friends. The big kids would tell the younger ones about gang fights that was going to happen and all the kids get together at the place where the fight is supposed to be and sit at side in circle to watch the fight maybe not in our neighbourhood but in other one. Everyone will be excited and telling others and discussing the fight they watched.

Through gathering the views and experiences of young women in their own words, it can be concluded that girls' violent behaviour is the product of an interplay of social and cultural factors that attempt to explain the production of violent behaviour. The findings suggest that there is a link between some of the young women's victimization experiences and their violent offending. They found violent behaviour and gang membership as rewarding and empowering, since it allowed them both to exert control and also to realize other benefits including status, respect, and money. These findings confirm the importance of victimization experiences, but also suggest the need to broaden the prevalent concepts of female violent offending. Their participation in violent behaviour may serve various functions, but certainly is not restricted to the prevention of future victimizations. Like males, females also engage in violence for both practical (instrumental aggression) and emotional (hostile aggression) reasons including status, respect, power, and reputation.

5d. Conclusion

This chapter presented some of the major themes that arose in gender power relations within gangs, and examined how girls negotiated their gender identities in their groups. While a few respondents described their gangs as egalitarian, others clearly recognized and experienced traditional gender hierarchy among their groups. Also evident was a system of double hierarchy within mixed-gender gangs. Two groups of girls emerged from the themes presented by the respondents. One group displayed toughness and enjoyed gender equality, while girls in second group experienced degradation from both boys and tough girls. Tough girls' perceptions of gender equality involved maintaining higher levels of respect than those held by the lower-status girls, who were physically weak and vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Even the tough girls faced numerous challenges in achieving and maintaining a status equal to that held by boys. They experienced a more forceful need to prove themselves worthy of respect, along with an endless struggle to maintain conflicting images of both toughness and femininity. The discrepancy between the tough girls' claimed gender equality in their gangs and the actual reality of the gender inequality was all too evident when they expressed that girls had to prove their worth to be treated as respectable members of the gang by displaying toughness and respectability.

For the most part, gangs were highly gendered groups. The tough girls carved out their roles within the patriarchal gang structure. They took advantage of any opportunities available to achieve and maintain respect and status among male gang members through their toughness and fighting abilities. The chapter demonstrated the existence of a female

“code of street” and explored its dynamics. Consistent with the male norms of the code of street, respect was revealed to have been of integral importance. Despite similarities, differences in the code’s application were noted for males and females. The gender hierarchies and sexist nature of gangs that maintained sexual double standards gave greater privileges to males, contributing to various difficulties that young women and girls experienced in maintaining their respect and “balanced” (i.e., integrated tough and feminine) reputations.

The girls placed a high value on being treated with respect. As with any other female in society, reputation and status were salient markers of their identity, and they would resort to violence to defend their status and honour. The “code of street” they displayed is similar to the one cited by Anderson (1999) in his study of similarly situated inner-city urban males in Philadelphia. But because they were part of a highly gendered society and group, the young girls in the present study offered conflicting self-images of masculinity and femininity. In addition to their “tough girl” displays of masculinity, they were fully aware of the self-expectations to “act like a respectable female” with regard to restricted sexual behaviour. Their acts of identity construction depended largely on the situation.

From a feminist perspective of understanding victimization and violence in the lives of young women, we need to look at the personal experiences of women as the reference points from which we should begin to theorize meaning. This analysis has examined the girls’ constructions of their identities, be that masculinity or femininity or an intersection of both, as they interacted with other female gang members and male gang members in the gang setting or on the streets. The tough girl constructed herself as

similar to male gang members and referred to her self-identity as tough, real, crazy, and violent. Looking more deeply at the reasons for the tough girls' violent behaviour and involvement in gang fights, it appears to have accommodated the structural constraints of her position both in society as well as in the gangs (which were highly gendered groups). The respondents were young, females, ethnic-minority, poor, and in general were born into and raised in neighbourhood and family conditions that were challenging and stressful. They were attempting to negotiate a sense of identity that gave them status, respect, power, and recognition, be that identity feminine or masculine.

CHAPTER SIX: LEAVING THE GANG

6a. Introduction

The previous chapter reflects gender inequality in gangs as it discusses gender power relations and the dynamics of gender identity in the lives of girls within the context of gangs. In this chapter I look at the process of young women's leaving the gang and examine their reasons for deciding to leave. Understanding why girls decide to leave gang life can be beneficial in developing a better understanding of gangs and to an extent can be helpful in reducing the gang issue. The main objective of this chapter is to understand in what ways the reasons that lead girls out of gangs can help prevention and intervention efforts for dealing with the problem of youth gangs. The decision to quit deviant behaviour is preceded by a variety of factors, most of those associated with negative consequences of gang involvement. The negative consequences of girls' gang involvement seem to be motivational in their moving away from the gang and from criminal involvement. Through in-depth interviews, respondents were able to express themselves and to share the reasons as to why they had left the gang and street life.

6b. Process of Leaving the Gang

The process of leaving a gang is as complex as that of joining a gang. In their study on youth gangs, Decker and Lauritsen (2006) stated that the process of leaving the gang involves reasons to leave, ways to leave, and the hindrances or difficulties of leaving a gang. As compared to other aspects of gang activity, the general topic of desistance from gang life has been given little attention for youth in general and for girls in particular.

Thrasher (1927) in his study of gangs mentioned females as having negative influences on male members' gang careers since they caused males to exit the gang by forcing them toward marriage and family life. Available literature on male youth gangs indicates that reasons why male youth leave gangs include the significance of marriage, employment, and parenthood; the psychological process of maturation; or that gang life becomes too dangerous (Horowitz, 1983; Klein, 1995). This complies with some of the broader literature on desistance from crime (Sampson and Laub, 1993).

Corresponding with other areas of female gang life, the perceptions of desistance are also gendered within the literature of desistance. The literature on female desistance from crime referred to parenthood, marriage, and maturation (Sommers et. al., 2006) as significant factors. In their study on British offenders, Farrall and Bowling (1999) found that women tended to desist more abruptly than men, and that often this was due to birth of a child. In view of the process of leaving the gangs, Decker and Lauritsen (2006) determined that some gang members make explicit decisions to leave the gang while others drift away or become motivated to leave because of violent experiences. Unfortunately, not much is known about the desistance process among young women and the reasons as to why they leave gangs, leaving open the question of whether or not the above-mentioned reasons fit with the life course experiences of contemporary young women involved with gangs. In the next section, I discuss the reasons for respondents' decisions to leave gang life.

Reasons for leaving the gang

In the present study, respondents' reasons for deciding to quit gangs varied and many of the young women cited multiple reasons. The main themes that emerged were

that the young women (1) recognized themselves to be victims of escalating violence, (2) feared the negative consequences of being institutionalized, and (3) realized that they wanted to make their lives better (a stage referred to as maturation in the literature on desistance). In the majority of the cases, some or all of these reasons overlapped.

As supported by the literature on female desistance, three young women mentioned that becoming a parent had caused them to make the decision: “I know that’s [having a baby] what had a major impact on me” (Karina). Fleisher and Krienert (2004) found that sixty-three percent of their sample cited pregnancy and the subsequent need to settle down as their main influence for becoming inactive in crime and street life. The fact of pregnancy itself and by itself did not dominate among the reasons of the respondents of the study, but it was a factor in combination with other reasons such as realizing that the violence inherent to gang life was something that the child would need to be protected from, or that pregnancy brought a desire to settle down and be independent. Tammy explains her reasons leaving the gang when she became pregnant:

It was a slow process. I had experienced a very bad sexual abuse, a gang rape. [Pause] I used to drink a lot. I would think if I were ever a mother, what a cruel and a horrible mother would I be. I was told by doctors that I won’t be able to conceive [because of rape]. But when I became pregnant, that was positive. That was a really big thing for me. I think baby was the only way that put my life on track. So I went to school and start my life. I didn’t want to be dependent on my husband or partner. I wanted to be independent.

Being independent and self-sufficient was one of the aims that young women and girls discussed as being a future goal after gang life (this is further discussed later in the chapter). Thus, pregnancy had a positive effect and served as a potential exit strategy for young women in gangs.

The girls cited concerns about escalating violence as one of the reasons they decided to end their affiliations with their gangs and to move on with their lives. Key to this was either personal experiences as direct victims of violent acts or the witnessing of violent attacks on fellow gang members. Four respondents stated that they had experienced extreme forms of violence, either directly upon themselves or by someone close to them, and those experiences had led them to consider reshaping their lives. Their experiences with violence had been the primary motivation for deciding to leave the gang:

Something really bad happened to me and I was desperate to get away. I realized it's either life or death. I know if I haven't left then by now I would have been dead by now. Since I left I know so many people I knew have died on streets either murdered or drug overdose. (Crystal)

A lot of my friends ended up dying because of gangs. Some of them were murdered; some of them just died and no one knows how it happened. (Abby)

In some cases, young women reported that a single event of violence had caused them to leave their gangs while for others, an accumulation of violent events preceded the decision to quit:

There is no safety here, there is nothing but danger and only thing that made it interesting here in the first place was that I had my friends here but now all started to die and maybe I don't want to do this anymore. (Debbie)

I used to take many friends to the hospital on OD [overdose drug] trips almost every week. But it didn't really started to click me until few of them didn't leave the hospital; they were going to the morgue instead. I have seen the worst kind of fights in front of me but that didn't really affected me but when my friends actually started dying, I was putting them in the ground, that was lot more heavier. (Nancy)

One consistent response by the majority of respondents (eleven out of fifteen) was that they wanted to make their lives better. Karina said, "I was tired of it. I want to live a

better life.” For many, the stresses of life and the fear of death and/or victimization motivated the decision to leave. Most respondents reported getting older as a reason that had motivated them to end their involvements with gangs. The girls felt that they had wasted time and reported that with increasing age, they felt that their present lives were taking them nowhere. For many of them, gang life seemed to be making less sense because they could see that it was a “dead end.” This realization came with age and after being in gang for some time. As the girls and young women aged, they experienced successes and failures and came to a more developed sense of their capacities to affect their own environments. Respondents reported that they felt a strong need to have long-term stability in their lives:

Sometimes I think about it [leaving] sort of as I’m getting older. (Natasha)

Now I think about it [leaving the gang]. Money is good. There is lot of money in it that keeps in it. Sometimes I think about it sort of as I’m getting older. (Mia)

I was getting older and was seeing what gang was doing, more of the downside, and I started to realize that its just one big downside and there isn’t really a positive side except that you are so stone that you don’t know the difference. (Debbie)

Familial ties and degradation experiences were cited as other reasons for leaving the gang. For Julie, it was the stresses of living on streets and her continuous debasement that motivated her decision to leave the gang and street life:

I quit because it was too much trouble. I was getting myself into more drugs ever and started living on the streets, started sleeping in recycling bins and laundry rooms. So I have to quit. My mom wanted me to come back.

Five out of the fifteen respondents had been placed in a remand centre at the time of the interviews and those girls expressed their desire to leave the gang after getting out:

I get sick of crime and get sick of coming in and out of here [Kilburn Hall]. I miss my family for being in here. (Cathy)

My mom worries about me when I don't go home for even weeks several times. Sometimes I miss my family for being in here [Kilburn Hall]. [Respondent becomes emotional] My mom always tells me to walk alone. I should not need anybody to watch my back. My younger sister misses me and I miss her a lot when I'm here. (Mia)

I have decided to quit. I wasn't feeling the love that I thought it was. I realized that I need to have family love and not street [family] love. There is no love on the streets. No love being in a gang. I need to get my family back. I need to go back to school. So I have to stop ending to get back here [Kilburn Hall]. I need to straighten my life. (Sharon)

Yes, I'm thinking of quitting once I get out from here [Kilburn Hall]. I'm sick of it. I'm being here for over three years now on and off. (Sam)

Clearly, feelings of loneliness and isolation within a facility were visible in these responses. Being away from friends and peers gave the girls a chance to reflect on their lives and future goals. There was awareness among them that not wanting to return to the remand facility was a factor in their deciding to move away from the gang and criminal life.

Even though many of the young women had lived in neighbourhoods where gangs and violence were quite common and even had family members and relatives who were gang members, only direct experiences of gang membership brought awareness of the true nature of gang life. Said Sandra, "I felt it's not the life I want." The competition to make money either through prostitution or other criminal activities, while at the same time, fearing a capture by the police and retribution from other gang members was mentioned by Marie, Sonia, and Crystal. Gang life eventually became much complicated for them:

It was danger and fear, always. I wanted to make life little simple. (Marie)

I left when I was 21 because I don't want to spend my life like that.
(Sonia)

Because I was disgusted with my life. I was not happy. I knew what I was doing was wrong. For me it wasn't a place where I wanted to stay. For many people I know its very hard for them to get off but once I had my chance I left. (Crystal)

Shover (1983) asserted that the daily routines of managing criminal involvement become tiring and burdensome to offenders. The process of "growing out" and making life better while also realizing that gang life is not all it seemed in the beginning was briefly explained by Abby, who reflected that despite its initial excitement and allure, gang life eventually became really tough:

At times, you can be really high up in gang and then you start falling and then you realize that there are younger people coming in and there are very big competitions and you are not going to have chance to compete against them and then you realize that you are starting to fall and you can't get back up. . . . maybe it's not worth anymore. Sometimes for some girls, they have very luxurious lifestyle. They had money handed to them, jewelry, drugs, clothes, parties all the time and all of sudden it just starts to fade away and then they are like "I have to earn this, it's not going to be handed to me.

The excitement of the gang life that may have characterized the initial involvement soon gave way to a much more grievous daily existence. For the girls in the study, cognitive decision-making was a gradual process over a period of time but eventually they made conscious decisions to leave the gangs and start life afresh. A few of the respondents (only three) did experience "in-and-out" period for some time; i.e., after their first exit from the streets and their gangs, they later returned again to that life before finally and permanently exiting the gang life. In the end, the girls were active agents who made conscious decisions about their future lives.

These findings coincide with the Sommers et al. (2006) model for understanding desistance from crime for female offenders. They described the major catalyst for change as follows:

When external conditions change and reduce the rewards of deviant behaviour, motivations may build to end criminal involvement. That process and the resulting decision, seem to be associated with two related conditions: a series of negative, aversive, unpleasant experiences with the criminal behaviour, or corollary situations where the positive rewards, status or gratification from crime are reduced. (p. 238)

To conclude, the major catalysts providing motivation for young women to leave the gang were escalating violence, self-realization of the possibility of making life better, negative impacts of institutionalization, and motherhood. All these factors can form an important part of intervention and prevention programs. When girls are in custody, the institutional and rehabilitative programs should focus on developing awareness about the realities of gang life, and a key element should be self-reflection. As seen in the context of gang involvement, understanding the effects of violence is crucial to an understanding of gangs.

How girls leave the gang

Literature on former male gang members illustrates that most members leave the gang through a process similar to that which they used to enter it (Vigil, 1988). This may include events such as getting beat up or committing a criminal act. Vigil also described the process as more difficult than the one involved in joining the gang because by leaving the group, the “deserter” has to reject friends and peers and worry about repercussions from rival gang members and getting caught by the police for the crimes committed during their involvement with gangs. Youth, therefore, need a strong support system when they decide to leave.

The respondent's commentaries provided insights into the process of how they left the gang, though there were contradictions amongst their statements. Girls consistently stated that it was difficult to leave the gang and that in order to do so members were forced to go through a ritual that took the form of a beating or the performing of a criminal act. These rituals were similar to those that take place at the time of joining the gang. The most consistent response to the question of the process of leaving was that in order to leave, the member would first be beaten up:

Sometimes you have to get beatings for five minutes straight and if you survive you can go. Sometimes you have to do a run and run for ten minutes and get chased by truck and people in truck have guns and will shoot at you and if you live you get to go. (Debbie)

Interestingly, the process of leaving the gang seemed to depend on the status of the girl within the gang. Girls enjoying status higher than that of the other girls or equal to that of the male gang members were able to get away from the gang without much hassle:

It depends, if you are a family member, you can usually get out easier because they don't want to hurt the family and they understand you are going to make life for yourself. If you have an uncle or brother, they are not going to give you as much hard time and maybe help support you. But at the same time, if whole family is into gang, to get out means turning your back to the family and turning down the family business; then you are sure to get a hard time. (Abby)

Many girls described situations of leaving that were less rigorous. Debbie explained that "Quitting was easier for me because I was the leader of gang." Sharon spoke about her plans to quit after she gets released from custody. "It would be easy for me. My cousin, he is a gang leader. He will let me quit whenever I want." Mia's decision to quit depended on her boyfriend's decision: "I can walk out anytime I want to but it depends on my boyfriend, what he wants. If he is willing to quit himself, we'll leave."

There were contradictions in the women's responses about the repercussions for leaving the gang. Some claimed that while it is tough to leave the gang, the actual leaving had not been hard for them that they had "just quit" their gang by simple announcement. Interestingly, only few of the respondents had ever witnessed a gang member who had experienced a really hard time in formally leaving the gang. While only two respondents reported that they had gone through a ritual of getting beaten up prior to leaving their gang, getting serious repercussions for leaving appeared to be a dominant myth among almost all the young women in the study sample, and especially the younger ones. As Decker and Van Winkle (1996) noted, these myths also dominate the public's view of gangs and are supported by media claims. They further stressed that such perceptions should not serve to influence gang intervention policies. Evidently, programs for gang awareness and intervention must take into account that media claims that leaving gangs is an impossibility can be dismissed.

The young women expressed that the toughest part of leaving a gang was making the decision to do so. Natasha indicated that in order to start a new life, she had moved to a part of the city where she would not be in contact with the gang members. This act of moving to another area did not reflect a response to threats from peers but rather was more about maintaining physical distance from gang-related friends. Natasha stated, "I wanted to move far away. I wanted to stay away from all these people there. Everyone with whom I get to drink and do drugs." When she decided to leave her gang, Karina too moved to another part of the city. She had received a threat not from any youth gang member with whom she had been associated but from her abusive boyfriend, who was a Hell's Angels member. Karina wanted to save her unborn child from his aggressive and

violent behaviour. In Karina's experience, "I was pregnant and my boyfriend beat me up. Finally, I ran away from him and moved to far end of the city." Crystal explained how she had told her gang leader and her girlfriend about her decision to quit both her gang and street life:

I just quit in a matter of one day. I quit the drugs, quit doing anything bad [illegal], and quit the streets, everything all in one day. I came home one day and said, no, I had enough. I can't do this anymore. I am tired. I am scared. I realized my life was a mess. I said to our leader and my girlfriend, "I am stopping everything right now. I don't care what happens.

Other respondents mentioned that they simply had stopped associating with members of their gangs. Abby had been a member of different gangs in Saskatoon and she knew quite a few gang members. "I just stopped hanging around with them," she reported, and she moved to another neighbourhood not far off from the inner city. Though she was not vocal, she clearly wanted to maintain physical distance from former fellow gang members. From the girls' responses, it was evident that once the conscious decision to quit the gang had been made, it was often necessary to move out of one's neighbourhood in order to avoid further association with gang members and crime.

The literature views desistance not as a one-time process rather as occurring over a period of time. Desistance from crime occurs as a result of a combination of both internal (refers to the individual's reflecting on her/his life) and external (refers to immediate environment) factors. Giordano and others (2002) suggested this to be part of the process within which one began differentiating herself/himself from the criminal self. As a result of their subjective interpretations of their "selves," desisters begin moving away from crime. During this time, they need to see some "hooks for change" in their immediate environments to support their hope for potential change. Also at this time, they need new

and positive involvements in order to prevent returning. In the next section, I discuss some of these “hooks for change” in young women’s lives that helped them to maintain a distance from gang and street life. Most of the girls sought outside help for social reintegration and as a result came into contact with organizations or social workers whom they could trust. From the experiences of respondents, it appears that strong and firm decision-making at the personal level was very crucial during the times of transition. For those girls, building strong self-esteem clearly aided them in making firm and sustainable decisions. Crystal described the strong need for help that would let girls know that leaving the gang and street life was “doable” and not just a “stupid dream”: “Girls need somebody to come along and say, ‘Hey, this is what we can do to help you. You are not stuck here; you can change if you choose.’” The main theme that emerged from this and similar statements was that amongst the girls who wanted to end gang and crime involvement, if support to leave was available, knowledge of that support was not widespread.

Unarguably, leaving gangs *is* “doable,” and to increase their effectiveness gang intervention programs need to dispel some existing myths such as that it’s impossible to leave a gang. In their study of gang members, Decker and Lauristen (2006) maintained that irrespective of sex, the majority of youth in gangs believed that it was not possible to leave the gang. Awareness and intervention programs should focus on dismissing some of these myths that may dominate the thinking of a majority of active youth gang members.

After the gang

Only a few studies (Decker and Lauristen, 2006; Moore, 1991) in the United States have attempted to look at the former gang members' "after the gang" lives: what challenges those former members faced in reintegration and what they went on to accomplish. Most of the respondents in the present sample sought professional help that offered support and direction toward a pathway to change. It was important for the girls to stay away from crime and to pursue a life that did not include gang-associates or former friends.

Interestingly, all the young women mentioned establishing relationships with institutions of education as key to turning around the negative course of events and starting their new lives. When citing girls' desistance from crime in general (Sommers et al. 2006; Fleisher and Krienert, 2004; Farrall and Bowling, 1999), education was seldom mentioned as a support factor for leaving crime. Rather those studies pointed to the future aims of getting married and having children as motivations for desistance. This present study found that a majority of the girls returned to school to complete high school and/or university or college educations or at least expressed a desire to complete schooling that had been interrupted by involvement in street and gang life. In the words of Cathy, "Back to school maybe is the first thing to do." Some even specified specific careers they would like to pursue in the future after completing their high school. Tammy and Nancy had already completed a specialized course in social work and were trained to work with other children and youth who had ended up in street situations similar to theirs. Sharon expressed the desire to enter the profession of social work following release. Others including Sonia mentioned long-term plans for careers:

I have interest in psychology but its lot of work and I'm getting old. Social work would be something that I would like. Because I always wanted to work with children in group homes, foster homes, work with children and people who are less fortunate than others. I have been in that situation and I know how it feels.

When asked about her focus on social work, Nancy explained: "Because I wanted to help people like me. I can understand them because I had their life. I can help them better than anyone who doesn't really understand. You can't really relate to them." Nancy's and Sonia's statements have important policy implications. The need to understand gang-associated children and youth is key to assisting them in making changes in their lives. Also, it is important that these individuals trust the social workers. Emphasizing the above point, Tammy explained why she wanted to be a social worker:

I wanted to be a social worker. Because when I was nine years old, I had a meeting with psychologist and she was doing all those tests on me and she said she can understand how I feel. I asked, "Were you abused?" and she said, "No." I felt, how you can understand when you haven't experienced it?

Understanding and gaining the trust of children and youth is an important and initial factor in interventions or assistance programs designed to support positive changes in their lives. In their past experiences, most gang members have undergone sometimes numerous crucial events when they were deceived and both not trusted by and not able to trust someone or others close to them. For example, there were times when respondents' mothers said that they did not believe that sexual abuse of their daughters was occurring, despite the daughters' telling them of the abuse.

Almost all respondents had the same basic aims and goals as did any other female in our society - a stable career, a family, and a home. Nancy stated,

I want to try something long term. I was moving a lot and jumped careers. I want to settle now and have family. I want to have a nice home. I'm sick of living in apartments.

Like many other respondents in the study, Nancy had lived in apartments buildings in inner-city neighbourhoods that were characterized by violence, drug dealing, and gang fights. The general conception was that the places where they were living were the root causes of all their problems, and that those living in middle-class neighbourhoods and in beautiful homes were isolated from the troubles and drudgeries of daily life. The girls realized a desperate need to be part of a loving family with meaningful and healthy relationships, as well as to have financial security through a stable career. On the whole, all of them wanted to be financially independent and realized the importance of education that led to a good career in order to get to that point. Sharon, who was in the remand centre at the time of the interview and expressed the desire to leave the gang after her release from the facility, explained her future plans: "Finish school, get small-paying job in the beginning, and then build my life." The need to be financially independent stemmed from their experiences as children and adolescent when they had seen their mothers dependent on partners for money and other needs. They had seen the tough struggle to get money for daily survival, and clearly understood that to be one of the reasons for gang involvement. Crystal stated her intention: "To find a good job and be independent. I don't want to rely on anybody for anything." From a critical perspective, underlying this urge for independence is a strong desire to get out of poverty, which the respondents believed to be of the reasons for their present situations. Additionally, they didn't want their children to end up in the same "bad" situations in which they found themselves to be.

Despite their outlined future plans and firm decisions to leave street and gang life, the respondents faced numerous challenges in following that new path. The experience of being in a gang had been powerful. A few of the respondents mentioned that after having left the gang, a void had existed in their lives. Being in a gang had carried a variety of meanings for the girls, and once they had left the gang many experienced tremendous feelings of loneliness. Some reported feeling depressed. Leaving their gang and friends had left a deep hole in their lives, and there was an immediate urge to fill that void.

Crystal reported:

You know, there are times when I was desperate to go back to streets to my friends because I was so alone. It's good to have people for you, even to talk and not judge you.

Mia, who planned to quit her gang once she was released from custody (and if her boyfriend agrees to), expresses a fear of losing her place in a closely knit small group of friends: "It won't be easy to quit. I'll have to get rid of all the friends. It's hard to make new friends." For some, the gang provided "a sense of belonging." This factor both made it difficult to leave the gang and also resulted in the desire to return to the friends and gang life even after one had left. Of this experience, Tammy stated, "It was difficult. After being okay for so long you feel the need to go back to your friends." When that void became difficult, the girls tried to fill it in a variety of ways. Crystal attempted to fill the emptiness through religion. She converted to Islam and strictly practiced religion in her daily life. Religion and cultural traditions were important for four of the young women, not only in their efforts to get out of the gang but also for remaining out of the gang. Three Aboriginal respondents described finding purpose in after-gang life through following Aboriginal cultural and spiritual beliefs. Understanding their cultural traditions

and spiritual beliefs had helped them to find a positive identity being an Aboriginal person, which in turn gave new meaning to their lives.

Many respondents described the difficulties they had faced and were facing in making necessary changes in their lifestyle. Apart from the emotional challenges on the personal front, girls had experienced some very hardships in getting back to productive experiences in the conventional institutions, especially in schools. They faced continuous stigmatization by members of those institutions, and felt that they were viewed with cautious and suspicious eyes. They were often “overstaffed,” meaning that they felt a level of involvement and surveillance by institution staff that was greater than that experienced by other students. As Tammy described it,

I was clean for eighteen months. But still they think I’m violent because of my history. I went to school and I was overstaffed. Why you want to go to place who don’t trust you. People don’t look at you the same. All the approaches are designed and set up for the individual - behaviour therapy, individual assessments. Its all about you and your ability to adapt, but others don’t take the responsibility. It takes an entire village to reform one kid.

Tammy went on to further explain her frustration:

Girls want family; they want a place to belong. But what is the option? Come back to the institutions, places which tell you, you are not worth it. For example, get a parent to sign a form to get into a place or program. Well, I don’t have a parent. I have to go over and over to explain that to people. Ask a mom to go to slumber party; I don’t have a mom to ask. Sometimes you get sick of it explaining.

There was a relapse period in the life of Marie: “I went back [to my gang] after quitting for a while. I owed some money to some guys and they came beating on me. So I went back on streets.” Finding adequate and timely help surfaced as a major theme in the challenges the girls faced:

There were times when I went to get help you know, no one would help me, There was nothing they could do for me. No place to put me. There were times I went to go to shelter and it was full. And I would feel either here or I go back to them [friends in gang]. Then I go right back there and you know it takes another year or so I spend before I try to go and get help again. For girls especially, like me, when they run from street they need a place to stay, a safe place that can protect them. (Abby)

The only reason I feel that there is not enough help available is because I know how hard it was for me when I wanted to leave. It was three or four times I tried to get help and every time I couldn't get in. I had no choice but to stay with my friends or on the streets. (Crystal)

There is a compelling necessity to have an integrated approach within intervention programs. The girls and youth have varying needs once they leave street life. They need new friends, financial security, protection, and drug de-addiction help. Above all, they need trust, understanding, and acceptance from the conventional institutions, especially schools since those are usually the first “stops” where they arrive on the hopeful pathway out of gang life. Lack of trust and acceptance from schools and its workers (usually teachers and counselors) can hurt these youths' self-esteem, and may be a factor in their decisions to return to the street lives that they had intended to leave behind.

6c. Consequences of Gang Involvement

The previous sections described the negative consequences of gang involvement as the major reason that girls had left the gang. Young women's perceptions of meaning of gang for them were expressed in the context of how they experienced the benefits and drawbacks of their gang memberships. Beyond doubt, gangs provided protection, friendship circles, belonging, and support within the group. Further, membership also fulfilled economic needs for survival through robberies, drug dealing, and prostitution. Different activities offered different rewards and risks. Active involvement in violent criminal activities increased risks of victimization, but at the same time it offered status,

respect, reputation, and money. The “tough” girls perceived a sense of equality with the males and other tough girls and power within their gangs. The experience of gang involvement was empowering for some of them and it also provided security, which had been a necessity at the time of association. Respondents described what for them was the best part of their gang involvement:

For me, the guys treat me with respect. It’s being respected and what you are known about. (Mia)

Probably have back up when need help, some true friends. (Cathy)

You always have someone there for you, for your protection. (Julie)

You have power because you have the name out there and not to mess around with this person. (Natasha)

For Abby, gang satisfaction was dependent on the gender power relations of the gang: “Well, if you are in the gang in which boys have power, then there is nothing good about it.” As described in chapter 5, the girls who had less power and status in their gangs (as compared to other girls in the gang) and in gangs where male members dominated and subjugated the females, girls were less likely to experience rewards from their gang involvement. Those girls were more likely to be victims of gendered violence, and respondents’ statements described some of the worst aspects of being a girl in a gang.

You can get sold, that would probably the worst thing. I have seen guys sell their girlfriends to their friends for like three beers. And girls don’t have choice; they have to get along with it because they own them. If you don’t get along they will get some of the girls to beat you up and some guys don’t care; they beat [their girlfriends] themselves. (Sonia)

Getting raped. Have happened quite a few times to girls in our gang. Girls have been raped by their own gang members. (Sharon)

Girls get beat ups when they work on streets, they get raped or go missing. Boys put girls on drugs to make them work. I was sexually abused by a guy when I was drunk and got beat up from my ex-boyfriend. (Nancy)

Apart from gendered victimization, other respondents referred to being victims of regular beatings either from personal confrontations or from rival gang members: “You always get into trouble. You are always doing something that involves police, trouble,” said Julie.

From these descriptions, it appears that though gang membership provided status, respect, and power to tough girls, many of the respondents acknowledged that overall the gang experience was harmful and negative. The findings clearly indicate that gang is a dangerous place to be. To gain what was usually only short-term equality, status, and empowerment, the girls risked involvement in violent behaviour that was the reason why almost all the respondents, when asked, described gangs as a dangerous place. Abby, who had been associated with several different gangs in Saskatoon, explained that her gang involvement was the only option she saw in her neighbourhood. While she had enjoyed respect as a fighter in many gangs, she was also aware of the darker side:

It [gang involvement] is probably the most dangerous thing. Not safe at all. Some people think, if you have gang, they will protect you. If you are in gang, and somebody else knows you are in gang that makes you a target. There is no safety the gang can give up.

Julie, who had joined gang as a way to get rid of her loneliness on the streets, expressed remorse about her experience:

I have seen the dangers. I had no feelings at that time. But now I regret why I did this. I always keep thinking why I do this why do I hang around with these people that made me do this or I did it on my own.

Sharon and Sam both became associated with gangs through family members and cousins, and while they had described enjoying respect and status within their groups, they summarized their overall gang experiences as negative:

Only thing I can say is it's not worth being in a gang. In the end, being in a gang does not benefit you, it only hurts you. (Sharon)

Nothing really is good about it. Just you have more friends to hang out with. (Sam)

Crystal, who had run away from her home to escape abuse from her stepfather, ended up on the streets of Edmonton and joined street gangs as a protection for working on the streets. She too concluded that "There is nothing good about it. It's all false hope."

Girls expressed mixed emotions about gang experiences and their effects on their lives. Even in the cases of girls who may have at points experienced equality and power, the meaning of gang changed over time. One of the important points from a critical perspective is to note that the gang experience for young women is a dynamic process, one that changes over time and even across individuals. This was reflected in some views of how the meaning of gang had changed for them, as follows:

Very controlling and demanding group of friends that you are always with. (Abby)

Most of the people think you can find life in a gang, you can't find life. (Mia)

It's [gang] like a family but it's not really your family. They [other gang members] are there for you but they are not. (Sharon)

Only thing I can say is it's not worth being in a gang. (Sandra)

The feedback on reasons why these girls decided to leave their gangs can help us to better frame our gang prevention and intervention programs. We can highlight the negative consequences of gang involvement, and point out how the promises and

illusions of what gang life is start to fade away after time. Young girls at-risk must have access to clear information regarding the dangers and negative consequences of gang life. The above findings reflect Campbell's (1990) assessment of the gang as a temporary asylum able to meet their immediate needs but not a permanent solution or equivalent to family.

As opposed to Moore's (1991) findings that described ex-gang members suffering long term social harm from their gang involvements, the group of older respondents (age group twenty-seven to thirty-three years) in the present study seemed at the point of the interviews to be doing fairly well within the social institutions of family, community, education, and economics. Most of them appeared to have successfully put their negative experiences behind them and had moved on with their lives. Of the seven older respondents, the majority (six respondents) were employed at the time of the interview and one was attending college. Out of the eight younger respondents, six young girls at the time of interview were placed in remand centre and expressed a desire to leave the gang and street life immediately on their release. Emotional scars on two girls were visible when they mentioned missing their siblings during their stay in remand centre. But others seem optimistic and had plans for their future like Sharon states, "Finish school, get small-paying job in the beginning, and then build my life." It is important that the girls like Sharon should receive the support to accomplish their goals so that they can put their negative experiences behind and build on their life.

6d. Conclusion

Based on the interviews with these fifteen young women, it seems that the decision to leave the gang appeared to have been preceded by a variety of factors, primarily (1) the

negative consequences related to harm due to violence, (2) difficulties with the law and (3) protection of their [unborn] children from the negative influences of violence and crime. A combination of maturation, growing older, and fear of closeness to violence comprised the main reasons why the respondents decided to leave the gangs.

Once out of the gang, the girls had to refocus their efforts toward educational opportunities and obtaining job-related skills. They recognized a need to redefine their roles and interests and to find new directions in their lives. All respondents expressed completing education as their immediate goal following the decision to leave the gang and street life. They perceived this to be the first step to bettering their lives, getting job, and becoming independent. Many of them mentioned a strong need to be financially independent in their lives. Like many other twenty-first century women, they wanted stable careers.

In order to effectively intervene with former gang members, respondents mentioned there is a need to trust former girl gang members and to accept them, in order to deter their return to gangs and to the streets. They need strong and multiple support systems to help them through their after-gang lives. Such support system must comprise an integrated approach that takes into account their addiction problems, their struggles with anger management, their management with abusive experiences both sexual and non-sexual, and their need for financial help. Because it is often necessary for the girls to move out of former neighbourhoods in order to avoid further gang involvement, they need new friends, role models, and mentors to whom they have easy access to talk openly and freely.

The desire to maintain a sense of self and independence by achieving career-oriented goals was an important incentive for avoiding a return to streets and gangs. On the whole, the success of leaving the gang appears to have depended on the girls' ability to achieve commitments to and involvement with conventional institutions. Once they achieved trust and acceptance within social institutions, their determination to stay away from gang and criminal life was strengthened.

From the findings, it appears that decisions to leave the gang were triggered by the negative effects of gang life. A move towards a conventional middle-class life occurred basically due to the push factors describing negative consequences of gang life. The girls who were willing to take risks by participation in violent crime achieved respect, status, and equality in their gang groups. But the majority of girls in gangs suffered gendered victimization that left them in positions subordinate to male gang members. The downsides of gang involvement far exceeded the benefits. Awareness about the dangers of gang life including the negative consequences should be highlighted in prevention programs, especially those designed for younger girls and children.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE PROCESS OF MARGINALIZATION AND GANGS

7a. Introduction

The preceding chapters discussed individual young women's and girls' pathways in and out of gangs through descriptive accounts of their lives. I identified key factors in their lives that influenced their decisions to become associated with gangs, their lives within gangs, and their reasons for leaving gangs. The next objective is to analyze the pathways to girls' involvement with gangs and violence through marginalization, age, gender, race, class, and ethnicity. How do age, gender, race, class, and ethnicity in the larger societal context influence girls' involvement with gangs and violent behaviour? The purpose of this chapter is to understand the young women's perceptions of racism, classism, and sexism, and how their experiences involving these factors interacted, leading the way to social exclusion and isolation from social institutions (i.e., marginalization) and their subsequent involvement with youth gangs. Young girls' descriptions of their experiences with social institutions stand in partial or direct contradiction to concepts such as equality, freedom, opportunity, and protection. Their accounts reflected injustice, unfairness, and/or inequality in schools, foster homes, and the justice system, and many of the choices they made can be usefully understood as attempts to resist institutional power by challenging it on the basis of its own fundamental percepts.

Most conventional female delinquency theories are inadequate with respect to understanding the implications of age, gender, race, class, and ethnicity as a holistic entity in the multiple marginalizations of girls' life experiences. Vigil (2002: 20) argued that "a systematic examination of the major agents of socialization – families, schools,

and law enforcement – can enlarge our understanding of gangs and gang members and of how the gang subculture emerged.” However, the socio-structural and sub-cultural understandings of gang formation form a large part of current empirical and theoretical research on male gang members. When it comes to female gang members and offenders, often what is fore fronted are the individual actions of females, with sharp focus on their psychological maladjustment to life circumstances. The influence of structural, cultural, political, and economic inequalities, the life conditions resulting from these oppressions and at times resistance, are often overlooked as contributing to female gang involvement and their violent behaviour. Henceforth, I would argue that by using a critical feminist stance, the limitations that the young women face within the broader social, cultural, political, and economic structures can be contextualized. The analytical tool of critical feminism helps to clarify why individual women come into conflict with the law and at the same time situates these women in the larger social, cultural, political, and economic contexts. Critical feminism “does not focus on individual flaws; rather it questions societal structures and the role of those structures in breeding and sustaining criminals” (Brooks, 2002: 47). Critical feminist theorists ask questions regarding whether women who come into conflict with the law are truly “bad” or whether they have arrived there because of their life circumstances. In this chapter, I integrate socio-structural reasons for girls’ gang involvement: their perceptions of experiences of racism, sexism, and classism within social institutions, and how these factors, to an extent led to social isolation and exclusion from institutions and their subsequent association with youth gangs. I conclude by stating that the multi-faceted array of oppressions faced by these adolescent girls and young women, in conjunction with limited venues of resistance, offer a glimpse into the

issues facing young, usually ethnic-minority girls in inner-city Western Canadian neighbourhoods. Considering our country's proud self-identity as a leader in the promotion of global human rights, we must critically examine where and how our institutional systems and structural arrangements have failed the most marginalized and disenfranchised groups in our population, including young women and girls.

7b. Social Institutions and Marginalization

The first step is to unravel how and why young women who are experiencing marginalization on multiple fronts become disaffected, diverted, and disassociated from social institutions. The blueprints of girls' lives are shaped by the broader context of key social institutions within which they interact on a daily basis. The social status of a person determines how s/he lives, with whom s/he interacts, what s/he does and how s/he does it. In this section, I review girls, and young women's experiences of discrimination, deprivation, and injustice within the institutions of family, child welfare, school, and the criminal justice system. These are the key institutions that helped to shape these girls' lives.

Family

The first social institution a child interacts with is the family. Ideally, family is regarded as an institution of love, care, and well-being, and also as a place for the teaching and supervision of children. The focus on individual characteristics of youth involved with illegal activities and gangs has contributed to an overemphasis on the personal attributes of children and their families at the expense of attention to the effects of social settings and context. Among the many factors that contribute to and shape the contexts in which children and youth live, family income is perhaps the most powerful.

Housing, neighbourhoods, schools, and the social opportunities that are linked to these largely are controlled by income. Families living in poverty are subject to multiple stresses and constraints that lead to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, thereby reducing parents' ability to provide children with a range of supports. Families lacking financial and emotional resources often fail in providing love, care, and welfare to children and youth. It is in this backdrop that gangs are believed to fill the void (Vigil, 1988).

The issues of marginalization impact different social categories differently. Aboriginal young women are greatly over-represented among low-income groups (Novac et al, 2002: 66). Aboriginal children are among the poorest and almost half (forty-six percent) of the total Aboriginal children under fifteen years old live with a lone parent (Fournier and Crey, 2000). Forty percent of off-reserve Aboriginal children live in poverty. For generations, since the colonization of First Nations peoples, their land, their lifestyle, and their traditional family practices have been adversely affected (Fournier and Crey, 2000). Part of the legacy of colonialism is cultural and family breakdown, child and spousal abuse, the abuse of substances, and the resultant violence that often accompanies such abuse (McKenzie, Seidl and Bone, 1995; Crisjohn, Young and Maraun, 1997). Domestic violence and abuse is one of the significant factors for single-mother families among Aboriginal populations. Aboriginal young women experience abuse both in and out of the home at disturbing rates. Up to three-fourths of the victims of sex crimes in Aboriginal communities are females under the age of eighteen years, half are under the age of fourteen and almost one-fourth are under the age of seven years (McIvor and Nahanee, 1998).

More than half of the girls in this study sample were female runaways to the streets, as well as to gangs. They admitted to running away, generally from abusive homes. About two-thirds of them have witnessed domestic violence. When asked about their relationships with their parents, some admitted to hating their mothers for taking alcohol and drugs. More than half reported emotional, physical, and sexual abuse in their lives and resented the failures of their mothers to protect them. The girls talked about poverty as one of the causes of their journeys to gangs and also as a cause for their siblings' gang involvements. Mia, whose two brothers both are gang members, explained her family's source of income: "My mom is a single parent and on assistance. My elder brother and younger one, both get money from drugs and other stuff they do." The consensus in those homes and neighbourhoods was that this was the normal way of living in order to earn money for survival. Among other reasons for female gang involvement mentioned by girls, earning money was one.

Outside of their families, the next most immediate setting for adolescent lives is the neighbourhood. Most of the social interactions of families and children are embedded in neighbourhoods. Again, the family income and the persistence of poverty limit economic and residential opportunities. A great number of poor neighbourhoods are racially stratified as well as economically isolated. A key explanation for residential segregation is the out-migration of middle-class European-descendant families from core urban and traditional low-income neighbourhoods, combined with the inward migration by racialized groups. Increasingly, these geographical areas represent low-income enclaves subject to the distresses of substandard and often over-priced housing.

Young kids everywhere usually play with their neighbourhood friends, often carefree of the problems that may face their communities. The play areas in inner-city neighbourhoods often include parks and streets scattered with beer bottles, trash, and used needles in an environment of decayed apartment buildings and vacant housing. Many of the people wandering around do not have jobs, which increases the visibility of crime, drug dealing, gangs, and prostitution. Almost all girls except one in the sample stated that they had lived in neighbourhoods where violence, fights, and late-night parties were common occurrences. Individuals who serve as representatives of mainstream society (i.e., police, probation and parole officers, social workers, and teachers) rarely live in those neighborhoods.

During the adolescent years, local conditions intertwine with experiences of treatment by peers and adults that emphasize the world to be no longer a friendly place in which to live. The various harsh realities of life in inner-city neighbourhoods place poor ethnic minorities in a social world that requires unconventional adaptations. Vigil's (1988) research on gangs found that people's adaptations in Los Angeles resulted in a street-based subculture formed to cope with the realities of life. Lower-class culture is the centre of focus in explaining lower-class male street crime and male gang delinquency, due either to the presence of opportunities for crime (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960), or to status frustration in achieving goals (Cohen, 1955), or to values of lower-class culture as favourable for gang-related delinquency (Miller, 1958). The neighbourhoods surrounding the downtown cores in both Saskatoon and Edmonton bring together marginalized people who feel trapped and often are under the influence of alcohol and drugs, and many respond violently to any transgression upon their sense of self (Anderson, 1999). Most of

the girls in the study had lived in neighbourhoods where youth gangs were visibly present. Depending on the neighbourhood, the pressure to belong to the gang could become physically threatening and the threats for the girls were acute. Sharon briefly explained that her reason for joining a gang was the constant threat she experienced because she lived in a neighbourhood that “was an IP territory”:

My life before I became a gang member was being so paranoid that someone with knife was following me or someone was hiding around the corner ready to stab me. After joining gang, I don't have to be paranoid about that.

When the girls in the study who worked on the street sought necessary protection, affiliation with youth gangs was the only choice they had.

The structural and cultural differences in gang neighbourhoods have a long history in gang research (Thrasher, 1927; Whyte, 1955; Cohen, 1955; Miller, 1958; Cloward and Ohlin, 1960). Moore (1991) and Vigil (1988, 2002) found that the neighbourhood gang problems have in many ways become spatial and visual reminders of visible ethnic minorities and Aboriginal people's marginal status. In Edmonton, the average earnings and medium incomes of Aboriginal people are much lower than those of the general population. In 2001 the poverty or low-income rate among the general Edmonton population was twenty per cent, but the rate stood at forty-four per cent among Aboriginal people (Baker, 2006). In many neighbourhoods in Edmonton, more than half of the Aboriginal people live in poverty. In Saskatoon, the Aboriginal population is concentrated in west-side neighbourhoods of the city that are the city's poorest. In the study, five of the girls from Saskatoon had spent considerable parts of their lives in two west-side inner-city neighbourhoods (Pleasant Hill and Riversdale), that are among the poorest in Saskatoon, and where in 2001 close to half the populations were Aboriginal

(Anderson, 2005). In these core neighbourhoods, Aboriginal youths undergo intense pressure to join and belong to gangs. In this context, gangs fill the void created by the effects of institutional racism and isolation.

The evidence is clear and compelling that low incomes and persistent poverty exact a significant price on children's development, educational attainment, and socioeconomic potential. The places where people live initiate their first opportunities and obstacles. Families in low-income areas and neighbourhoods face employment constraints and marginal inclusion in wider society. Parents as well as aunts, uncles, and even grandparents may have encountered various forms of obstacles and discrimination for generations; thus, successful upward mobility may become an aspiration that might never be legitimately attained. This is most notably true for Aboriginal people in Western Canada, where Aboriginal incarceration rates are the highest in Canada. The girls in the sample study explained that living in poor, crime-ridden neighbourhoods most influenced their lack of opportunities and their subsequent association with gangs.

Child Welfare

The child welfare system in general, and foster care in particular, are designed to (among other purposes) provide a safety net for children and adolescents from disorganized families. Although foster care may sometimes be better for the adolescent than remaining at home or living independently, frequently it is unable to provide the support required to help children and young people to avoid life-compromising behaviours that risk their futures. Foster care is itself a high-risk setting for adolescents and children. The risks become more evident when gender and race enter the picture. Pat Carlen, in her work on female offenders in Britain tracked women's passages from "care

to custody.” She stated that women’s “minor (and often non-criminal) early misbehaviours would never have escalated into ‘criminal careers’ at all, had they not been in Care” (Carlen, 1988: 90). Trevethan and her colleagues (2002) found in their study on Aboriginal offenders and their childhood experiences that significantly larger proportion of Aboriginal (sixty-three percent) than non-Aboriginal offenders (thirty-six percent) were involved in the child welfare system when they were children. There is clear evidence that this net has failed and that the child welfare system is doing an inadequate job in providing care, protection, and support to Aboriginal children and youth.

The unfortunate legacy of residential schools (Wotherspoon and Schissel, 2003) and other attempts to forcefully assimilate Aboriginals also have resulted in high numbers of Aboriginal youth being placed under state care, in foster homes and in other institutions. Within the city of Edmonton, Aboriginal children and youth are over six times more likely to receive child protection services than are non-Aboriginal children and youth (Edmonton Urban Aboriginal Accord Initiative, 2005: 42). Throughout Canada, there are approximately three times as many First Nations children in the child-welfare system today than were enrolled in residential schools at the height of their operation in the 1940s (Blackstock, 2003). The 1998 Canadian Incident Study on Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS) coupled with research on service access indicated that poverty, poor housing, and substance misuse were the critical factors accounting for the over-representation of Aboriginal children in the welfare and care systems. Interestingly, when researchers controlled for poverty, substance misuse, and neglect, there was no over-representation of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system (Blackstock and

Trocme, 2004). This difference rightfully pinpointed structural inequalities faced by Aboriginal families, inequalities that led to negative consequences in the healthy development of their children.

About two-thirds of the respondents in the study had resided in foster homes and most of them in more than one foster home. Because there were only three respondents of non-Aboriginal ethnicity in the sample, marked variations in the reasons for placement in foster care were not noticed for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal respondents. Girls had been placed in foster care for being victims of violence and abuse at home, for running away, and for the neglect they had suffered as a result of their families' poor financial conditions. Foster care itself frequently became a high-risk setting for most of the young girls. Out of the ten respondents who had resided in foster homes, six were in contact with other gang members and had easy access to drugs during their time in those homes. Almost all the respondents who had been placed in foster homes mentioned, "not liking the place." Sharon explained her experience in a foster home:

The foster home I was in, I didn't really like it because sometimes I would get beaten up for no reason. There were four of us: two boys and my sister and me. First time I got weed was from boys staying in my foster home. They said they got it from their friend in gangs. They showed me how to smoke it. Though I had gangs around me in my family but I remember first time I ever heard talking about gangs being "cool," how nice it is to be in one from them.

The very act of separating a child from his or her family of origin is traumatic and may itself cause disturbance. Tammy explained her separation from her siblings and their subsequent placements in different foster homes as the turning point in her life after she had disclosed to social workers that her mother's boyfriend was abusing her: "It was like negative consequence for me." Since that occurred, she has been unable to stop blaming

herself for her family's separation. The living conditions amongst the various foster homes where the respondents had been were quite similar. Tammy explained her stay in a foster home:

They kept me in a foster home. This place was chaotic. There were about eleven kids. All different age groups. There were older boys, teenagers, and even my little brother's age. Three bedrooms upstairs in a house, but they were for their family and all of us were in basement, piled into different rooms and in open area. It will take a while to have a bed and a room. If you just came in, you will probably land in an open area. The other foster home I was in, there were five or six kids in different rooms. But everybody keeps us in the basement [laughs]. I never had a room upstairs.

In the social services system, rising caseloads and continuous funding cuts can create situations in which the needs and priorities of children and youth are often neglected. Shortages of available foster homes can lead to overcrowded and substandard foster home situations, and this in turn can result in increased risk factors for young girls released into foster care. One of the respondents had been raped by her foster father, and to escape she felt forced into the risk-filled situation of living independently at a young age:

I moved around in different foster homes. I had a family where I moved into and stayed there for a year and my foster father ended up raping me in my sleep. Then I lived on my own when I was fifteen. The social services let me stay because they knew I won't stay in any foster home. I didn't trust them. So I had my own place and that's where I got into drugs, prostitution, gangs and stuff. (Karina)

A child advocate from Alberta stated that "when funding for foster homes and resources are tight, it's not surprising standards may not be strictly adhered to. There are many great foster homes in this province. Unfortunately, there are some retained as foster homes that probably shouldn't be, but there aren't alternatives" (Johnsrude, 1999). For almost all respondents (two excepted) who had been placed in foster homes, those homes

themselves became high-risk settings. The social “safety net” has failed in providing safe heavens for young, vulnerable, at-risk population. Widespread social insecurity, a characteristic of neo-liberal policies, is stinging the most marginalized groups in the society in the form of governance that controls the downtrodden and destitute (Hogeveen, 2007).

School

The educational system potentially is another source for conventional support, role models, and an environment of healthy bonding for young people. Substantial research on youth gangs demonstrates that youth who are involved in gangs are less likely to complete school and less likely to do well academically. It is well-documented that in Canada, as elsewhere, adolescents from low-income families and neighbourhoods are at much higher risk of educational failure than their more affluent suburban counterparts (Kraus et al, 2001, Shane, 1996). However, while issues of educational access and opportunity have been touched on within the scopes of other studies, the extent of these issues in the lives of young women associated with gangs in Canada has not been thoroughly investigated and the systemic and institutional barriers that girls (particularly Aboriginal) may confront in accessing public education have largely remained unveiled. Furthermore, it has been argued that schools have a distinct role to play in addressing the issue of youth gangs by enforcing zero-tolerance policies for gang affiliation. Additionally there is potential for schools to act as points of connection, stability, and support for girls struggling with the multiple causes that may lead them down the path to deviance (Fitzgerald, 1999).

While respondents' neighbourhoods and family provided access into gangs, schools provided a physical space for the Aboriginal and visible-minority young girls to become pressured into gangs. A lot of problems were manifested by their high rates of suspensions, expulsions, and dropping out. The majority of girls in the sample had problem in schools. Because of the many school suspensions for fighting, truancy, and disrespectful and defiant behaviour, most were doing poorly academically. Some girls reported being expelled from and/or dropping out of school because of drugs.

School dropout and expulsion was a theme that arose across all interviews. However, I would argue the importance of considering the context under which gang-involved young women may be expelled or forced to drop out of educational institutions. It was interesting to note that most of the girls in the study had not been expelled because of their associations with gangs, as might have been expected considering the zero-tolerance policies for gang affiliation in schools and other educational institutions. The young girls, fully aware of such policies, reported that at school they were careful to keep their gang affiliations low profile. Debbie explained:

There were some gang kids that were involved with gangs like me that went to school. But we didn't talk about it very much. We always kind of kept it to ourselves. There were lots of fights like any other school but not really gang fights.

The school fighting between students and drug problems were cited by the young women as the primary reasons for their dropouts and expulsions from school. In some cases, bad school experiences actually led to gang involvement. Abby described the incidents that provoked fighting:

When I started getting picked on as every other child gets picked on and I used to fight back. Then I get picked on more and I fight back more. I went to a Catholic school and I wasn't Catholic so they pick on me for

that. I was Chinese and everybody else was White, they pick on me for that. They will pick on me for my last name as they feel it sounded funny. They would tease me, made songs on me, steal my stuff, try to push me around in the hallway.

She went on to explain that following fighting incidents she would be suspended from school and during these days off from school, she began to hang out with kids who were associated with gangs:

I always went to school every day and never skipped. And I always did fairly well in school but I used to fight a lot. For lot of reasons, I always get caught. They would kick me out of school for few days so I come home and stay in my neighbourhood and hang out with kids who were not in school or who have skipped the school and were associated with gangs. I would always hang around with them and they would tell me about gangs.

The fighting that many of the young women described needs to be understood as a response to the racialized, gendered, and classed system of conventional schooling and to the perceived difference these young women represented to their peers. In other words, it was a response to institutional forms of violence that were enacted against them through racism, sexism, and classism that has become part of the education system as a whole (Roman and Eyre, 1997). Karina suffered from Attention Deficit Disorder and was labeled as “trouble-maker” (in her own words) by her teachers that led to negative attitudes towards teachers and studies. She finally dropped out of school. In his work on educational issues facing homeless children and youth in America, Paul Shane identified the inability of educational systems in the post-industrial era to accommodate the needs of children and youth who presented challenges to the standard forms of instruction and learning characteristic of current educational structures (Shane, 1996). Some of the problems at school were directly or indirectly related to family experiences. Sonia, for

example, was physically abused and neglected by her parents and she related those experiences to feelings of detachment from school.

Family problems definitely contributed to the girl's negative experiences at school but the schools themselves were disparaging environments. When the respondents were asked if they had ever experienced racism, half related racist encounters within the school context. If racism can be seen as violence (Jiwani, 2001), in their schools these young girls suffered violent racist attacks from fellow students, and teachers. Bullying, in itself an upsetting experience, is common among school-going children, but bullying in the shape of racism results in a direct attack on one's identity. When the respondents were asked if they had ever experienced racism, they had incidents to recount:

Oh yeah . . . a lot. In the elementary school that I went to they are very racist. Almost everybody that went there were White and anybody that wasn't usually got watched 24/7. They watched us in class, in recess time, and anywhere we did anything wrong they were right there and they already knew what happened. If there was a fight between "us" and somebody else, "we" were the only ones at fault and going down to the office and "other" kids would get back sent to the class. (Abby)

I got jumped at school one time by the two White girls. By the time principal made it there, there's only one girl that was trying to beat me up and he [the principal] grabbed me by the back of the arm and dragged me down to the office and just left her there, didn't even say anything to her. (Debbie)

It was like a coincidence or what. Every time something like that happened, I was always under suspension or picked up or blamed. (Natasha)

Almost all the native girls in the study stated "name-calling" based on their race as a common experience during their school lives. Sandra stated, "I was called 'Big Tall Indian.' I was only Native kid in my class." Given the large number of the respondents who self-identified as First Nations, these findings were highly familiar to the entire

group. As Hampton and St. Denis argued, “There is no doubt that Aboriginal people, students and teachers must contend with racist practices and beliefs rooted in white supremacy and colonialism” (2002: 5). In the words of Omi and Winant, “Race still remains a fundamental principle of social organization and identity formation” (1993: 6).

When the young women and girls were asked about how they saw themselves integrating into the education system as a whole, one of the themes that emerged consistently was how the middle-class construction of the public education system and the ways in which these young women’s status as “poor” served to alienate them from the conventional practices of schooling (Willis, 1981). This prevented them from “fitting in” with the rest of the student body and in the school system itself. Tammy described and expressed her feelings about how the school system made mockery of students’ poverty:

They would put our names on the board, who didn’t pay fees. Our names would be there on the board all through the year and other kids would be teasing me: “You can’t pay even pay your class fees.” That was a really shameful part. . . . Eventually I didn’t have to be there.

In addition, many of the young women and girls also mentioned how discrimination had resulted from labeling and stigmatization by school personnel. Tammy described how she internalized those feelings of “difference”: “I am different from the rest and let me find who is like me.” Tammy illustrated her reasons for associating with other youth involved with street crime and gangs:

It’s finding similar and finding a place where you were no longer told how awful you were. If you went to school you are told that “Good moms don’t drink and they don’t try to do this or that. Let’s make a Father’s Day card.” If you don’t have a dad they reinforce that over and over and over. So it was easier to be with kids who didn’t have those things and didn’t have to pretend and fit in over here.

This finding demonstrated how these young women became characterized as “different” from the other students as a result of their social status. As aptly stated by Willinsky, “Education is no small player in giving meaning to these differences. We are schooled in differences great and small, in borderlines and boundaries, in historical struggles and exotic practices, all of which extend the meaning of difference” (1998: 1).

What became clear through the discussions with the young women and girls was that, generally, the educational system assumed a very specific and narrow understanding of the life experiences, family lives, and class positions of its students, resulting in an erasure of the life and living conditions including poverty that many of the students may have been experiencing. Historically, the assumed scenario of students’ residing within homes guided by two middle-class parents was the standard for which the material and curriculum requirements for school were constructed, and all students were expected to respond and perform accordingly. Though Alternative School System Programs such as Joe Duquette High School in Saskatoon are emerging, they are not the norm.

Clearly, we must pay heed to the ways in which the institutions of education, through their everyday practices, are complicit in (re)producing forms of social inequality that these young women also experienced outside the school walls. This lens through which the education system’s role in the lives of the young women and girls was revealed demonstrated that the social, cultural, and economic capital generated by the formal education system does not extend to all students equally, and in too many cases is dependant on a normalized middle-class conception of the white student (Giroux, 1983; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).¹

¹ The notions of social, cultural, and economic capital were set forth by Pierre Bourdieu in his social theories concerning the social reproduction of inequality (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). For a discussion

Evidence from the interviews showed there to be a link between respondents' having poor school experiences and being at-risk of adopting gang lifestyles. The sample of respondents had negative attitudes about school and school administrators yet believed education to be the important variable for success in future life, as illustrated by their present qualifications and future aspirations as presented in chapters 4 and 6. While all the respondents valued education, they spoke of public schools as places closed to them in both before- and after-gang accounts, places where they were labelled as troublemakers either because of their histories with violence and gangs and/or because of their racial and ethnic identities, and places where they consistently had been negatively singled out because of their appearance or demeanor. Valerie Polakow, a prominent advocate for marginalized women and children internationally, stated:

My own ethnographic observations of poor children in Michigan document widespread discrimination and prejudice on the part of the teachers and school personnel toward destitute children and their families—where classroom environments for poor children, particularly difficult and angry children, become landscapes of condemnation that reveal shared experiences of exclusion, humiliation and indifference. (2003: 102).

Criminal Justice System

Among the institutions that affect the lives of female gang members, the criminal justice system plays an important role. Because our society and state rely heavily on the agents of our criminal justice system to solve the problem of crime and gangs, the relations of these agents with youth become highly significant. In this section I discuss young women's and girl's perceptions of their relations and the nature of their interactions with the police. Contact with police is considered to be a gateway to the

of the forms of capital as they relate to education and homelessness, see Vappu Tyyska's Long and Winding Road: Adolescents and Youth in Canada Today (2001).

criminal justice system and “their decisions to initiate the criminalization process” (Chunn, 2002: 425) are seldom scrutinized. My focus is: What are the young women’s and girls’ views towards police? How do their gender, race, and social class influence the nature of their interactions with the police?

Almost all the respondents had undergone involvement with the police at some time in their lives, so consequently could recount personal experiences of interaction. They spoke of mistreatment, and of hostile and violent encounters with police. They were unanimous that policing practices are biased against the poor and against ethnic minorities. Almost all the Aboriginal and ethnic minority respondents referred to the police as racist. Some of the respondents’ answers gave illustrations of overt racism among police officers:

Sometimes they can be racist, that depends. Some of the cops are racist and some aren’t at all. Some of the ones that are racist, they yell and insult the kids. They make jokes and they make fun. I have seen some cops beat up people for merely stupid reasons. (Abby)

Once I was held with liquor for being minor. The judge was talking bad things about my mother and even the officers who picked me up were speaking bad about my mother like partying, drinking, and when they came to know my mom is White, their behaviour changed. (Tammy)

When I ran into cops, they judge you. You get picked just being Native in a group of kids. For this reason, we sometimes don’t like White guys because they get treated better than us [Natives]. For small things they just . . . I was once arrested by a White cop; he purposively put the cuffs real tight. When they are taking fingerprints, they purposively hurt your hand. Some of them could be too assholes. It kind of hurt. We get mad and kick the back of the cop car whenever we get chance to do. (Sharon)

Yeah, this one cop he said in front of me, “If I had my way, I’ll shoot all the Indians” with a loud voice. (Sam)

The respondents from Saskatoon had strong negative feelings about the over-policing that they described as occurring in certain neighbourhoods in the west side of the

city, and spoke of interactions that indicated stereotyping on the part of the police officers:

Like my experiences with the cops, they think that main problem is with ethnic kids, they don't think the problem with White kids. They think White kids are up on the Eastside, they go to school and to church and everybody else one out doing crime, so all the cops are on the Westside catching everybody and there are no cops on the Eastside watching anything. It is very under-policed over there and very over policed over here [on the West side]. (Debbie)

Westside [Saskatoon] is very poor and Eastside is fairly rich. One guy I know he is an African Canadian and he has friends that live in Briarwood, which is far east. Every time he drives over there to pick his friends to go out, the cops stop him and say, "What are you doing here? You don't belong in this neighbourhood." (Mia)

Some respondents mentioned suffering negative consequences because of police officers' knowledge of their family members' gang involvements, and reported often having been pointed out and watched by police officers even when they had not been not doing anything illegal:

Cops treat me bad. I got hit by a cop. They know me and my brothers are in gangs so maybe that's the reason. They call me names and they call my family names, like "Native, being drunk" and stuff. (Cathy)

Once officers came to know the families and backgrounds of children and youth, their chances increased for being stopped, searched, and arrested. That is what happened with Abby, whom police officers recognized through frequent encounters at domestic violence calls to her home.

First time when I was arrested, cops stopped me and searched the bag and I was arrested with it. I was carrying this bag for them [gang members] and it was full of stolen stuff. I had friends in all sorts of gangs. Sometimes they would ask me to do. (Abby)

Julie, while not directly accusing the police of racism, stated, "I don't know. They just keep a closer eye on 'us' than the rest of 'them'." This differentiation of "us" and

“them” reflects the systemic labeling and systemic discrimination that Native youth must endure on a daily basis, differentiation that leads to group exclusion from the mainstream society. Evidently, proactive policing focuses on ethnic minority and lower-class communities, which then due to the increased arrest rates reinforces racial stereotypes while also generating hatred and distrust of police officers by Natives and other visible ethnic minorities in lower-class neighbourhoods. Police over-patrolling of inner-city neighbourhoods is a form of institutionalized racism that becomes a symbol of White power in Native and lower-class neighbourhoods and communities.

Another disturbing theme pertained to the levels of sexism within the institutions of the justice system, as experienced by the respondents and especially at the hands of police officers. The young women and girls expressed numerous negative experiences of being judged, searched, and scrutinized by male police officers. Respondents’ perceptions of sexism and harassment by police officers mirrored the paternalistic nature of a society and justice system that both represent and reinforce the values and practices of patriarchal capitalism.

The following were responses to my question of whether the police treated girls differently from how they treated boys:

Cops treat you like a shit all the way around. I told them we had nothing in our pockets. But they piled us down and searched and said, “No, nothing there.” But they did kind of . . . I don’t know. Its just . . . that’s not right. They take advantage of things, situations. (Debbie)

Yes, well, one of the cops had laid me and my cousin down to handcuff and search. There was no women cop. (Sam)

Sometimes, the cops look at the girls; they look as if they are hookers. (Abby)

Yeah, I got stopped by a cop once I was working on the street. He made me do the . . . dance. He made me do that in the middle of the street. It was a busy road and people were driving by and looking at me. That was totally insulting and out of mind. I had friends that would tell me that they were cops around who would have sex with them for not putting in jail.
(Karina)

While Karina cited hearsay of police officers having sex with young women working on the street, the next respondent I interviewed described her personal experiences of having sex with a police officer. This was done in exchange for his not arresting her. The respondent concluded her account with the comment “And that cop is still in job.” Clearly, and appallingly, young women and girls suffer male brutality on the streets as victims not only of male gang members, pimps, and johns, but also of those in legally sanctioned roles of power. This amply explains why Crystal told me that, after having been gang-raped by opposing gang-members, “Police is the last one I would like to go when I had bad date.” This perception was reflected by other respondents also who had worked on the streets.

The experiences articulated by these young women and girls clearly demonstrate that sexism, exploitation, and male violence continue to be serious problems. Canadian political and economic histories outline the oppression and disadvantage faced by Aboriginal women within the existing cultural, economic, and political systems (Leiman, 1993). Julie encapsulated all of those factors in her assertion that “It depends on your race. If you are a Native girl, you are treated differently than a White girl or White boy and less badly than a Native boy. Cops think, ‘If she is Native, she must be up to some kind of thing.’” Insights like that presented by Julie call attention to how sexism intersects with issues of race and poverty to create additional challenges in the young

women's social environments and particularly in their interactions with those who are entitled to protect them.

7c. Intersecting Oppressions: Age, Race, Class, and Gender

In this chapter, the importance of socio-cultural context is discussed, calling to attention the factors that contribute to the victimization and marginalization of and discrimination against young women and girls. The analysis reflects the lived experiences of the respondents and illuminates the ways in which their daily lives were overshadowed by larger systemic issues. Their experiences direct us to consider the social contexts within which the particular factors of age, race, class, and gender can prove to be risky for girls.

The daily struggles of the respondents began in their homes, which were of lower socio-economic status and usually comprising parents with their own sets of problems to deal with. Respondents' experiences within their families were characterized by anger, rage, and in some cases emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. The institution that should have provided love, care, nurture, and support became a place of hate, abuse, and neglect for most of the girls in the present study. Many of the young women assessed these emotions as having contributed to their patterns of aggression and violent behaviour. To a large extent, the families' social and economic health largely depended on the family income. Poverty negatively affected the material, social, and cultural resources by which the girls were able to negotiate their lives. The neighbourhoods where they lived, the schools they attended, the parks and other recreational opportunities that were available: all by and large depended on family income. Almost all the respondents in the present study reflected on their families' poor economic conditions and that of their

neighbourhoods at some point in the interviews. In their lives, poor economic conditions interacted with race and gender and produced multiple risk factors. Research indicates that women and specifically Aboriginal women are the Canadian populations' most affected by poverty (Comack and Balfour, 2006). On November 3, 2005, the United Nations Human Rights Committee condemned Canada's "failure to protect Aboriginal women from violence, to address the poverty of Aboriginal women, and to correct overt discrimination in the law."

The Aboriginal girls whom I spoke with typically saw themselves as closed out from white middle-class society and as abandoned by institutions based on white middle-class norms. The respondents clearly felt themselves to be marginalized, and their schools served as places where they experienced physical and emotional abuse, discrimination, and violence. Considering the devastating impacts of residential schools on the general Aboriginal population in Canada (Wotherspoon and Schissel, 2003), it is logical to expect that there are further residual issues that remain between Aboriginal individuals, families, and communities and the child welfare, justice, and school systems. The systematic removal of Aboriginal children from their families occurred as part of the historic and current colonializations of Aboriginal people in Canada; first in residential schools then more recently in child care. It is critical to understand how current forms of oppression are built on a past history of colonialization and how this pattern impacts the lived experiences of young Aboriginal girls. Given the fact that the Aboriginal respondents in the study were placed in foster homes due to experiences of abuse and neglect resulting in part from poor economic conditions in their families of origin, this calls to attention the larger issue of the low economic status of the Aboriginal population in Canada and its

effects on the children. The rates at which Aboriginal children are removed from their parents and placed in foster homes are alarming. In addition, the below-average living conditions typical of most foster homes in which the respondents stayed during their adolescent years was and is devastating, yet is rarely acknowledged. Natasha summed up her foster home experiences: “In four years at the age of fourteen, moving into twenty different foster homes is a abuse.”

Conflict theorists state that young people join gangs as a result of their feelings of marginalization. The shared feeling of being outsiders may be related to their socioeconomic status, cultural background, or other identity-forming influences (Mathews, 2005). The disenfranchised youth group together for support, amity, protection, and solidarity. The experiences of discrimination, feelings of marginalization, and being victims of labels such as “they,” “others,” “outsiders,” all reinforce the process of exclusion. In the case of Aboriginal people, the labeling and stigmatization process began when colonization began. The labelling occurs not only individually, as in the personal experiences of respondents, but (significantly for Aboriginal people) also systemically, as reflected in their experiences in schools and their interactions with police officers.

Aboriginal over-representation in the criminal justice system is a fact. While comprising approximately 3.6 percent of the general population in Canada, Aboriginals make up 18 percent of the federal correctional population (LaPrairie, 2008: 209). In Saskatchewan, the Aboriginal population is 13.5 percent of the general population but constituted 80 percent of the total correctional institutions admissions in 2001-03, an over-representation ratio of 5.9. In Alberta, the corresponding over-representation ratio is

7.3 (LaPrairie, 2008: 209). The number of Aboriginal youth involved with youth gangs, as documented in several official records, is much higher than that of any other ethnic group. These numbers are even higher for the Prairie Provinces. While it is possible that Aboriginal people commit more crime than do other groups in society, it is also probable that the system exacerbates this difference by targeting this group of people. Countless studies provide evidence of occurrences of discrimination at all stages of the criminal justice process: police are more likely to over-police and to charge Aboriginal youth (Bell, 2007); the courts are more likely to mete out stiffer sentences to Aboriginal gang members (Mercredi, 2000); and Aboriginal offenders are less likely to be sent into medium and minimum security institutions and less likely to be released from prison on parole (LaPrairie, 1995).

Young Aboriginal women face multiple and extreme oppression through colonization, male violence, racism, poverty, and institutionalization. These compounding oppressions make Aboriginal girls especially vulnerable to abuse both within and outside the home. The rate of physical and sexual abuse of Canada's young Aboriginal women is extremely high. Many of the girls saw joining gangs as a way to get away from their families and as a source for social and emotional support. Their pathway analyses revealed that females with experiences of sexual abuse were more likely to run away from home at earlier ages and spend more time on the streets. This study also concluded that early life on the streets increased the probability of developing association with deviant peers who had gang affiliations. Additionally, the intersections of discrimination that young girls experienced – e.g., racism, colonization, and poverty - exacerbated the disparities already experienced by the girls as a result of their ages and

gender. Negative experiences propelled these already-marginalized young women further into the deviant subculture: having been rejected by mainstream society, the welcoming arms of fellow companions albeit gang members seemed like the best and perhaps only choice for support, protection, and for finding feelings of belonging. Tammy described her affiliation with her gang/group as a source of common identity, contrary to her experiences at school where students like herself were victims of overt discrimination.

Exclusion from social institutions means a lack of belonging, acceptance, and recognition. Individuals who belong to underprivileged groups or to minority social groups are at high risk of facing social exclusion. From both the literature and also the responses I received from respondents, it appears that Aboriginal and ethnic-minority girls and young women are aware of and sensitive to the oppression of racism. Due to the nature of my research and the sample size, extending this study's generalizations to encompass the entire Aboriginal young female population is impossible (nor it was my intention), however, these responses can make a contribution to the body of self-reported incidents of oppression by published feminist scholars (for example, hooks, 1981; Collins, 1990).

I would insist on the necessity for an increased critical and feminist awareness of the numerous forms of colonialization that persist in our society, ranging from the relatively visible forms to the relatively invisible. Through this research, I came to understand how Aboriginal female youth who have undergone repeated exposure to a hostile social environment feel compelled to project that hostility back to society, largely to relieve their pent-up anger and hatred. For example, the girls expressed such frustrations in such statements as, "It kind of hurt. We get mad and kick the back of the

cop car whenever we get chance to do” (Sharon); and “It makes me feel that we are treated unequally. We have always been left out, looked down and degraded, stuff like that. So we find way to get over it, we do those things” (Cathy). On the basis of what they told me, I suggest that when young girls speak about schools, the justice system, and society at large, they do so in ways that highlight the tensions between the ideals that are supposed to govern these social institutions and the actuality of their experiences within them. Their experiences are a reminder that society and the state have failed to hold accountable those institutions and individuals charged with protecting children and youth from violence, abuse, and neglect. In doing so, society has failed to honour the most fundamental of social contracts, i.e., to protect those who cannot protect themselves. As a result, the hope of a just and ethical social order has been eroded.

CHAPTER EIGHT: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

8a. Introduction

Girls in gangs recently have generated significant public attention. The violent behaviour of young girls in gangs is frequently reported in media but rarely understood. The research conducted on female gang members in Saskatoon and Edmonton attempts to address this gap. To this end, it dispels some of the myths about female gang life and opens new avenues of understanding female gang involvement by providing a better understanding of the nature of female gang involvement. Through interviews with girls and young women, it was possible to extract information about the importance and place of gangs and violence in their lives. The purpose of this study has been to evaluate and expand the knowledge base in order to identify important insights into the pathways that led girls to gangs and the pathways that led them out of gangs. From the beginning of the project, my intention was to contribute to the scant scholarly literature and information on female gang members and their violent behaviour in Canada. Though gang composition in our multicultural society is most usually described through age, class, gender, and ethnicity, little information is available about the interaction of these factors as variables for gang involvement.

The objectives of the study have been (1) to understand the lives of female gang members and (2) to explain, through a life course perspective guided by feminist standpoint epistemology, the pathways of girls' involvement in gangs and violence through the marginalization of gender, class, race, and ethnicity. The data for this study were obtained from interviews with fifteen girls and young women from the cities of

Saskatoon and Edmonton. Given the relative lack of information about female gang membership in Canada and the hidden nature of this population, a qualitative approach for study of the issue was deemed appropriate. This was also appropriate to a feminist standpoint epistemology. The fundamental questions were (1) How well did the girls understand their involvements in gangs, and (2) How can we retrieve that understanding from the girls?

The social constructionist perspective has been used to explain the nature and extent of youth gang problem in Canada. One aspect that becomes clear is that although gangs are described as organized along lines of race and ethnicity, very little research is available regarding how the colonialist-generated conditions of racism play out in and impact youth gang involvement in Canada. Rarely is the factor of racism considered when assessing the problem of youth gangs, notably here Aboriginal youth and gangs. During the review of the limited available traditional and media information on females involved with gangs and violent crime, it was found that the population was overwhelmingly identified as “emancipated” females seeking equality with male gang members. By choosing to take “masculine” roles, girls in gangs seek out equality with males and as a result, the women’s liberation movement frequently is fore fronted as a cause of increasing female violent behaviour.

From the review of research on female gang members and their involvement in violence, the explanations for female criminality can be placed on a continuum where on one end, they are seen as having personal and psychological mal-adaptation problems and on the other end, socialist feminist explanations divert the attribution of cause from personal problems to social problems. Socialist feminist scholars connect relationships of

class and gender inequality to girls' participation in gangs and identify the female criminal as a victim of patriarchy, whose crime is retaliation to gender oppression or for prevention of future victimization (Campbell, 1990; Moore, 1991; Gilfus, 1992; Joe and Chesney- Lind, 1995; Gaarder and Belknap, 2002). The absence of a thorough understanding of female violent crime led to the prevalence and strengthening of claims that the women's liberation movement influenced contemporary young girls in their search for equality with male gang members. The silence with regard to the experiences of women of different races was criticized by Black feminist theorists. Black feminist theorists and multiracial feminist theory posit that socialist feminists have failed to account for the experiences of racial-minority females, experiences that are grounded not only in class and gender terms. This criticism resulted in widespread attention by feminist criminologists to interlocking interactions of race, class, and gender, although the factor of age usually was excluded. There has been a continued absence of theoretical and empirical interest in research on violence by girls, specifically the research that encompasses age, race, and gangs. To address this gap, this study examines the social, situational, individual, and experiential factors that affect the girls' decisions to join gangs and to act violently. To fully comprehend intersections requires contemplation of parallel contributions of macro-level interlocking structural inequalities and micro-level interactions that define race, class, and the gendered positions of girls in gangs, on the streets, and in society.

The critical ethnographic approach was chosen because it advances propositions about human groups and interactions that best relate to the aims of this study (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984). These propositions suggest that the proper approach to investigating

girls' experiences in society is to find out what motivates them and in turn how they are motivated by socio-cultural variables of poverty, gender, race, and ethnicity. The recurring patterns of the interactions of these variables become the major categories for collecting and analyzing data. After the analysis of the interviews, it can be concluded that the personal troubles of respondents are explicitly connected to larger public issues and are significant contributors to their gang involvement. People try to find ways to better their lives in order to change their social and economic circumstances, yet critical researchers recognize that their abilities to do so are constrained by various forms of structural inequalities. The critical feminist theoretical perspective serves as the theoretical framework for this study and directs us to understanding how oppressed girls are regarded as active agents in their own lives, who sometimes strive to better their lives, albeit with the limited options available to them.

In this final chapter, I recap the major findings of the study, outline contributions to the field that result from the study, and explore some of the policy recommendations emerging from the findings.

8b. Summary of Findings

The findings are organized by describing the lives of respondents, including descriptions of the precursors to their gang involvements, their lives within gangs, and their reasons for leaving the gangs. To summarize, this study resulted in the following key findings:

Correlates and contexts of female gang involvement

The primary concern of the study was to explore the factors that are related to female gang involvement. The findings from chapter 5 support some of the findings from

other studies on youth gangs. The girls in the present study tend to be from inner-city neighbourhoods characterized by families of poor socio-economic status. They have suffered emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, and their gang affiliations appeared to them as inevitable since respondents felt they had few or no other options. The majority of the respondents were Aboriginal.

The economic situation of respondents' families generally depended on a single mother who was barely making ends meet, and a few had never seen or known their fathers. In some cases respondents' mothers were struggling with their own various problems, often resulting in abuse and neglect of the children at home. The girls routinely and frequently witnessed alcohol, and drug use and violence between their mothers and their boyfriends and other relatives. Many of them disclosed having been shuffled around through numerous foster homes. Foster homes emerged as another avenue that offered contact with gang members and drugs through contact with the others in care in these homes. Some reported their first contact with gang members as having occurred through their stays in foster homes. Many of the girls reported having run away from abusive homes and living on the streets. They become involved with peers also living on the streets, used drugs and alcohol, and hung around with gang members as precursors to gang involvement. Due to negative experiences at school, almost all respondents had dropped out. The in-depth interviews resulted in close insights into the processes behind respondents' decisions to come involved with gangs, and offered a context for their gang involvement. The major theme that emerged was that the girls in the present study had been in search of belonging, given the lack of positive parental and family relationships in their lives. Many girls also reported a need for protection on the streets, protection that

was provided through friends in gangs and thereby resulting in their own gang affiliations. In addition, girls reported having joined gangs in part for the reason that their peers, friends, family members, and neighbours were gang members. Gangs initially offered fun and excitement through hanging out together and attending parties, as well as the opportunity to fit in with popular kids – activities and contacts all highly valued during teen and adolescence years of development. Further, the scarcity of recreational activities in low-income inner-city neighbourhoods had led respondents to befriend gang members. My findings also support the conclusion that having a family member in a gang was often related to gang involvement (Miller, 2001). For many respondents, gang affiliation was a normal way of life because immediate family members and/or relatives were also gang members. The girls became involved with gangs for basic human needs of belonging, protection, and identity. The gang seemed to be a reasonable solution to their significant and variety of problems.

The girls' and young women's stories of threadbare childhoods, experiences of violence at home and on the streets, family members' association with gangs and drug dealing, all reflect getting caught up in almost inevitable future lives involving drug use, violence, and gangs on the streets. Their pathways describe choices made and actions taken in the context of locally available constructions of opportunity and possibility. In addition, the young women's stories of growing up in lives of poverty, inequality, and discrimination and marginalization within the social institutions reflected getting caught up in terms of intergenerational and geographic legacies of social disadvantage. Age, although not significantly addressed in critical feminist criminology, serves as a point of intersection along with race, class, and gender when addressing female youth gang

involvement. Nobody is born with an instinctual sense of what is possible or where opportunities lie. This sense of what is possible is something people develop as they are socialized and acculturated, as they are taught and come to learn how the conditions under which they live facilitate certain actions and outcomes. Typically, though young girls might have a relatively immature sense of what they are capable of, as they age and experience successes and failures (especially their own and those of their peers), they come to a more developed sense of their own capacity to effect environment.

Life within the gang

The historical focus of maleness as the crucial factor in understanding crime denies the experiences of girls locked into a gender, race, class, and ethnicity experience. When female gang membership was examined, it was basically in reference to the girls as sex objects for boys in the gangs or to their secondary roles as weapon carriers or as spies of rival gang's activities. The findings in chapter 6 with regard to respondents' roles in youth gangs both corroborate and contradict the previous research on female gangs in the United States. The present study reveals that the type of activities that girls did in gangs afforded them different degrees of equality. The girls in the sample were not stereotypical subordinates who had been useful solely for holding weapons and concealing drugs. Some of the respondents were at par with male gang members in defending gang territories by engaging in crime and enjoyed equal status to those of male gang members. Despite the relatively equal positions for at least a few girls in some groups, the study corroborated the previous findings regarding sexual double standards (Miller, 2001) in gangs. Girls dealt with the patriarchal limitations imposed by their groups, the streets, and society in different ways. In mixed-gender gangs, some girls enjoyed the status conferred

to them due to their being relatives and boyfriends of gang members and/ or their abilities to fight for their group. But the girls continuously struggled to maintain and/or raise their status in their groups and on the streets.

Respondents placed great value on seeing themselves as equal members with the males in their gangs, rather than as exploitable sexual partners. Although they saw gender inequality as a common tradition in most of the gangs in both cities, the respondents talked about their struggles to achieve a status equal to that of the boys while at the same time wanting respect because they were females. I recognized contradictions in the way the respondents presented themselves. They wanted to be tough and also to be feminine. They negotiated status and power by acting out a specific type of femininity that was different from the more common societal standards of acceptable feminine behaviour. Most of the girls agreed that fighting accorded them status and approval. It was one of the ways they could establish reputations as being both worthwhile and also smart enough to be able to stand up for themselves. Girls accepted the related risks and dangers, since their goal was earning acceptance and higher status in the gang. At the same time, they felt they maintained personal respect and status by not displaying sexually promiscuous behaviour. In those ways, respondents believed they could maintain the boys' respect as well as their own self-respect within the patriarchal power structures of the gangs, their neighbourhoods and society.

This study contributes to the expanding knowledge on “code of street” and confirms the code's applicability to young urban females' lives. While the dynamics of urban males' street lives and interactions have been the subjects of past and recent attention, females have not been included in these studies or were discussed only in

reference to males' dating behaviour (Anderson, 1999; Brezina et al, 2004). This present study uncovers the existence of a female code of the street and reveals its features to be similar to those of the male code of street. The respondents continuously struggled to maintain respect, and acts of disrespect were an underlying cause for the majority of conflicts and physical confrontations. Concern for earning and losing respect (in addition to other features) were found to be factors common to both males and females but for girls, maintaining respect was more difficult. The sexual double standards on the streets and in gangs resulted in frequent labeling and devaluing of females for their actual or perceived sexual promiscuity. Maintaining their respectability - a significant feature of femininity – appeared to involve a delicate balance.

From the analysis, it is evident that gangs are highly gendered groups wherein girls continuously struggle to achieve status that can be attained and maintained in a variety of ways. In their efforts to achieve and maintain status, they construct both femininities and masculinities depending on the situational contexts. Therefore, Messerschmidt's (1997) structured action theory does present a basis for understanding gender dynamics within gangs. It recognizes that notions of gender identity are not fixed but rather are dynamic, depending on the situation (Laidler and Hunt, 1997). The respondents were active agents in their gang lives and made conscious decisions to display themselves in ways that they perceived as appropriate in the particular given contexts. At times they displayed toughness (achieved masculine identity) when engaging in violent behaviour because such displays yielded them status and respect. They also refrained from sexually promiscuous behaviour (displayed appropriate "good girl" femininity) in order to maintain their respect and status. I argue that girls' violent behaviour in gangs may take

the form of both masculinities and femininities and in order to understand young women's participation in violent acts, we must unpack our deeply held assumptions of gendered norms, including our definitions of gendered deviance. Thus, we need to separate definitions of violence from gender identities and challenge that premise on the grounds of its sexist orientation. Participation in violent behaviour for girls in gangs and on the streets may occur because of different reasons, one of them being to get respect and maintain respectability.

The findings also highlight the heterogeneity of respondents' experiences within gangs. Some girls enjoyed status equaling that of the boys, while others were subordinate to both male members and tough female members. Their stories of victimization and violence make evident the multiple ways in which the young women positioned themselves as conscious thinking subjects within the realities of their own lives. The findings suggest that there is in fact a link between the young women's victimization experiences and their violent offending. A clear pattern emerged wherein all the young women interviewed had previously suffered extensive abuse in one form or another, either in their homes of origin or in foster homes or on the streets, and subsequently had joined gangs in order to find support and comfort. Within the gangs, they were exposed to violent and criminal behaviours, which in their initial to middle range "gang life course experience" proved rewarding and empowering because it allowed them to exert control and to achieve status and monetary benefits. The findings do confirm the importance of victimization in girl's lives but also suggest that girls are active agents during their life course. Violence within the context of gangs was a venue for achieving respect and status

in a social setting where legal opportunities for achieving the same were limited by structural, cultural, geographic, and racial constraints.

Leaving the gang

Respondents were asked about their motivations for leaving their gangs, for the purpose of highlighting the difficulties and consequences associated with gang membership. The findings in chapter 6 provide insight into why the respondents decided to exit their gang and the street life. It was found that for a majority of the participants, the most common reason for leaving gang life was an emergent need to better their lives. The young women's initial hopes and dreams for finding a better life in gangs had in almost all cases met with disappointment. Gang life had not yielded all that the girls had hoped for.

When citing girls' desistance from gangs, pursuit of education and career was seldom mentioned as one of the first reasons for which young women decided to leave the gang. Prevalent reasons for leaving were pregnancy and the desire to get married (the gender expectations). This study found that majority of respondents had returned to school to complete their high school educations or had expressed the desire to complete school and get a job. The girls expressed a strong desire to not be financially dependent on the males in their lives and to not bear the abuse they had witnessed as suffered by their mothers and others around them. Some even named specific careers they would like to pursue in the future. An aspiration to continue education played an important role in their after-gang lives. In response to the fact that the young women and girls in the study expressed a desire to complete education as one of their prominent future goals, it becomes significantly important to then provide them with strong support systems and

positive school experiences that include factors of trust and acceptance to optimize the attractiveness for their returning to school, and to enhance their chances for success with education.

From reviewing the consequences of gang involvement for the girls in the present study, it appears that the liberation hypothesis does not apply to them. In the literature on female gang members, liberation and social injury emerged as competing themes. Given the structural and economic conditions of the present study's respondents and their families, it is obvious that the respondents cannot be classified as having been influenced by the women's movement. Their involvements with gangs provided escape from abusive home situations and offered opportunities to make money and to gain respect and status through participation in illegal and at times violent behaviour. Nurge (2003) explained such behaviour as "achieving individual liberation," an assertion in contradiction to the suggestion that they had been influenced by women's liberation to "go for" opportunities to engage in masculine behaviour. Despite some of the benefits of gang involvement for the respondents, almost all eventually expressed regret for their associations with gangs. They described gangs as a dangerous place with minimum security that exposed females to specific gendered risks. The risks of escalating violence, the absence of any hope for the future, and the desire to better their lives were some of the reasons that motivated the girls to leave the gang.

Respondents' understanding of the reality of gang life and their meanings of gang changed after having been in gang for a while (i.e., with time, age, and experience during their life-course). They described gang involvement as not an optimum choice but rather as a viable choice in their lives at their times of joining. Keeping in view the numerous

potential dangers and negative consequences of gang life for the respondents, the group of seven older respondents (age group twenty-seven to thirty-three years) seemed at the time of the interviews to be doing reasonably well within the social institutions of family, community, education, and economy. On the whole, the present findings support the view that gang involvement did provide individual liberation experiences for some girls. But with the respect, status, and power gained from gang membership came risks of victimization and exposure to dangers to life. Therefore, the respondents' female gang experiences were simultaneously both liberating and dangerous. This confirms Curry's (1998) assertion that liberation and social injury are not mutually exclusive.

8c. New Contributions to the Field

When there is little or no research study on female participation in gangs available and what information does exist is that presented by media and/or legal government agencies, it is difficult to assess the nature and extent of female gang affiliation in Canada. I believe that this thesis is one of the most expansive and detailed studies of female gang members yet undertaken in Canada. However, the present study is just a beginning and much more related research remains to be done.

Information on female gang involvement in Saskatoon and Edmonton

Interview discussions with girls who considered themselves to have been involved with youth gangs or other deviant peer groups led to an understanding of the ways in which the girls defined and described their group and/or gangs, and how they differentiated those from other deviant groups. The youth gangs of which the study's respondents were members identified their groups (name, colour, and "turf") with the names of some of the known and popular gangs of the city (e.g., Indian Posse, Native

Syndicate, and others), gangs with strong leadership, organization, greater group loyalty, and more extensive involvement in delinquency. Not all respondents belonged to groups that were highly organized to the level depicted by the media and law enforcement authorities. It seems that the presence of these groups was more than minimal in the cities of Saskatoon and Edmonton, particularly with regard to Aboriginal gangs. There exists a need to broaden our conceptualization of what constitutes an organized gang. Formations known as “groups” warrant attention because they share some common features with gangs, and this can lead to wrong classification on the parts of practitioners. In addition, need exists for further research that explores whether these “groups” are similar to the cliques identified in American gang research.

The study also revealed that all gang-involved respondents in both cities had been part of mixed-gender gangs. Though all-female gangs are a rarity in Canada (Nimmo, 2001), media reports do mention females operating their independent crews in bigger cities. The city police in Saskatoon have identified one all-female gang with limited membership and a dormant activity pattern. However, none of the respondents from Saskatoon had knowledge of the presence of any such gang. No regional generalizations regarding the nature of female gang structures can be made since we lack sufficient information on female gang involvement all across Canada.

Theoretical understanding of female violent behaviour in gangs

There are a number of ways in which the present study is unique and offers valuable insights to the field of female gang involvement in Canada. The existing information and research fails to combine feminist ideologies, political and economic considerations, and the oppressive social conditions that deny young women and girls’

access to legitimate opportunities for establishing respect, status, power, belonging, and identity. This research gains insight into the ways in which a sample of previously gang-related young women and girls interpreted their worlds. Based on the findings of this research, it can be put forward that identifying these females' conduct as pathological and inherently problematic denies them agency and autonomy. There is strong need to identify the respondents' roles in resisting and negotiating power within the context of the gangs and street environments. We need to re-examine our thinking that relates all girls' non-feminine behaviours to mental problems. Tammy provided an example of how an erroneous connection was made linking her drug overdosing to suicidal tendencies:

I was using drugs and I ended up overdosing and went in coma. All these social workers and psychologists thought I was suicidal, that I tried to kill myself. I didn't try to kill myself, I was trying to get high but they assumed that the two things were related. For me they weren't. But no one listened to that. They think I was suicidal and my mom can't take care of me, they kept me in foster care.

The application of code of street to understand violent behaviour of girls on streets and gangs holds promise. The issues of respect, status, and power are of as much value to girls as they are to boys identified in other research. Girls in gangs are forced to define for themselves what is feminine within the conflicting normative standards of gangs. For the girls in this study, toughness, violence, and femininity together formed a part of the reality in how they lived their lives in gang and/or on streets. Violence for them was an appropriate action taken in particular social situations. Their femininity was tied to conventional notions of feminine respectability but they did not accept total submission to normative femininity. The gender hierarchy of gangs and streets forced the respondents to search for ways in which to adapt to their dismal environments. They learned to negotiate and deal in order to find ways both to create personas of toughness

and independence yet also to display appropriate feminine behaviours of non-promiscuous females. The present study extends knowledge concerning the places and meanings of violent acts in the lives of girls in gangs, and what gender means to them. For all contemporary girls, gender is dynamic and ever-changing and gender identity is whatever she feels right for her.

By limiting our understanding to seeing girls' violence solely as an act for "doing" masculinity, we are blaming the girls. This too-narrow interpretation is an inadequate basis for formation of intervention policy and practice. However, seeing their violence as a resource for achieving respect and status within a context where opportunities to achieve are very limited holds promise for better understanding the lives of marginalized girls.

Contradictions to popular conceptions about female gang members

The widely held view is that girls in gangs are emulating male gang members and actively engage in violent behaviour in order to display images of toughness, craziness, and aggression. The experiences of the girls in the present study suggest that a handful of girls in some gangs enjoy status that equals that of the boys in gangs in both Saskatoon and Edmonton. There are large numbers of girls who are abused, exploited, and degraded by male gang members and by tough female gang members. With the exception of one respondent and a few examples as cited by other respondents, I did not find many females as gang leaders operating crews comprised of both male and female gang members. However, I did find that for the most part the young girls claimed to be operating at a level equal to that of the boys and to be participating in activities similar to those undertaken by the male gang members. I also discovered that girls currently are moving

away from the stereotypical roles females previously held in gangs, providing some degree of support to popular media claims. But a deeper look at the structures and operations of gangs revealed that gangs are highly gendered groups and that females try to make their own niches in these patriarchal groups. Females who enter the gang in a “traditional female way,” i.e. by having a sex with male gang members, still outnumber the girls who adopt “traditional male activity,” i.e. by participating in beating, armed robbery, or home invasion, in order to get initiated.

There was not a typical female experience. Some girls reported having been equal to boys in some gangs, but many others were subordinate to both male gang members and tough female gang members. Hagedorn and Devitt (1999) found that gender roles varied by ethnicity and race; e.g., African-American females have more authority and autonomy than do Latinas. The present study was not able to reach more deeply into gender role variations by ethnicity due to the majority presence of Aboriginal respondents in the study. Only three respondents were non-Aboriginal, and these three girls were part of Aboriginal and/or racially mixed gangs. This suggests a need for further exploration into gender equality in varying ethnic gangs. The fact that non-Aboriginal respondents were part of Aboriginal gangs coupled with statements by other respondents suggested that a number of white males and females were members of Aboriginal gangs. But while the girls mentioned that some gangs were strictly racially segregated, they also acknowledged the presence of others in both cities that were racially mixed. This suggested an important issue to be explored further and also in other cities. At any rate, findings from the present study suggest that many street gangs are more ethnically diverse than the media depictions suggest.

Contrary to the popular perception that it is hard (or impossible) to leave a gang, most of the respondents reported that it had not been difficult for them to exit. Although the myth that it was hard to leave a gang was more common among the younger respondents than the more matured ones, the majority said that it had been easy for them to quit their gangs. The above-mentioned myth should not influence intervention efforts to deal with the gang issue.

8d. Personal Troubles and Public Issues: Integrating Micro and Macro

From the qualitative interviews with respondents, it became increasingly apparent that a majority of the respondents had felt alienated and isolated from mainstream Canadian society and its social institutions. The analysis from chapter 7 highlighted the ways in which girls' experiences of ageism, racism, classism, and sexism interacted, resulting in social exclusion, isolation from social institutions, and a subsequent involvement with youth gangs. The young women and girls expressed the belief that social injustice was widespread in society and that they had been victims of social and gender inequality, racism, and oppression.

Respondents explained that joining a gang had been a normal action relative to the contexts in which they belonged. Many had family members and siblings who were also in gangs, making the exception and reality of gang involvement even easier. Most of the respondents, when young, did not have positive experiences with the child welfare system. Respondents had been placed in multiple foster homes during their adolescent years. Tammy rightly asserted that "Being in twenty different foster homes is in itself an abuse."

The majority of the girls came from inner-city neighbourhoods that were separated from legitimate commercial and educational institutions and from mainstream society in general. The respondents' families of origin had been positioned in communities that experienced high poverty, unemployment, and a lack of formal social controls. They described the neighbourhoods in which they had resided as having had a significant impact on their eventually getting into the gang. Gangs initially at least provided fun, protection, popularity, respect, and increased attention from the opposite sex. The experience of Aboriginal people in Canada can be expressed as that of multiple marginality (Vigil, 2002). Lack of job opportunities, segregation of poor racialized minorities to inner-city neighbourhoods, and lack of hope have led many Aboriginal youth into the violent milieu of gangs. There is good reason to believe that the Aboriginal female is the most negatively affected social category in the current Canadian social, economic, and political environment. The history of racial oppression in Canada is well documented in critical race and post-colonial works. Current political and economic conditions have left many Aboriginal people powerless to fight the poverty and violence that have raped their communities of life and land (Leiman, 1993). At present, both the economic conditions of Aboriginal women and covert racism have made Aboriginal women victims of systemic racism, a form of racism more difficult to fight than overt racism.

The girls and young women interviewed were aware of the larger society's attitudes and concerns regarding the problems of racism. They were aware that, in comparison to the treatment given mainstream society, in general and law enforcement in particular treated them differently, not only because they were females but also because

they were Aboriginal. Respondents discussed their personal experiences with social workers, police officers, and school administrators and teachers. The responses that depicted experiences of overt racism as described in chapter 7 indicate that this particular group of girls and young women felt the oppression of a racially biased society. Their stories about and perspectives on alienation from the school environment raise serious concerns about the political underpinnings of our educational institutions, as well as about the forms of knowledge and implicit social messages that are directly and inadvertently being transmitted to students about equality of opportunity, citizenship rights, and the nature of social inequality and injustice in Canadian society. We must then ask the question: If Canada purports to espouse notions of democracy, fairness, and justice in its social institutions, how can the experiences of these young women continue to prevail in our public education and justice systems? Moreover, this finding draws attention to how class, race, and gender differences serve to justify differential social, economic, and political participation in Canadian schools. Intersecting issues of poverty, racism, and related processes of racialization resulted in many of the respondents' alienation and disengagement from education and formal schooling.

For the Aboriginal girls in the study, racism and sexism at the hands of police officers was a significant issue. Officers were strongly criticized for being part of the larger patriarchal and racialized society. Future research should explore the value and effectiveness of sensitivity training about race and gender; in Saskatoon and Edmonton, police racism and sexism clearly have emerged as significant problems.

Repeated exposure to hostile environments in which the girls were subjected to discrimination and racism appeared as a common theme among the respondents. The

stories of these girls formed a reminder that society and our social institutions have failed to uphold their acknowledged roles and responsibilities for protection of children and youth from violence, abuse, and neglect. The systematic dehumanizing of their selves led to feelings of emptiness, which in turn caused the girls to disengage from society. This disengagement pushed the girls toward gangs and violence. They were attracted to the collectivity of gangs, which provided a sense of belonging and of self-identity. The identity of being a gang member was actively sought because it was the only source for power and control in a society and families where respondents often felt powerless. Group membership was a significant and readily-available route to human interaction and feelings of self-worth. Being part of a group/gang fulfilled needs for social interaction and a feeling of importance on the part of individuals who may have lacked access to these within conventional, law-abiding society. The fact that gangs were more readily available than were other social institutions to meet the respondents' needs should make us examine current social and economic policies regarding education, child care, and welfare and their effects on inner-city neighbourhoods.

8e. Policy Implications

Recently, there has been an abundance of all sorts of information flowing from many directions regarding youth crime and youth gangs. However, the first and most important step to be taken in addressing this issue is to elicit the voices of young female gang members and others traditionally excluded from policy formation and evaluation. In the absence of information that comes from the girls themselves, myths and distorted information dominate our understanding, leading to the generation of policies based on that information.

This section presents several policy and program implications that emerged from the research findings. In addition, I also specifically asked the respondents to share their thoughts and suggestions on how to best and most effectively address the issue of gangs.

One of the major reasons for the respondents' involvement with gangs was the seeking of protection, whether on the streets and/or in their own neighbourhoods and communities, from other gang members or from abusive family members. The girls lacked power on the streets and in the society at large. The elimination of sexism, racism, and inequality in our society would go a long way towards redressing this issue. The immediate need is to listen to these youth and make an effort to meet their immediate needs for protection and safety, if we really want to support them in their attempts to retrieve healthy lives despite the unhealthy environments. The scarcity of safe places for young people is a primary issue to be addressed irrespective of the factor of gang involvement. The foremost step would be to enable them to establish trust in the mainstream society and its institutions. One suggestion would involve expanding or creating local programs for the at-risk girls through community centres and other agencies.

Correspondingly, there is a need to provide publicly available recreational activities for girls. Boys occupy the majority of the scarce currently available inner-city recreational and sports facilities such as basketball or volleyball courts. Study respondents explicitly described the need for girls-only facilities, especially in smaller communities. Much-needed recreation venues include community centres with pool tables, art rooms, "coffee house" rooms, dance halls, and a range of sports facilities along with the supplies and instructors to support these activities. While some sports facilities

are available to students through the schools, children and youth who are out of schools for various reasons are left with nowhere to go for fun and recreation, at which point hanging out with gang members is one of few available options.

The majority of the study respondents had negative experiences with schools. Low academic achievement and high rates of suspensions and dropouts were frequently reported. Girls maintained low profiles about their gang membership when on school premises. Therefore, school suspensions resulted not because of gang affiliations but due to fights, drug use, and other behaviour and discipline problems. Suspensions provided girls with the opportunity to escape the routines of school and to hang out freely with peers who were gang members. Therefore, to some extent suspensions led the way to increased contact with gang members. School authorities should look for alternates to school suspensions as a way of disciplining students.

Upon leaving the gangs, respondents expressed that an immediate goal had been to complete their educations, and most of them accomplished this in alternate schools as opposed to in “regular” schools. They explained that the alternate schools were a better “fit” because they were structured with a more student-centered approach. In those schools, they felt accepted by teachers who were fully aware of their needs and backgrounds. Teachers and workers alike trusted them, listened to them, and showed willingness to guide them at every step, experiences and treatment that were in stark contrast to what they had known in the regular schools. While alternate schools should be recognized and applauded for these initiatives, efforts should be made to have programs in regular schools that can emulate the programs of alternate schools available for at-risk girls and youth. The respondents perceived education to be an important stepping stone in

moving out of gangs and rebuilding their lives. Distrust on the part of school leaders for these girls can have the impact of pushing them back toward gangs and crime, so schools need to be receptive to the girls who are attempting to get their lives back on course.

Girls in the study had suffered extensive abuse in their families. Community mobilization efforts should address and educate younger parents, parents-to-be, and youngsters and youth about family values. The importance of a healthy home environment and its impact on children and their futures should be part of school and community programs and as well on priority lists of provincial and federal government initiatives.

Some of the respondents had come in contact with street gangs in Saskatoon and Edmonton after running away from their abusive families in smaller communities and towns. They stressed the lack of adequate resources to address girls' needs in smaller communities. The girls who had been abused in their families reported that the counselors in their schools often did not believe their accounts of abuse, and also that few foster homes had been available locally, so running away had seemed the only solution. As we develop new programs and strategies to deal with youth gangs in larger cities, there is urgent need to address these issues specifically for girls in smaller communities and towns.

Adolescence is a challenging period. The strong needs to be accepted and to "fit in" with peers dominate teen thinking. The respondents perceived gang membership as a way to enhance their status and reputations. This need stemmed from the fact that these girls, coming as they did from marginalized communities, seldom had opportunities to establish personal popularity, status, and respect. Further, there were few opportunities

for recreation and fun for girls. At a recent Saskatoon Gang Intervention Strategy lecture (2007), in the roster of proposed programs (prevention, intervention and suppression) for children and youth, none were designed and intended specifically for girls. Such situations are resonant of the 1990s, when feminists used the phrase “too few to count” to describe the dearth of and much-needed gender-specific programming and funding for female offenders within our correctional and justice systems.

On the whole, gang membership is the result of a personal needs-based decision. When viable options to fulfill needs are not available, girls (like other youth) turn to gangs. Girl’s thoughts and suggestions in the next section articulate and clarify many of the above themes.

Policy and practice: Views from girls

One of the central premises of this dissertation is that young women’s and girls’ perspectives are essential if we are to thoroughly understand their involvements with youth gangs. Coherent with this approach was to ask the respondents how they themselves would propose to prevent young girls from joining the gangs, and also how the authorities might best help those who would like to leave the gang. I asked the respondents the above two questions. One blunt response expressed by several of the respondents was that, considering the ever-present reality of gangs in the lives of at-risk and vulnerable youths, preventing youth from joining gangs would be impossible.

Consistent with findings from previous research by Decker and van Winkle (1996), the respondents expressed that there is a strong need to talk to young children and youth about the perils of gang life. The majority of respondents said that the best way to stop youth from joining gangs was to talk to them about the risks of membership. However,

some expressed the belief that simply talking to at-risk youth would not be enough to discourage them, and that they needed to be shown “real-life movies,” videos, that would portray “what is real” about life in the gang. Their comments reflected violence as a pivotal part of gang life. They suggested that an awareness of the ever-present threat of violence and other risks (e.g., gang rapes) specifically affecting girls might prevent younger girls from joining the gangs. In respondents’ own words, they offered the following advice about better education about the life of gangs:

For girls who are not involved yet you have to make sure they don’t get in. I would probably like to *teach them the reality of gang life* [emphasis added]. (Abby)

Show videos of violence on streets, how drugs kill because gangs are more for drugs. Show stuff that happens to girls on streets. Maybe older kids talk to these girls who have been through this. Or have people who have been in gangs like me and who have gotten out, they should tell these youngsters. (Mia)

We can’t stop but we can educate them. I went there because that’s what I knew. I knew that’s not bad. Only thing is we can provide information to them. I got help but the decision I made was my own. (Nancy)

Respondents’ other major recommendation focused on the need for more activities, especially sports, pool tables, and other neighbourhood recreational opportunities for dance, art and drama:

I guess nothing can be done. They make their own choices. Well, you can get more activities out there, though. More opportunities for sports - hockey, basketball, volleyball, football - something that mostly Aboriginal people can’t afford. Cities have way more things to do. In a small town, it is hard to set up things like that. For girls, dancing lessons because most girls like dancing, hip-hop, group dancing. (Sharon)

Media play a two-way role in the issue of youth gangs. First, media provide information on youth gangs to the general public and in the process create panic by portraying radical, threatening, and alarming images of gangs and gang members.

Secondly, media diffuse images and portrayals of gang and youth subculture through movies, music, and fashion, “selling” gang subculture to youth. The young women and girls in the study acknowledged the strong influence of media in popularizing gang and street culture. They recommended that media be used to present a “real” picture of gangs, eliminating the glamorization and highlighting the negative aspects of gang involvement:

Stop romanticizing it in TV like in movies, it shows being in a gang is cool. They show that you can get into a gang, make a lot of money and get out and reset your life. Well, that doesn't happen in real life and they should stop making it look so pretty as it is not really pretty at all. (Abby)

I don't think that media should glamorize like *Boyz in Hood* and other movies like this. They glamorize gang life especially mafia, mob. They show all the riches and all beautiful girls. Like *Pretty Women*, it glamorized prostitution. They should show the real fact, of what really happens in gangs. (Sonia)

Given the history of victimization, abuse, and violence that the respondents had experienced in their homes, neighbourhoods, and schools, they strongly felt the need for establishing safe and healthy environments free of violence and gangs:

There are numerous problems within the families of these kids: drugs, divorce, no parents at all. It should be a healthy safe environment. (Crystal)

The problem of lack of positive role models has frequently been pinpointed in previous research on gangs and youth crime. The respondents also reported a lack of having someone trustworthy in their lives to whom they could talk and confide. The need for trust and guidance was at the centre of those discussions:

Some people need someone to care for them, make them feel that someone is out there that they can trust or attempt to trust. (Marie)

I think they need more role models whom youth can talk to. (Sandra)

Respondents strongly emphasized the lack of services available to youth on the streets. Timely availability of services, for example a secure places to stay (especially for girls on the streets) were pointed out:

I don't think there are enough services. I don't think so. There are lots of youth on streets. They struggle every day to get this much money to support themselves on drugs to stay awake to make sure no one does anything to them. They struggle to find a place to sleep. (Julie)

For Aboriginal girls, gangs served as a place of belonging and identity. Once they left the gang, a void existed in their lives and they experienced a strong need to go back to their gang friends. Some respondents mentioned that through their interactions with the justice system at the point they had decided to leave the gang, they had gotten involved with Aboriginal cultural and spiritual belief programs which helped them to heal through their after-gang journeys. As has been illustrated in many other studies on Aboriginal populations, the respondents felt that getting to the roots of Aboriginal cultural beliefs can be a strong "hook" to hold on to, in order to exit gang life:

Get them back to cultures, do some funny things like camping. Youth groups where they can do something constructive being together. Family should be more involved. Don't let them go and wander at young age. Help them find their culture by talking with elders. There is so much to learn about their culture. Counselors should be more one-on-one. (Sandra)

The need for an integrated approach that focuses on personal alcohol and drug addictions should be part of a comprehensive gang intervention strategy that can provide better integrated withdrawal programs:

For already involved, they need support to get out. They need withdrawal programs otherwise they will go back to get drugs, to gangs for money to get drugs. (Abby)

Get programs to build their self-esteem. Definitely self-esteem because lot of girls have very low self-esteem. There should be programs for them on how to be better people. If they think they are not worth it, when they feel

they are fat. They should know that all women are beautiful no matter how big or small you are. God made who you are. Only you can change yourself, no one can change you. (Sonia)

The respondents stated that, above all else, in order to re-establish themselves in society, it was essential that others trust them, accept them, and genuinely understand their personal circumstances and living conditions:

To get somebody out [of gang], they [girls] need a strong hand to show them what they want now is the best thing for them. It's possible and not the stupid dream. (Abby)

8f. Recommendations for Future Research

Although I discuss limitations of the present study and recommendations for future research throughout both the dissertation and this chapter, in this final section I emphasize the most crucial of these. This study was primarily localized in areas of Saskatoon and Edmonton. While there were a few respondents who had spend some parts of their lives in cities including Yorkton and Prince Albert, their gang experiences had been mainly in Saskatoon and Edmonton. Therefore, it is recommended that female gang activity be studied on a wider geographic scope.

The respondents in the study were mainly Aboriginal and had associated with Aboriginal gangs. Given the multicultural context of Canadian society and presence of ethnically diverse gangs in different provinces, this study is limited in its coverage of ethnicity. Because ethnicity bears heavily on gender roles and therefore, on experiences of female gang members in mixed-gender gangs, more related research is needed. Future research should take into consideration regional ethnic variations in gang behaviour and address these issues at the local level.

This research focused mainly on former gang members and those who had made decisions to quit gangs immediately on release from incarceration facilities. It is highly recommended that efforts should be made to study the experiences and perceptions of girls who are currently in gangs. Such a study would be fruitful in possibly curtailing the girls' gang membership periods and would be beneficial for framing intervention policies.

8g. Concluding Thoughts

One of the main political concerns driving this research has been to challenge a growing hostility toward young marginalized girls in contemporary gangs. To this end, I aimed to have presented authentically the everyday struggles in their lives, a goal that I feel I successfully accomplished. I utilized qualitative data in an attempt to pursue a critical feminist based research. In an effort to remain true to the voices of the respondents, the content of the qualitative data replicated the thoughts and expressions of the interviewees. Their perceptions presented me with the opportunity to uncover the realities of their childhood experiences and their experiences within gangs, as well as the possible solutions to female involvement in gangs.

This research is an important step forward in coming to a better understanding of female gang involvement and violence in Canada. The findings provide extensive understanding of the lives of girls in gangs and the conditions in which they act consciously to negotiate their identities and make choices about how best to live their lives. Girls' violence and their gang memberships need to be exposed, as do the complex hegemonies that perpetuate silence around these issues and realities. In this study, the

simple but highly important step of listening to their voices has been undertaken, and I am grateful to the girls and young women who shared their stories with me.

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Appendix A

**UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN
BEHAVIOURAL RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD**

<http://www.usask.ca/research/ethics.shtml>

NAME: B. Schissel (H. Aulakh)
Department of Sociology

BSC#: 02-539

DATE: March 18, 2003

The Behavioural Research Ethics Board has reviewed the revisions to the Application for Ethics Approval for your study "The Legal and Social Context of Female Youth Crime: A Study of Girls in Gangs in Saskatoon and Vancouver" (02-539).

1. Your study has been APPROVED.
2. Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures should be reported to the Chair for Committee consideration in advance of its implementation.
3. The term of this approval is for 5 years.
4. This approval is valid for five years on the condition that a status report form is submitted annually to the Chair of the Committee. This certificate will automatically be invalidated if a status report form is not received within one month of the anniversary date. Please refer to the website for further instructions:
<http://www.usask.ca/research/behavrsc.shtml>

I wish you a successful and informative study.

Dr. Valerie Thompson, Chair
University of Saskatchewan
Behavioural Research Ethics Board
c/o Office of Research Services

VT/ck

Appendix B

The Social and Legal Context of Female Youth Crime: A Study of Girls in Gangs.

Consent Form

As a researcher from the Department of Sociology at University of Saskatchewan, I would like to thank you for agreeing to this interview. I am doing a research study on young women, their street life and possible gang experiences in Saskatoon and Vancouver. I will be asking you questions about your life in general, including your family, community, school and friends and your association with street gang. It is possible that results from this study could help community and legal system to better respond to the needs and problems of young women.

Duration of interview

The interview should last approximately 90 minutes. You are free to take a break during the interview. The interview will be tape recorded.

Right to withdraw

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to leave at any time you want. It will not affect your status and the availability of services to you from the organization (name).

Confidentiality and Anonymity

What you will say will not be revealed to anyone. But if in case you provide me information that you or someone else is having a risk of physical danger than I may have to reveal that to police or social services. But it is unlikely that such a situation will arise as I am not going to ask you any such question and I advise you not to tell me anything. The direct quotations from the interview may be used in my thesis and other publications. Your interview responses will not be disclosed to anyone except when forced by court to make these responses available to legal authorities. But your identity will be kept confidential. First, your real name will not appear anywhere, but only a fake name (an alias) will be used in the reports. Second, the tapes will be destroyed after transcribing them. Third, any clue or event in the responses that puts your (or other person's) identity at stake will be deleted. Moreover, after your interview you will be given the opportunity to read the report of your interview. So you can add, change, or delete information from the report as you see fit.

I ask you to please not to use the names of other girls and guys during the interview. Moreover, if you feel that you are likely to be punished or confronted by fellow gang members for talking to me, then you are advised not to participate in this interview. If in case any personal questions upset you, counseling services will be available at the organization (name).

You can have an access to the summary of the results of this study at the organization (name) and if you want to receive a copy of same, please provide your contact information to me.

If you have any questions, I would be happy to explain it more briefly. You can ask me any questions you want during and after the interview also. If you have any questions about the research or the results, you can contact me, or my supervisor, Dr. Bernard J. Schissel of the Department of Sociology at 9 Campus Drive, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK Canada, S7N 5A5, Phone (306) 966-6934 or at the Office of Research Services, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon at (306) 966-2084. Please call collect.

I will be giving you a copy of this form to keep it for yourself and by signing this, you agree to participate and understand that the Ethics Committee of the University of Saskatchewan has approved the research on the ethical grounds on March 18, 2003.

Participant's Signature _____

Date _____

Interviewer _____

Thank you,

Harpreet Aulakh
Ph.D. Student
Department of Sociology
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, SK, S7N 5A5
Phone (306) 966-8835

Dr. Bernard J. Schissel
Department of Sociology
9 Campus Drive,
University of Saskatchewan,
Saskatoon, SK, S7N 5A5
Phone (306) 966-6934

Appendix C

Outreach/Youth Worker Declaration Form

I (name) declare that I am familiar with (participant's name) for time. In my opinion, (participant's name) is capable of understanding the consequences of agreeing to participate, and of making an informed decision to either participate or not in the study titled "The Social and Legal Context of Female Youth Crime: A Study of Girls in Gangs" conducted by Harpreet Aulakh, a Ph. D. candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon

Outreach worker's signature

Name of Organization

Date _____

Appendix D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview no.	Interview date:
Time start:	Time finish:
Interview location:	Referred by:
Age:	Race/Ethnicity:
Are you currently attending school?	If yes, which grade?

A. Personal background

- If someone asks you what it means to be in a gang, what would you tell them?
- Had that meaning changed since you first joined the gang and at the time when you left – how?
- When you were growing up, what were some of your experiences with family? With community/ neighbourhood? With school?
- What kind of exposure did you have about gangs and drug use within your family? Within neighbourhood? Within school?
- Do you think that some racial/ ethnic groups are treated worse than others? By who mostly?

B. Pathway to gang involvement, drugs and other criminal activities

- What was your lifestyle like before getting involved with a gang?
- What do you think are the top 3 reasons girls join gangs? What about the top 3 reasons boys join gangs?
- Were you ever arrested for anything? If yes, when you first started getting trouble?
- Have you had any involvement with drugs? If yes, when you first experimented with drugs/alcohol? Did most of the girls in your gang use drugs?
- Do you think girls get treated differently by the police and the justice system? Why/ why not?

C. Gender dynamics within a gang and perceived levels of violence

- Do you think that girls have equal power in the gang as boys? How do the girls feel about this?
- In some gangs girls say that the boys treat them like possessions. How far do you think that was true for your gang?
- What was the best thing (or benefits) about being a female in a gang? What was the worst? or some of the problems girls face being in the gang?
- Would you say that there are lots of girls who get into fights? Are they as violent as boys?
- How safe or dangerous do you think it is being in a gang? Do girls face any particular dangers? What kind of precautions do you take?

D. Getting out of the gang and attitudes toward the future

- When and why did you decided to quit the gang?
- By what age normally, most of the girls quit gangs and for what reasons?
- What do you see yourself doing in next 3-5 years (married/single/kids/job)?
- Looking back at the reasons why youth become involved in gangs, would you suggest some measures to address the youth violence and/or gang problem in general and for girls in particular?

Any questions for me?