

## **Healing Connections: Rising Above the Gang**

by

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### Abstract

The guiding principle for our research into the youth gang phenomenon is that any investigation into youth-related issues should begin with the knowledge, wisdom and strengths of young people. Their voices convinced us: that popular conceptions of “gangs,” especially youth gangs, are often misguided; that despite their reality that gangs are not an attractive social to marginalization, they do understand why young people join; and that gangs are functional micro-communities but that they do disintegrate the larger community. Most importantly, the young gang members were profoundly aware that social policy must support family health initiatives and that any social justice change must focus on a mandate for the police as front line workers who provide safety and security. In the end, our research through the voices of young people illustrates that youth gang members are in a constant struggle to find security in a world that tends to isolate and marginalize them.

The politics of gangs has sparked serious concern for youth-serving agencies, politicians, policy-makers, and community members as they attempt to address gang issues within their communities (John Howard Society of Alberta, 2001). Unfortunately, the media have served to intensify these problems through increased, and often sensationalized reports of “out of control” teens or “superpredators” (Schissel, 2006; Sternheimer, 2006; Tovares, 2002).

A recent report of rising crime rates in the Province of Saskatchewan, Canada has further increased public and political anxiety and has presented researchers with the task of gaining credible and substantiated insights into the gang phenomenon. “In 2003, “[t]he Saskatchewan youth violent crime rate increased by 21%, while the youth property crime was up by 14%, and the ‘other’ *Criminal Code* crime rate increased by 11%” (Saskatchewan Justice, 2004, p.1). Increased media attention to gang crime and violence, as well as reports of elevated crime rates within Saskatchewan, has created, for community members, a sense of urgency about gang-related issues.

In response to this expanding public panic over gangs, the resulting academic and public policy research has been somewhat orthodox and in many respects rather myopic. For example, a large body of research discusses the nature and practices of gangs (Tarver, Walker and Wallace 2002; Totten 2000; Gordon, 1994) much like an anthropologist would describe a foreign subculture. This research is limited not only by its somewhat prurient nature, but also because it tends to discuss youth activity out of context, especially the contexts of structural disadvantage and racism. A further body of investigation focuses on race and ethnicity which discusses gang activity within the contexts of cultural tradition and displacement (Tarver et al, 2002, Vigil, 1990, Hagedorn 1988). While this research is important in understanding the effects of structural disadvantage and racism, it tends to show “gang problems” as problems of ethnicity and implicitly indicts minority groups as responsible for gang deviance. Unfortunately, much of this research, because it is so mechanistic and descriptive in its orientation, has limited social policy/healing relevance, especially in relation to proactive policies that focus on health and lifestyle. Most importantly, however, limited attention has been devoted to youth perspectives on the gang phenomenon (Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, 2003). There has been even less attention given to those youth, sharing similar backgrounds, who consciously choose not to join gangs.

The goal of our research is to seek guidance and wisdom from youth, primarily Aboriginal youth, about contemporary urban gangs. The basic tenet is that the voices of Aboriginal youth who are living with the realities of gang presence provide the most in-depth and complex understanding, as youth are the “experts” of their own experiences. Researchers have used first-person accounts to study other social/personal phenomena including eating disorders, sexuality, racial discrimination (Henry and Tator, 2002). Our research is guided by narrative-based methodologies that take a personal/subjective approach through autobiographies and stories by gang members (Shakur, 2002; Webber 1991). We believe that youth have the solutions to their own problems although the youth voice has been remarkably silenced in research and subsequent policy-development, especially with respect to the modern urban gang phenomenon (Bjerregaard, 2003). Although such research paints a rather dim view of gang and street life, it does (through stories of survival) teach us the devastating effects of disadvantage and that the channels of escape rarely lie with the outside world.

### **Theoretical Insights**

Researchers study gangs from a wide range of developmental perspectives primarily derived from criminological theories that contain some rather orthodox assumptions about good and bad behaviour. Strain theories, for example, argue that high rates of crime and deviance occur when communities lack cohesion and economic opportunity (Merton, 1957; Spergel, 1995) Social control theorists are similarly concerned with the ways in which communities establish cohesion and social order. The belief is that crime and deviance occurs when an individual has weak attachments to social institutions and social values (Linden, 1996). Such orthodox theoretical foundations focus on gangs from a primarily criminogenic perspective, serving to illuminate undesirable characteristics and deviant behaviours that need to be eradicated to reduce the number of gang

members. As they concentrate on criminal behaviour at the individual level, they tend to ignore the structural origins of disadvantage and the politics of criminal definition and criminal surveillance. In so doing, they make the implicit assumption that the law is just, that crime lives primarily within certain social classes, and that the problem of crime is a problem of detection, diagnosis, and deterrence. Further they direct the focus of intervention on three areas of gang reduction: prevention, which identifies risk factors contributing to gang membership (Decker & Curry, 2000); intervention, which focuses on effective programs and treatment strategies for exiting the gang lifestyle; and suppression, which focuses on forcibly restraining gang members and their activities. While prevention, intervention and suppression may be useful policy strategies, they overlook the strengths and positive characteristics found within the targeted population. The fundamental ensuing issue is not “why do young people become involved with gangs?” but “why do young people choose to become involved with illegitimate, rather than legitimate, gangs?” (Gordon, 1994, p. 18). More importantly, most research has failed to explain or even address the reality that most youth, sharing similar backgrounds, choose not to join gangs (Esbensen, 2004).

### **The Quest to Define the “Gang”**

The quest to understand the definitional complexities of the “gang” and the “gang member” seems endless (Spergel, 1995; John Howard Society of Alberta, 2001; Esbensen, Winfree & Taylor, 2001; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2004; Craig, Vitaro, Gagnon & Tremblay, 2002; Bjerregaard, 2003). Most contemporary researchers argue that the definitions of ‘gangs’ and ‘gang membership’ will directly affect the ways that communities perceive the gang phenomenon as a security threat or community risk, or non-existent (North Carolina Criminal Investigation Centre, 2000; Spergel, 1995). There is evidence that media, researchers, politicians, and community agencies have consistently labeled various youth groups as “gangs” without little attention or consideration for the implications this term has on its members (Spergel, 1995).

The distribution of scarce resources to support gang reduction efforts is significantly associated to the perceived threat that gangs pose within a community and ultimately on how the community defines the gang (John Howard Society of Alberta, 2001; North Carolina Criminal Investigation Centre, 2000). There is a direct correlation between the public perception of increasing gang activity and the amount of money that is allocated to addressing the issue (Shelden, Tracy & Brown, 2001). As a result, some researchers maintain that the number of identified gang members within any community is more closely associated with the political and fiscal interests than the actual number of gang members within a community (Shelden et al., 2001). Despite these claims, the actual identification methods pose significant and unique challenges to researchers and concerned community members. These methods of create a context in which the social construction of “the gang” is largely a political act, rarely associated with how gang members or affiliates perceive themselves or their groups.

It is often difficult to replicate previous research and service delivery devoted to the gang phenomenon because incongruent definitions will appreciably alter the number of gang members within a targeted population (Spergel, 1995; Esbensen et al., 2001). Theoretically, it should be possible to develop a generic

definition of a “gang” or a “gang member”, but the distinctive characteristics found within localized groups mitigate against a universal definition (Shelden et al, 2001; Petersen, 2000). Consequently, research rightfully needs to orient itself to how gangs function from an internal, community-context, member-base perspective to avoid the politics of definition.

### **The Politics of Defining “the Gang”**

The most commonly recognized definition of a ‘gang’ is derived from a law enforcement perspective (Shelden, Tracy & Brown, 2001). “‘Street gang’ is a term that law enforcement traditionally used to categorize crime groups that consisted predominantly of young males from similar ethnic backgrounds that were usually engaged in a low level of criminality, often based within a specific geographical area” (Criminal Intelligence Service Canada, 2004, p.29). One of the major criticisms for this type of ambiguous definition within Canada is that the focus, though implicit, is on marginalized minority youth, primarily male, living within inner city neighbourhoods (Schissel, 2006; Bjerregaard, 2003). Contrary to the Criminal Intelligence Service of Canada’s (2004) definition of a street gang, Canadian-based research has indicated, “...single ethnicity gangs either do not exist, or are a rarity” (Gordon, 1994, p. 13).

One of the criticisms for utilizing legal definitions of a gang is that these definitions do not provide clear indicators of the level of entrenchment of an identified gang member. This lack of clarity can have serious consequences, especially among peripheral gang members or gang acquaintances (Mecredi, 2000; Kassel, 2003). Kassel indicates that several non-gang prison inmates reported that they were often punished and isolated for simply associating with known gang members within the prison population. These subjective ‘guilty by association’ consequences may also be experienced within the community as Harowitz (1993:29) states, “The reality of life in a gang-infested neighbourhood is that every boy and girl must by necessity associate with gang members, because gang members are their classmates, their neighbours, [and] their relatives.”

Several gang scholars have addressed the importance of definitional issues especially with respect to devising strategies that effectively respond to gang related issues (Klein, 1995; Spergel, 1995; Landre, Miller & Porter, 1997; Howell, 2000; Huff, 1998). One of the major difficulties is the prevailing mythology of youth. Decker and Curry (2000) describe the common misconception that street gangs are highly organized crime structures. In their work, they found that there was significant movement amongst gang members, even between “rival” gangs, in essence that gangs are highly transient and relatively loosely organized. These are not organized crime groups which have stable memberships over long periods of time. It is clear from such research that our ability to ascertain who is an active gang member at any given time is limited (Jackson, 1999).

Law enforcement strategies, however, persist with definitions that facilitate their law enforcement activities, especially activities that focus on maintaining public safety by suppression-based gang reduction strategies. Bill C-24 under the *Criminal Code* is Canada’s most aggressive anti-gang legislation. Bill C-24 defines a criminal organization, including a gang as:

- (a) a group, however organized, that is composed of three or more

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

It *does not* include a group of persons that form randomly for the immediate commission of a single offence. (Parliament of Canada, 2001, p. 30)

In addition to providing an official Canadian-based definition of a gang, Bill C-24 offers police officers more legal powers, including immunity from prosecution for committing illegal acts in the line of duty—with the exception of death or serious bodily harm and sexual exploitation. The anti-gang legislation can also prohibit imprisoned gang members from receiving early-release incentives offered to non-gang member prisoners (Parliament of Canada, 2004). The Canadian Civil Liberties Association (November, 2000), responding to similar anti-gang legislation known as Bill C-95, did not endorse these kinds of amendments to the *Criminal Code* indicating that crime cannot be stopped by committing more criminal acts. Furthermore, this type of anti-gang legislation provides too much ambiguity and opportunity for the violation of individuals rights granted under the Canadian justice system and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Similarly, Bejerrgaard (2003) argues that ambiguity in anti-gang legislation provides law enforcement officials with too much power to identify gang members at their discretion. In fact, ambiguous legislation (and definitions) provides the context for racial profiling (Tator and Henry, 2006).

### **The Implications of Labels, Moral Panics, and Stereotypes**

The over reliance on law enforcement practices to address gang problems poses many significant challenges. Bjerregaard (2003), exploring the implications of anti-gang legislation in California, argues that because law enforcement strategies fail to address the root causes of gang membership, legislation cannot effectively reduce gang membership. In addition, Bjerregaard warns that such legislation has the potential to create an adversarial relationship between law enforcement and particular communities that are being highly policed. If suppression strategies remain as the dominant approach to gang policy, jurisdictions at all levels will continue to expend extensive resources within a reactive paradigm that is highly susceptible to community-based, age-based and race-based profiling.

The power to name and define any individual or group is based on positions of privilege and power acquired, most often, through specialized training (Rose, 2000). The over reliance on “expert” testimony, assessment and diagnosis renders an individual powerless to assign meaning to her or his own experiences and identities (Rose, 2000; Bishop 2000). Caplan (1995) maintains that the process of labeling can have serious and detrimental consequences on an individual that include: threats to self-esteem, loss of privileges or status within one’s community, and the potential for others to perceive and treat an individual differently.

Furthermore, public perception creates a context in which gang members,

or those assumed to be gang members, will feel the excessive wrath of the society. Schissel (2006) posed these questions relating to youth crime: “who controls the images of youth, who benefits from the biased and incriminating portraits of offenders and why are certain categories of people the targets of journalistic and political abuse?” (p. 28). Mainstream society often perceives that a gang poses more of a threat than it actually does. The media have capitalized on sensationalizing acts of violence by gang members, which has directly impacted gang-related policies (Schissel, 2006; Shelden et al., 2001). “The basic premise surrounding a moral panic is that the concern for a deviant behaviour or deviant group is disproportionate to the immediate threat posed. Moral boundaries are drawn between right and wrong, ‘us’ and ‘them’ (St. Cyr, 2003, p. 27). Media representations of criminal offences committed by gang members or perceived gang members have created an illusion of a “predatory” character, an illusion that serves to reinforce the “us vs. them” dichotomy (Bjerregaard, 2003). “In analyzing moral panics, it is crucial to analyze how these accounts use individual examples as the norm, thereby decontextualizing criminal behaviour from the structured nature of society” (Schissel, 2006, p. 77).

In an empirical study of arrest records of street youth based on background (age, ethnicity, and wealth) Schissel (1993) found that those youth from a lower income background were arrested more frequently than their higher income category counterparts for system-generated charges such as breach of curfew or conditions of a probation order. Despite media depictions of violent acts and drug related offences committed by Aboriginal youth gangs, these types of offences were significantly lower for Aboriginal youth in comparison to their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Such studies provide valuable insights into the daunting task of unraveling the myths surrounding Aboriginal gang involvement and fostering a genuine understanding of the complexities in the lives of Aboriginal youth. All too often others who speak on behalf of the experiences of these youth, especially marginalized youth, serve to silence the voices of youth. Dorfman and Woodruff (1998) addressed this issue further:

Although most stories about violence involve youth, the predominant speakers in the stories were adults, usually white men. . . This is disturbing because it may be easier to discount the perspective of those who cannot or do not speak up for themselves. Adult speakers in stories on youth and violence may not adequately reflect the perspectives and ideas of the young people for whom they speak (p.33).

The journalistic adage “If it bleeds, it leads” is more than a trite aphorism. Sensationalism sells and, as a result, media accounts rarely, if ever, devote attention to organizations, policies, and stories of success. Instead, the media continue to cover stories that are not representative of the genuine, lived realities or experiences within the community (Dreier, 2005). The harmful consequences of continuing these practices: the reinforcement of negative stereotypes (Schissel, 2006); increased public fears and demands for drastic measures (St. Cyr, 2003); and the construction of aggressive policies that are based on an “at war” paradigm (Bjerregaard, 2003; John Howard Society of Alberta, 2001). Unfortunately, Aboriginal youth in Canada are vulnerable and often exposed to these forms of oppression (Schissel, 2006).

### **Aboriginal Perspectives On Youth Gangs**

A recent community-based research study by the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN) explored the gang phenomenon within the Province of Saskatchewan, Canada. Over the course of two years the organization met with over 400 participants to provide an in-depth analysis of Aboriginal youth involved in or at-risk for future involvement with local street gangs. In August 2002 a cultural camp was held to explore the level of knowledge and involvement that Aboriginal youth had regarding gangs. One of the primary initiatives was to dispel the myths of gangs and to provide culturally relevant alternatives to gang involvement. FSIN sought to investigate youth responses to their reasons for gang involvement, the functions and practices of gangs, and possible alternatives to gang involvement. The Federation disseminated its findings to local agencies, government agencies, and interested community members as a directive measure for addressing the gang problem within Saskatchewan (Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, 2003). The report was decisive in its position that Aboriginal youth join gangs for acceptance and belonging, for money, power and security, for excitement. In addition, Aboriginal youth were joining gangs because they feel disenfranchised and unattached to family school, and community. In some instances, they are forced to join, especially those who were incarcerated. These rationales are clearly not the signs of individual pathology but are indicative of natural human desire to ameliorate social oppression.

### **Supporting the Voices of Aboriginal Youth: Contextualizing Risk**

The study of risk factors is at the forefront of gang prevention, as it seeks to identify individual and social factors that are associated with gang membership (Hill, Howell, Hawkins & Battin-Pearson, 1999). The theory is that by identifying known risks found among gang members, researchers are able to develop an understanding of the influences of individual characteristics, school, family, and the community which are the most commonly identified precursors to gang involvement (Jenson & Howard, 1999, p. 230). For example, the Seattle Social Development Project (SSDP), a longitudinal study that began in 1985, found that predictors of gang membership, including certain types of behaviour, were evident at a very early age (Hill, Lui & Hawkins, 2002). Further research focusing on individual risk showed that individuals who joined gangs demonstrate anti-social behaviours prior to gang involvement. (Thornberry, Huizinga & Loeber, 2004; Hill, Lui & Hawkins, 2001). The central focus of this research is that, despite some research to the contrary (Li, et al, 2002), gang involvement and prior criminality are inextricably linked.

A second type of analysis focuses on the family unit as a significant influence on a youth's decision to join gangs (Maxson, Whitlock & Klein, 1998; Eitle, Gunkel & Van Gundy, 2004; Spergel, 1995). High levels of exposure to family violence and trauma (Li, et al, 2002) and low levels of parental monitoring and involvement (Thornberry, Huizinga & Loeber, 2004) are significant risk factors for gang involvement although, interestingly, Lahey et al. (1999) did not find any significant correlations between single parent households, low household income, or high crime neighborhoods and gang entry.

A third type of analysis focuses on education and school experience as significant factors for gang membership (Huff, 1998; Howell, 2000). The Seattle Social Development Project reported that learning disabilities, negative perceptions and labeling, limited school success, and weak attachments to school are associated with gang membership (Hill et al., 1999). The critical response to this research, and our basic position in this paper, is that inappropriate or irrelevant educational environments are as much of a risk as low individual educational attainment.

A final type of risk-based research involves the community and theorizes that gangs develop in communities in which there are limited or blocked opportunities to achieve economic independence (Klein, 1995; Spergel, 1995). As a result, the inner-city community becomes the most studied risk domain for gang membership ((Eitle, Gunkel & Van Gundy, 2004; Esbensen, 2000), based mostly on empirical work that shows that inner city neighbourhoods have high rates of crime and drug trafficking, and consequently have been identified as most at risk for gang presence.

One of the strongest criticisms of risk factor models is that the assessments and analyses do not allow for youth to apply meaning and interpretations to their own experiences, nor can these methods accurately predict which individuals will resist gang activity, despite adversity (Smith & Carlson, 1997). In addition, the notion of risk factors negatively reinforces the stereotypes and misconceptions that all individuals who possess a particular set of risk factors will experience difficulties (Fraser, Richman & Gallinsky, 1999). As previously stated, the vast majority of children and youth who do possess a similar set of identified risk factors do not join gangs (Esbensen, 2000).

Over the past decade there has been a demand to move away from "pathology focused" models of human service delivery (Rose, 2000, Dietz, 2001; Moxley & Washington, 2000). The philosophical foundation is that conventional methods of helping and healing have a long history of oppression (Dietz, 2001; Rose 2000) and often overlook the strengths and skills that exists within every individual (Blundo, 2001; Laursen 2000). Even the most troubled youth possesses strengths and talents (Wolin, 2003). "The fundamental premise is that individuals will do better in the long run when they are helped to identify, recognize, and use the strengths and resources available in themselves and their environment" (Graybeal, 2001, p. 234).

As the literature has clearly indicated, there is urgency for communities and policy-makers to gain a genuine understanding of the gang phenomenon. The perpetual focus on negative stereotypes, often reinforced through media images, has created a breeding ground for oppression and marginalization of youth involved with or at risk becoming involved with gangs. The result has been to

develop harsh policies to wage “war” against individuals who have gang involvement. Unfortunately, these types of approaches have overlooked the strengths, skills and positive characteristics that are possessed by youth who are involved in gangs. Even more distressing is that the strengths and insights of youth who are not involved in gangs have been consistently overlooked in society’s century-long exploration of the gang phenomenon.

Therefore, it is our focus in this research to give voice to and explore the skills, characteristics, and strengths of children and youth who are situated within the gang context and who are often unfairly indicted as criminal gang members. The strengths that we see in our respondents provide insights into gangs and the gang panic that go well beyond the narrow scope of pathology, criminality and risk (Wolin, 2003).

### **METHODOLOGY**

We committed in this research to the position that in order to understand the complexities of Aboriginal identities, social issues, and healing approaches, researchers must incorporate the potency of Aboriginal epistemology and protocols within their research paradigm (Ermine, 1998; Thuwai-Smith, 1999). Too often research surrounding Aboriginal issues has been done by outsiders in ways that are not consistent with Aboriginal protocols for obtaining knowledge (Thuwai-Smith, 1999). It is insufficient for researchers to simply engage in conventional approaches to extracting knowledge from Aboriginal communities in hopes of finding “solutions” to Aboriginal “problems.” Genuine knowledge and understanding begins with developing a foundation that is consistent with the values, beliefs and worldviews of the targeted population. It is knowledge that often stands at odds with the risk or pathology model of crime and deviance.

Therefore, our protocol for research is complex and rather rare. In an Anishinabe/Cree research paradigm, permission to proceed with the project must be first granted from the spirit world. The primary understanding of this teaching is that a researcher does not act on her/his own behalf; rather a researcher is strictly the translator between the spirits and the academic community. The knowledge that is obtained through a traditional Anishinabe approach would not be used for the personal gain of the researchers, but for the betterment of the community they serve. Therefore, personal credit for the research project would not be exploited or encouraged (Lafontaine, 2004). Traditionally, individuals do not own traditional Aboriginal knowledge; rather certain individuals are keepers of the knowledge and must hold the information in the utmost regard. Within a research capacity, Aboriginal ethics approval begins with permission from the spirit world to begin each project. A researcher must earn the rights to enter into each research area. Although there is no formal documentation for this process, permission is understood by an Elder’s willingness to begin sharing her/his knowledge. Although, this may be seen as vague to conventional researchers, those individuals committed to the inclusion of Aboriginal research protocols are well aware of the honor it is to receive traditional knowledge and teachings. The research team hosted a sacred offering ceremony to return the sacred knowledge back to the spirits that permitted the knowledge to be shared with others (Lafontaine, 2004).

Research is a powerful force that can be used to empower communities, especially those whose voices have been primarily excluded from the research scope (Graveline, 1998; Bishop, 2000; Fine, 1997). The present study is sensitive

to traditional knowledge systems and supports the postmodernist view of social construction as justification for methods, analysis and conclusions. Social constructionism suggests that people assign ever-changing meanings and understandings of the world based on personal experiences (Hones, 1998). This implies that there are multiple layers of truths (Katz, 1999) and interpretations of experience (Rosenau, 1992; Tierney, 1998; Marchand & Parpart, 1995; Glesne & Peshikin, 1992). Swandt (2000) further explains that:

“...constructivism means that human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as we construct or make it. We invent concepts, models, and schemes to make sense of experience, and we continually test and modify these constructions in the light of new experience (p.197).

The tenets of these methods are central contributions to understanding the gang phenomenon as much of the existing literature on these issues has consistently overlooked the construction of the gang phenomenon from a youth perspective, and even more has overlooked the voices of youth who are rising above the gangs. Our particular focus on qualitative research is based on two principles: 1) truth develops through the lived experiences and personal narratives of youth; and 2) the relationship between a researcher and the participants is crucial to our ability to generate knowledge and understanding from our marginalized participants.

We interviewed youth at three inner-city youth centres devoted to helping young people at risk. To establish the kind of trust that we needed, the researchers spent several weeks at each site before engaging in any actual research interviews and spent several nights interacting with the youth to begin to establish trust and credibility. Some of the activities included playing pool, listening to jam sessions, attending youth-directed board meetings, playing cards, and having simple conversations. Following these interactions, youth were asked if they wished to participate in a study that might help other children and youth to avoid joining gangs. The ages of the participants ranged from 12 to 25. The older individuals in the study were asked to reflect on their youth and their relationships to gangs. Of all 31 participants who were asked to participate, only one individual declined. Establishing trust prior to the actual research interviews provided a strong response rate for this study. None of the youth expressed any dissatisfaction or disapproval about speaking about the gang phenomenon with the researchers.

We used a semi-structured interview schedule to provide an opportunity for the discussions to follow the unique conversation and subject areas offered by each youth. The strength of this approach was that the participants often offered depth of understanding to the reality of gang life. The limitation of this approach was that it was often difficult to maintain on-going conversations with youth who were reserved about their insights.

## **Understanding the Gang Phenomenon through the Voices of Youth**

### ***The Gang Defined***

Of the thirty children and youth, interviewed for this study, each individual had a basic understanding of the term “gang” and most often these understandings were derived from direct experience with gangs or individual gang members. The respondents provided the following surprisingly consistent definitions of gangs:

*“...people wanting to belong to a family, and feel safe with these*

*people and protect me stuff like that, that's what I think it is"* (Participant 6, age 18)

*"People that get beat up and everything"* (Participant 12, age 12).

*"A group of people wanting to be more active and more involved with people and more loved by someone"* (Participant 18, age 14).

*"I would say a gang is a group of people that doesn't have any structure, they don't, their moms and dads are there but they're not, they are drinking or drugs and they don't care and they don't give enough attention. I think it is attention a lot of that has to do with attention"* (Participant 32, age 19).

*"I think they are just people trying to cry out for help I think"* (Participant 24, age 18).

*"It's just like doing something for somebody else that doesn't give you anything back"* (Participant 32, age 19).

*"A group of people I would call family"* (Participant 34, age 18, former gang member).

*"I don't know what they are. I think they starting trouble with other people because of the way they dress and they also dress a certain way, wear certain colors"* (Participant 9, age 20).

*"Well okay basically it's with my experience with gangs it's just a group of kids hanging out pretty much and it evolves into something other than just a group of kids, you know you are selling drugs to make money for each other and it becomes more important than the friendship itself. Well, my experience has been that it's just been for monetary gain the things they do a way to make money, lots of it"* (Participant 13, age 25, former gang member).

*"A group of scared people, can't face conflict alone always have to take negative action. They have to make things right. Try to get power to make more money. Rob/kill People who let them down. Not happy with who they are. They scare people bad"* (Participant 28, age 23).

Although most policy-makers, politicians, law enforcement officials, and other youth-serving professionals would most often define a gang through acts of crime and delinquency, these youth define a gang through strong, and often emotionally painful descriptors of human suffering and struggles to belong. Through the eyes of these youth, the definitional complexities of exploring gangs become more vivid, and perhaps more humane than definitions based on "objective," legalistic research. The insights of youth provide a valuable entrance into the realities of the gang phenomenon. The words of these children and youth echo strong messages of pain, helplessness, and the struggle to belong as key features. The youth in our study perceived gangs at a more intimate and humane level than most researchers who define gangs as a generic entity (Spergel, 1995; Decker & Curry, 2000).

Much like the medicine wheel teachings often found in Aboriginal epistemologies, the youth in our study tended to offer process-oriented definitions of a gang, definitions that focused on struggles for security and contentment. Medicine wheel-based teachings, including worldviews and healing methods, are most concerned with the energy or process that flows between the quadrants of the medicine wheel rather than the actions of each separate quadrant (Hart, 2004).

Healing is not about each individual activity or healing ritual that a person experiences, but rather the journey and connections that occur throughout the process. Consistent with these types of Aboriginal worldviews and beliefs, the youth in our study defined a gang as process-orientated and personally based, in contradistinction to a more dominant generic view based on criminality and intrinsic badness

### ***The Gang in Action***

We asked a series of questions intended to understand the kinds of activities that youth directly experience or witness in the actions of gang members. In general, most of the respondents spoke of violent and illegal activities. Some literature has suggested that youth witness the power, prestige, and resources that gang members possess, which creates a desire in them to belong to a seemingly powerful entity (Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, 2003). Despite this literature, the youth here did not perceive gangs as attractive or appealing. In fact, most youth indicated that gang activities were “stupid” or “pointless.”

*“Like they sell drugs to minors. They make people go work [prostitution] and stuff. They beat up people. They make them do stuff for them”* (Participant 10, age 14).

*“Beat up people if they wear their color”* (Participant 12, age 12).

*“Like gang fighting and robbing and I don’t know. It’s like they try to take over what is not their’s”* (Participant 4, age 19)

*“Try and rob kids and adults”* (Participant 14, age 12).

*“They don’t even solve anything. They just fight for stupid reasons”* (Participant 10, age 14)

*“I was car jacking people and telling them to drive us to places and that and after that the cops were watching us. And the last thing I did was beat up this guy and we broke his ribs and his nose and I got caught. I was the only one who got caught because the cops were only watching me because I had to do it all. And the cops come across the streets with shotguns and that I was just “Holy Shit”... And I ran in the King George parking lot in the middle of the street. And they all had me cornered. And right in the middle of the street, they all had their guns drawn. I just took off my bag and my shirt and I said that ain’t mine. And I got tackled and that dog was barking in my face”* (Participant 16, age 18, former gang member).

*“They usually just walk around and if someone is wearing their color then they will tell them to settle down or if they don’t they will take it off of them. If they refuse then they will beat them up and if anybody tries to go, then they will all jump that same person. It is just like pointless because everybody is going back and forth”* (Participant 18, age 14).

*“I don’t know, people that go around making ...like trying to push people around, to see things their way, that’s basically it”* (Participant 19, age 23).

*“My feelings on what a gang is uh they just use it for like power and like they just because they think they are in a gang they have all this back up and they think it’s a good life to be in and all that but myself personally like I haven’t been involved but I have gotten asked to like join and all that. Like I have friends who are in gangs now and all that and*

*its to the point where they ask me, and ask me and I just tell em no I don't need it, I'm too old for all that and I have my own problems to deal with myself and now its to that point where they don't bother me anymore and like its okay but people think like just because I know people in gangs and that that they think I'm a gang member and I get considered like affiliated or whatever just because I talk with em and or I hang around with em for a long time and that's about it"* (Participant 17, age 21).

*"Gangs don't help the community. I have never heard of a gang being respectful. They feel well in a gang to get in a gang they get initiated in someway, they either have to hurt somebody or do whatever they are told to do"* (Participant 25, age 21).

The respondents, in general, saw gang activity through a lens of pointless violence. However, a deeper analysis of their words also reveals a sense of prolonged oppression that youth understand and experience and vocalize (Friere, 1992, Bishop, 2000). And, despite the fact violent and criminal gang activities pose significant challenges for law enforcement officials, the youth in our study did not perceive gang members as vastly different from other members of the community. The following are typical insights:

*"Just like any other person. Just like any other person but just he was in a gang. Anything that was different about him was just that he was in a gang. Nothing was different about him."* (Participant 8, age 15)

*"They are all right. They are just normal people. They just hang and they are fun"* (Participant 18, age 14).

*"They just want to enjoy themselves in a way that nobody else likes"* (Participant 26, age 19).

These last quotes exemplify a fundamental reality of young people and gangs: "Most marginalized and troubled children and youth have been scarred by their experiences. But to say having these experiences makes these children somehow different from our own is dangerous" (Green and Healy, 2003 pg. 18). When society begins to view gang members as vastly different from others, it makes it easier to inflict harsher punishments (John Howard Society, 2001). The youth in our study echo these sentiments as they tended not to see gang members motives as vastly different from the motives of the community at large. Their collective sentiments are also largely consistent with Aboriginal worldviews and beliefs based on equality, acceptance, and inclusion (Hart, 2004; Ross, 1996).

### ***Gangs, Risk and Prevention***

As we mentioned previously, one of the basic goals of conventional gang research is to identify the risk factors associated with the decision to join a gang (Huff, 1998). The common social policy philosophy is that gang reduction is best approached through prevention strategies (Huff, 1998, Spergel, 1995; Decker & Curry, 2000). In contradistinction risk-based gang reduction strategies, our respondents were very clear that decisions to join gangs are not based on individual risk or individual delinquency but on very real, very rational decisions about power and protection, about belonging, and about access to resources (Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, 2003). The youth described the following insights for entering a gang:

*“To be backed up. Like in case somebody wanted to fight you before, you just want to be friends or something so that those guys can beat up somebody who wants to beat you up.”* (Participant 10, age 14)

*Because everybody will see them as cool or something. Unless they have been treated rough as kids and to be mean... (Participant 4, age 19).*

*I think it is just more trying to belong to something so they do that. So they have back-up or something because a lot of people like to start fights and stuff.* (Participant 6, age 18).

*“Well some people need them because if they are going to jail and people are trying to bug them, they will just join a gang so that those people can’t get them. So then they got back up”* (Participant 18, age 14).

*These kids now that I see they pick on them left and right and they rob them so they want to join gangs mostly for protection. Those boys are too scared to stand up for themselves... Money and power. Money and respect. People think that you get respect by saying that you are in a gang. And you can rob anybody without anything happening”* (Participant 16, age 18).

*“Lots of kids, I believe, are joining gangs because they are looking for that family atmosphere”* (Participant 30, age 20).

*“Lack of attention as a child, they just want attention, that’s how they do it, when a kid goes through a surviving stage”* (Participant 26, age 19).

*“They just go to the gang because they want much love that was not at home”* (Participant 18, age 14).

*“To be known. To get a name. To be known as a bad guy. Tough guy”* (Participant 22, age 20).

Quite clearly, if prevention and understanding are the aims of good social policy research, listening to the stories and experiences of individuals with direct involvement with gangs should be a fundamental starting point for change. For example, many youth stated that they were not forced into gangs. This information is consistent with other research that indicates that prevention policy would benefit from our general finding that is not as dangerous to refuse gang membership as conventional research suggests (Gordon, 1994). Furthermore, one of the strongest arguments against the over reliance on risk factors is that not all individuals who possess risk factors will join a gang (Smith & Carlson, 1997). In fact, most individuals experiencing “at-risk” family, economic, and community environments choose not to join gangs (Esbensen, 2000). Youth provided powerful examples of their strength, courage, and determination to survive, in the face of familial adversity.

*“I wear a mask at the same time like if I looked like how I lived, I would be like a ball of scars I would be sitting on the floor like a ball of scars”* (Participant 32, age 19).

*“I live on my own. I haven’t seen my Mom for a long time. She said that she was going to Larson House and I phoned there and they said, “We can’t really release any information but I can tell you right now that I haven’t seen this name here at all. So I don’t know where she is”*(Participant 6, age 18).

*“Yeah, believe it or not actually she would tell me do whatever the hell you want come home and leave me alone whatever. At first I felt it was fine but then staying out all night and partying I remember one time sitting down and actually thinking I wish my mom would tell me come home and whatever*

*and I just started doing that on my own and then I started taking care of my brothers and sisters” (Participant 30, age 20).*

*“At home, because if you are in a place that you don’t want to be, it don’t matter if you like it. It doesn’t matter if you hang up pictures on the wall and you have a plant in the corner. It doesn’t make a good home. You still feel it inside of you. You look out the window and say, “Oh, man I wish I wasn’t here.” For 10 years I thought that. You know how much torture that is? Everyday you wake up, same house, same smell; same everything and I hate it. I don’t want to be like my dad. I don’t want to be like him and his crack head friends” (Participant 32, age 19).*

### ***Resilience in the Face of Adversity***

A fundamental question that arose from our discussions with youth is why so many choose not to become involved in gangs. One of the most surprising results of this study is that the very reasons children and youth join gangs, are the very reasons why others are choosing to not to join.

*“Because it is just not me. I have other things to do, finish school and have a life” (Participant 4, age 19).*

*“Because I just don’t think it is cool. I don’t want to go through all of that trouble that they have to go through when I can just be me and just do whatever I want to do instead of what they want me to do” (Participant 8, age 15).*

*“My sports and school...I will be the one graduating” (Participant 10, age 14).*

*“Because it would just be messing my life. I am good at schoolwork and everything and it is just retarded. And my Uncle said that if I ever joined a gang then they are going to beat me up” (Participant 18, age 14).*

*“I have done the same thing but I’ve always had something in my head that said, “Don’t do it, don’t do it.” And that’s what stopped. Always something telling me that, “You can do better than this. You can do this. Stay strong.” My life has been torture. It’s just unbelievable” (Participant 32, age 19).*

Importantly, the reasons that children and youth choose not to join gangs provide concrete elements for helping, healing and reclaiming gang members. Their perceptions that gang membership includes a loss of control, power, identity and opportunity to access resources is a challenge for researchers, policy-makers and youth serving agencies. How, in effect, can they develop meaningful ways to help youth achieve their goals---autonomy, identity, and material gains---in the conventional world? The findings herein, in fact, support the belief that, with respect to values and needs, gang members are not so different from members of mainstream society.

### ***The Impact of Gangs on Community***

There were several differing perspectives on the impacts that gangs have on the community. Although youth often expressed ideas in different ways, the basic consensus was that gangs have a negative impact on the community, especially for the police, for community members, and for gang members. In fact, none of the youth indicated any positive effects of gang presence. This was interesting given the somewhat benign, almost noble view of gangs that our interviewees expressed with reference to how they define a gang. Their sentiments regarding community impact are exemplified by the following:

*“I am sometimes just scared to come around here because there is a lot of people that get beat up around here or killed. And I am just having this weird feeling about coming down here but I just come straight to the White Buffalo or just around my friends house”* (Participant 10, age 14).

*“They are just a problem and a weight that is stuck around everyone’s shoulder”* (Participant 16, age 18).

*“Sometimes worse, most of the time because cops when they have something important to go to then they will have to go calm some gang members down from doing a stabbing or something like that”* (Participant 18, age 14).

*“I think it is making it worse, not for themselves but for other people, because people are starting to not care about them”* (Participant 32, age 19).

*“Yeah....no I don’t think so. Can’t go to the police there would be too much negative retaliation. I have no faith in the police. I would be called a rat a snitch you know. No other agencies than EGADZ that I know of”* (Participant 28, age 23).

### ***Responding to the Gang Problem: Voices from Inside***

As we argued at the outset, prevention, in theory, is a most effective approach to gang reduction. Despite the findings in this area, gang prevention efforts are minuscule in comparison to other areas of gang reduction, especially those that involve suppression through intensive law and order strategies. The youth in our study were very clear about how prevention should work:

*“Just talking to them before they enter. Like what you are doing now. That is good”* (Participant 8, age 15)

*“Tell them not to go in a gang because it is not cool. They just beat up other kids for no reason”* (Participant 12, age 12).

*“Parents could stop drinking and start paying more attention to them. Like say when they trying to speak to the parents and ask them to come to one their sports games or something. Sometimes the parents will just ignore them and just go and do what they want. I say pay more attention to your kids”* (Participant 18, age 14).

*“My mom used to be right out of it and fucked up. But she is sober now for near 15 years but it didn’t help us. My mom is trying hard to make it right you know, a good home. She was in Rez School and it was hard for her. Mom is proud of me but she couldn’t bring me up in a healthy way”* (Participant 28, age 23).

In the eyes of our young respondents, open communication and support from adults appear to be important aspects of gang prevention, especially with

respect to meaningful opportunities for children and youth to make connections with adult family members. Our respondents' views on gang prevention are consistent with some of the existing literature surrounding gang membership which focuses on the importance of a meaningful connection to caring and concerned adults (Green and Healey, 2003).

A second theme that ensued from the voices of the youth was the importance of support and encouragement. Research has suggested that the exact tools of intervention or the theoretical paradigm for intervening are less important than the supportive relationships that are established (Patterson, 2001; Clark, 1999). Youth offered words of wisdom, as well as personal insights to supportive relationships. When asked either how to support gang members or how they have been supported, the young people in our study provided the following examples:

*"Probably here [Egadz].... Like they have helped me so much, like get my house, and get into school and get into treatment"* (Participant 4, age 19).

*"I would suggest an Elder or someone within a school I guess, elders are nice actually they give really good advice. Like our elders when I went to Joe Duquette he was a really good person to talk to. He had a lot of advice. Every time you walked out of his office he made you feel like a person, not just like everybody but you are like one of his own"* (Participant 24, age 18).

*"Well, I think it [Egadz] helps keep me off the street like the homeless people. I was able to eat and a place to clean up like they have showers and stuff like that downstairs"* (Participant 30, age 20).

*"She sure helped me out a lot; I don't forget about Pat (Quint Youth Lodge staff) one bit, she was always my guardian angel"* (Participant 32, age 19).

These examples suggest that youth have a wide range of needs including physical needs like shelter, food and clothing and emotional needs such as kindness, individual attention, support and advice. These needs were at times met by members of the community in ways that were meaningful and relevant to the youth.

### **Gang Suppression**

Gang suppression is the most common and expensive form of gang reduction (Mecredi, 2000). Despite the overwhelming emphasis by communities to suppress gang activities, research has indicated that suppressive approaches are the least effective means of addressing the core issues of gang membership (Bjerregaard, 2003). The youth in our study specifically discussed the limitations of suppressive approaches, but interestingly talked about the respect they felt for law enforcement officers who are most often at the forefront of gang suppression and who are most often criticized for being militaristic in their suppressive approaches.

*"Well I have been in trouble here and there but police are good people. They stop trouble. Or try to stop trouble."* (Participant 8, age 15)

*"Because say if you are like a police officer and if you wanted to go help a gang member they will probably just get beaten up or killed or something"* (Participant 10, age 14).

*"I could go to the cops"* (Participant 12, age 12).

*"I say people don't like the police but when they need the police then"*

*they are right there, they will call the police but they don't even like them. But when they don't need them they don't like them. It is just retarded"* (Participant 18, age 14).

*"Yeah....no I don't think so. Can't go to the police there would be too much negative retaliation. I would be called a rat a snitch you know."* (Participant 28, age 23).

Although most youth did not identify law enforcement approaches as effective methods for gang reduction, there was strong support for the role that law enforcement officials play in addressing the gang phenomenon in individual lives. Apparently, despite the rather stark criticisms that law enforcement officials receive about gang control, many youth have respect for the roles of law enforcement officials within the community. This somewhat anomalous finding certainly calls for further exploration into the relationship between street youth and law enforcement officials as a potentially meaningful gang reduction strategy.

### **Conclusion**

That youth voices are essentially silenced in the literature surrounding gangs gave rise to our study. Our research, hopefully, has served as a gateway to further explorations of gangs, especially in a paradigm of community-based approaches to knowledge production. Youth involved in this study provided depth of understanding and compassion for the struggles of gang members. They showed us that public and popular cultural discourses about gangs are often definitionally misguided. They showed us that, despite popular opinion, gangs are not, for them, attractive, ideal social outlets. Subsequently, these youth did reveal a profound understanding of why people join gangs, especially when their social networks and security are jeopardized. They showed us that gangs can create micro-communities for people in need, but gangs also tend to disintegrate the community at large, especially with respect to the police and the maintenance of social order. They showed us the importance of both parental and other forms of support in the lives of marginalized youth. Lastly, they showed us that if we are serious about dealing with gangs as a social problem, then we need to find avenues of support for youth who are healthy and that the police have a primary role to play in a strategy that promotes both justice and security. The heartfelt renderings of the youth in this study echoed a strong message to media, to politicians, and to policy-makers who attempt to define and contextualize the gang phenomenon in an orthodox law and order paradigm: *Gang members are individuals who struggle to be safe and secure and to belong in a society that continually isolates and marginalizes.*

Several pertinent epistemological and methodological issues have arisen in our somewhat preliminary investigations of Saskatoon youth gangs, the most significant of which are the absence of youth-focused research and the absence of Aboriginal-based research and policy. As demonstrated by the young people in our study, a focus that accounts for the struggle for identity and security provides depth and clarity to the often one-sided, negatively situated existing gang research and literature. Quite clearly, the solutions to developing effective measures for gang reduction lie within those youth who are actively choosing not to join gangs but whose lives are embedded in a quest for meaning.

“I am the best resource you have to know and understand what is going on inside of me” (Lay, 2000, p. 69).

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