

Use of the Teardrop Tattoo by Young Street Gang Members in Canada

by

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Abstract

This paper reports on the use of a specific gang-related communication ritual – the teardrop tattoo – using a sample of 290 youth gang members. The sample was derived from a series of six Canadian qualitative investigations over a ten-year period (1995 – 2005) in various geographic regions of the country. This is the first Canadian project on the use of the tear drop tattoo by young gang members. Ninety-seven of the 290 participants had been convicted of murder or manslaughter. Seventy-one of this group, all male, had at least one tear drop tattoo. An additional ten male participants who had served time in a correctional facility but had not been charged with murder or manslaughter had the tattoo. The findings confirm anecdotal observations that the teardrop is reported by gang members to signify to fellow gang members and rival gangs that they have killed a rival, had a member of their gang or family killed, or have served prison time. A primary function which young gang members attribute to the tattoo is to communicate the message that they are dangerous and must be respected.

Overview of Street Gang Typology in Canada

Types of Gangs

The multidimensional frameworks developed by Totten¹ and Mellor et al.² highlight the different types of Canadian gangs involving young adults.³ For the purposes of this paper, street gangs are defined as: visible, hardcore groups that come together for profit-driven criminal activity and severe violence. Gang-related communication rituals and public display of gang-like attributes are common, including tattoos.⁴ Gang involvement in Canada exists on a continuum and types of gangs can be conceptualized using a pyramid diagram (see Figure 1). The degree of organization in the gang is defined by: the structure and hierarchical nature of the gang; the gang's connection to larger, more serious organized crime groups; the sophistication and permanence of the gang; the existence of a specific code of conduct or set of formal rules; initiation practices; and the level of integration,

cohesion, and solidarity between the gang's members.⁵ This integrated Canadian model allows for a general typology that can be applied and adapted to identify specific types of gangs. The common structure is very similar to that identified in the U.S.A.,⁶ Europe⁷ and other countries.⁸ The continuum includes:

- street gangs, such as *the Independent Soldiers (B.C.)*, *Malvern Crew (Toronto)*, *Galloway Boys (Toronto)*, *Grand Ravine Bloods (Toronto)*, *Driftwood Crips (Toronto)*, *Redd Alert (Prairies)*, *Mad Cowz (Winnipeg)*, *les Bleus (Montreal)*, *Jamaican Posse (Montreal)*, *Native Syndicate (Manitoba and Saskatchewan)*, *Native Syndicate Killers (Manitoba and Saskatchewan)*, *Fresh Off the Boat (Calgary)*, and *Fresh Off the Boat Killers (Calgary)*.

- mid-level gangs, such as United Nations (B.C.) and the Red Scorpions (B.C.)

- organized crime groups, such as the Hell's Angels, Triads, Italian Mafia, and Russian Mafia.

Street gangs

- *Almost all youth gang members in Canada belong to street gangs.*

- Street gangs are involved in serious crime and violence many times every week – this differentiates gangs from non-criminal youth groups.

- Street gangs have some stability over time, lasting at least one year or more. Membership is fluid.

- Typically they claim an area/turf, which they protect from rival gangs. This may be a housing project or an area they claim to be their own for drug distribution.

- Members identify themselves through a common name, symbols, colours, signs, graffiti, clothing styles, bandanas and hats.

- They rely on violent entry and exit rituals to protect the gang from outsiders.

- Ethnic and racial minorities including Aboriginal youth dominate membership of Canada's youth gangs. While some gangs have members mainly from a single ethnic group, an increasing number have a multi-ethnic membership.

- Many youth who join gangs have already been identified as youth who are using drugs and have been involved in serious and violent crime.

- The majority of youth gang members are male, although there is a growing percentage of female gang membership in Canada. Female gangs are somewhat more likely to be found in small cities and rural areas than in large cities, and female gang members tend to be younger, on average, than male gang members.

Compared to mid-level gangs and organized crime groups, street gangs: have lower levels of sophistication; engage in less serious crimes; are much less structured; are relatively non-hierarchical; are younger in age; and tend to be based out of schools, reserves, or neighbourhoods.

Mid level gangs

Mid-level gangs have characteristics of both street gangs and organized crime groups:

- Mid-level gangs can be multi-ethnic, although some groups in the Prairie provinces are exclusively Aboriginal.

- Members may come from different socio-economic backgrounds, but

Aboriginal and African gang members have lived in extreme poverty.

- These gangs are frequently rooted in school, justice, and child welfare settings – family blood lines and neighbourhoods are important.
- Compared to organized crime groups, mid-level gangs are made up of unstructured smaller groups or cells.
- Like street gangs, relationships with other groups are fluid and opportunistic – often organized around lucrative criminal opportunities.
- They are involved in serious crimes: extortion, kidnapping, drug dealing and smuggling, homicides and extreme violence, and trafficking.
- Violence is often initiated in response to perceived threats from other groups, whether real or not.
- Members rely on violent entry and exit rituals to protect the gang from outsiders.
- They are frequently sophisticated and disciplined.

Organized crime groups

- Are highly structured and hierarchical – often modelled after successful companies.
- Have flourished over time and are recognized, feared, respected.
- Have exclusive membership based on family, race, ethnicity.
- Are complex enterprises with rules, by-laws, constitutions.

FIGURE 1: Gang and Organized Crime Group Typology

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Street Gang Membership and Roles

Who is involved in street gangs?

Youth gang membership can be conceptualized using a concentric circle diagram: wannabees/posers are on the outside, new recruits are in the outermost ring, and leaders are in the innermost ring (See Figure 2). Most gang leaders require new recruits to meet certain criteria and perform serious crimes of violence before they are allowed membership.

The leadership structure is made up of the original founder and core members who started the gang. Membership commitment can be measured in a hierarchical ranking system within the gang (see Figure 2).⁹ Often, there is not one person who directs other members, although older members have more influence compared to young members. Leaders (also called King Pins, Bosses, Presidents or Captains) actively promote and participate in serious criminal activity. These males are generally in their mid-twenties or early thirties. Veterans (also called Heavies or Higher-Ups) decide which criminal activities the gang will participate in and are considered to be faithful in their loyalty to the gang. Along with leaders, they are responsible for settling internal conflicts within the gang. These conflicts typically arise from members having friendships with rival gang members, those who engage in sexual relations with girlfriends of fellow gang members without their expressed consent, or those who steal money from criminal profits or chemicals such as crack cocaine, crystal methamphetamine, and ecstasy. Consequences range from severe beatings to death. Core members (also called Associates or Affiliates) usually have been with the gang since it started, and are experienced, proven members.

Most gang leaders require prospective recruits to meet certain criteria before they are allowed membership.¹⁰ These youth want to prove themselves and rise through the ranks; they often earn serious money for gangs. To gain entry, a new recruit generally requires sponsorship. It is common for recruits to 'do minutes', that is to survive a beating at the hands of some gang members. New recruits are required to commit a series of criminal acts called strikes at the direction of their superiors in the gang to prove loyalty. Many of the gang-related crimes in Canada are strikes committed by new gang members trying to increase their status in the gang. They must also produce a copy of their criminal record to members of the gang. The greater the number of convictions, the more respect and status the recruit achieves in the gang.

Strikers (also called Soldiers) are also highly likely to engage in serious acts of violence (see Figure 2).¹¹

Wannabees (or posers) are at particularly high risk of being victimized by violence at the hands of legitimate gang members. These youth are looking for a sense of belonging and family, and go to great lengths to mimic gang membership through tattoos, dress, display of colors, and hand signals.

Females who participate in gangs are for the most part treated as sexual slaves and are forced to play tertiary roles (look-out for the police, dealing drugs, sex trade work, carrying drugs and weapons). Often, they are traded amongst gang members for coercive sex.¹²

Primary Activities of Street Gangs

Hanging out

Contrary to popular belief, gang members spend the majority of their time hanging out, meeting basic needs such as food and shelter, partying, and being incarcerated.

It is not a glamorous lifestyle as most street gang members live in poverty. A primary activity is heavy drug and alcohol use and generally a withdrawal from mainstream social interaction. Due to the drug use, property crimes and crimes of violence may result, often on an impulsive and senseless basis.¹³

Making profits from serious crime

Making money through serious crime may be episodic for disorganized street gangs but usually involves complex relationships and an organized division of labour for mid-level gangs and organized crime groups.

Using the gang as an alternate family

Almost all street gang members come from dysfunctional families where violence is the norm. Many have grown up in the care of the child welfare system and have been bounced around in many different foster homes and group homes. Some have witnessed atrocities or have been child soldiers in Sub-Saharan Africa. Many are traumatized as a result, and are searching for a sense of belonging and family.

Engaging in severe violence

Street gangs generally prey upon communities in which they reside through threats, violence, and intimidation to gain respect and fear in the neighbourhood. It is common for rival gangs to take control of separate high-rise apartment buildings in social housing communities and use them as a base for dealing chemicals, pimping young women, selling and storing firearms, and shooting at rival gang members from upper floor apartments. Often, members extort money from residents in return for protection from enemy gangs. As members become entrenched in violence and crime, the complexity of their behaviour increases and they assume a permanent place in specific neighbourhoods. They gain a steady supply of chemicals to deal (crack cocaine, crystal methamphetamine, ecstasy, heroin, etc.) and a collection of guns to protect themselves and kill off rivals. The frequency and seriousness of violence and crime escalate over time. Due to their extreme use of violence and ability to make large profits from crime, street gang members earn great respect and status within some social housing communities. The reputation and status of gang members grow with the intimidation of witnesses to crimes. As a result, gang members enhance their status and control over community residents and rivals.

Violence within and between gangs is associated with gaining social status and reputation. There is an emphasis on honour, personal integrity and territoriality. Issues of self-esteem, gender identity and self-protection help explain the onset and escalation of gang violence. As street level robberies and rival gang violence increase, victims are made aware of the “turf war” as gangs establish their territory.

Tattoos

Street gang members use tattoos for several reasons. Most gang members have numerous tattoos, particularly if they have spent time in young offender facilities, jails or prison. Tattoos portray one or more symbols that the gang has adopted as something unique to represent the gang. Tattoos are worn and used for intimidation. Members of violent gangs usually have the gang name tattooed in large bold letters so that other persons or gang members will know what gang the person represents. Wearing an unauthorized tattoo typically results in the wearer being severely beaten or killed.

FIGURE 2: Roles in Street Gangs and Levels of Violence

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Anecdotal evidence and a small number of studies using samples of adult men suggest that the tear drop tattoo can have specific meanings depending on its shape and location.¹⁴ Some researchers suggest that it can signify category of gang affiliation: a teardrop under the left eye signifies membership in gangs that fall under the category of 'People' (such as the Bloods), whereas one under the right eye signifies gangs that fall under 'Folks' (such as the Crips). For adult men, it is a tattoo that is almost always associated with time spent in prison and membership in a gang.¹⁵ Older gang members also use the teardrop to represent having killed someone or the death of a fellow gang member or family member.¹⁶ It is highly unusual for an adult to wear this tattoo if there is no gang or prison affiliation.¹⁷

Some police forces and gang observers claim that there is a difference between the closed and open teardrop tattoo.¹⁸ Both the closed teardrop (or colored-in teardrop) and open teardrop (no coloring inside) may indicate that the individual has lost a family member/fellow gang member *or* the murder of a gang rival, or an unsuccessful murder attempt on an individual who killed a loved one. Some suggest that the tear drop with an empty top and full bottom means that the wearer has killed a person who murdered a loved one. New recruits may get teardrop tattoos to display that they have passed the test of murdering a rival gang member.¹⁹ Whatever the significance, it is important to understand that gangs can attach their own meaning to this tattoo.²⁰

Some people who are not gang-involved, particularly marginalized young men, get a tear drop because they want to look 'cool' or want to be perceived as violent gang members. Should these 'posers' hang out in gang neighbourhoods, they run the risk of being killed or severely harmed by legitimate gang members. This can happen for two reasons: first, legitimate gang members may mistakenly believe the poser is in a rival gang; second, real gang members may choose to 'pay back' posers for imitating legitimate gang membership.

Research Design and Methodology

Sample Recruitment

The following six studies on street gangs and severe violence were conducted by the author over a ten year period from 1995 – 2005, with a total sample size of 290 young street gang members, 83% of whom were male: *Youth Services Bureau 1999 Youth Survey*²¹ (n = 51 gang members); 2000 *Guys, Gangs and Girlfriend Abuse* (n = 90 gang members),²² 2001 *Serious Youth Violence Study*²³ (n = 31 gang members), 2002 *When Children Kill Study* (n = 9 gang members),²⁴ 2003 *Youth Literacy and Violence Prevention Study* (n = 84 gang members),²⁵ and 2005 *Gays in the Gang Study*²⁶ (n = 25 gang members).

In some studies, correctional facilities in Ottawa, Kingston, Toronto, Regina, Vancouver, Halifax, St. John's, and Fredericton were contacted to see if there were any young gang members currently in custody or recently discharged, and if the institutions could contact these young people to explain the relevant study. A similar process was used with parole and probation officers, and non-profit agencies, again in selected sites. At no time were any names of potential participants provided prior to them agreeing with the institution/ probation/parole officer to participate in the studies. Any attempt to do so would have been highly unethical. Not all the institutions and individuals contacted were able and/or willing to identify contacts for this research and not all those contacted were willing to participate.

In other studies, the author conducted ethnographic research by frequenting areas in large cities where street gangs were active, building rapport with gang leaders, and interviewing gang members. These methods have been described elsewhere.²⁷

The total sample size of the six studies is representative of those street gang members in large metropolitan cities in Canada. The sampling procedures used are solid, based on the historical body of ethnographic research on street gangs, and the participants represented many different gangs in a variety of urban centres across the country. Random sampling is not possible because the total number of street gang members is unknown in Canada (estimated at no more than 1.34 per 1,000 population), it is very difficult to access gangs and there is not any available list of gang member names and contact information, and not all potential participants want to participate. The total sample size in the current study is many times larger than the average sample size used in previous studies.

Ethics

All studies went through numerous peer reviewed research ethics committees. The Carleton University Tri-Council Ethics Committee and the Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa Research and Ethics Committee reviewed study proposals. Rigorous reviews were independent, expert, and recorded.²⁸ In addition, the homicide study

required the approval of a Youth Court Judge (pursuant to the requirements of the Young Offenders Act) along with the review and approval of the Ontario Ministry of Correctional Services Research Committee. Specific facilities and community-based correctional services (probation and parole) also reviewed and authorized the studies. Each of these reviews required the establishment of a number of protections for the participants. These included ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, no harm to participants, anonymity and confidentiality.

Each person who participated in the studies was provided with an informed consent form, which was reviewed before each interview. After confirming that the participants understood what they were being asked to do, the forms were signed and placed on file. Another ethical concern was ensuring that no harm was done. In most social research this is usually interpreted as harm to subjects or participants. For the studies included in this paper, concerns about harm to participants and also the potential for harm to others by participants were addressed.

Questionnaire Design

Semi-structured interview questionnaires were developed for each study. Each study had a different focus, although all involved street gang members and/or serious and violent offenders aged 15 – 26 years. These interview schedule questions were based on modifications made to existing questionnaires used in a variety of peer reviewed street gang studies having a focus on gang culture, severe violence, and various identifiers. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 290 young people. This method provided these young people with a space to explore the meaning of their behaviour. The interviews and supporting documentation (additional data sources included parole, probation, psychiatric, and psychological assessments at varied points in time in their lives) provided the base data for the analyses. Like any series of conversations, the interviews were unique. They provided insights into the lives of participants, their engagement in severe violence and gang life, and how they viewed their world.

A wide range of factors were examined in the lives of participants. Young people were asked a variety of personal questions about their family lives, their experiences with the criminal justice system, and their engagement in violent, illegal activities. Some of these questions were potentially incriminating, some were upsetting, and others brought back difficult and painful memories. Some of the participants were engaging in dangerous activities at the time of the interview. Participants were allowed to tell their accounts as they emerged and guide the sequencing of issues if they so chose. These accounts were supplemented with the interview guide to ensure consistent information from all informants. For most studies, interviews were tape-recorded and hand-written notes were kept as a backup. In those studies where tape recording was not possible, hand-written notes recorded narratives.

The interview questionnaires contained sections which focused on methods used by gang members to communicate with each other and with rival gang members (such as hand signals, tattoos, dress, inscribing 'role calls' on buildings in gang turf). For all studies, interviews began with a series of questions on the participants' current living arrangement and then explored over the life course their experiences with the major social institutions such as family, school, peer group, recreation, religion, health, social and child welfare organizations, and the criminal justice system. Some questions provided answer categories and others were open-ended.

Though the schedules had a fixed format, some questions had to be modified to ensure that participants understood what was being asked of them. The participants had a variety of learning styles, different levels of literacy and verbal skills, and many were learning disabled.

Where tattoos were visible, a series of open-ended questions explored tattoos and the meaning ascribed to them by participants. Participants were asked questions such as: "I see that you have a tattoo underneath your eye. Can you tell me about that?" These questions would be followed up with questions such as: "Is there any special meaning for the tattoo? What does it say about you?" When gang identifiers were not obviously present, participants were asked if they used specific things such as hand signals and other gestures to communicate with fellow gang members. No assumptions were made about the significance of the tattoos, jewelry, colours and similar identifiers.

In-Depth Interview Data Analysis

In the fields of criminology, sociology and anthropology, there is an established tradition of excellent qualitative research on street gangs in naturally occurring settings using methods which capture the social meanings of the actions and ordinary activities of members.²⁹ Typically this involves spending long periods watching members, coupled with talking to them about what they are doing, thinking, and saying. The goal is to see how they understand their world and learn as much as possible about their lives. The data from these projects provide authoritative evidence on issues related to gang culture and gang identifiers.

There is a lack of Canadian information on these issues. There are very few data on how young adults see their participation in street gangs, their interpretation of hierarchical relationships in the gang, how they understand their use of tattoos and other symbolic identifiers, and the context around their acts of severe violence against rival gangs. The primary benefit of in-depth interviews with gang members is the ability to develop trust and investigate the participants' feelings, motives, justifications and understanding through conversation. Such studies are in an excellent position to investigate the meaning gang members attach to tattoos, such as the teardrop.

The method used for analyzing the in-depth interview data was based upon the techniques of ethnographic data analysis³⁰. Grounded theory is a qualitative approach that generates theory from observation. It provides the structure often lacking in other qualitative approaches without sacrificing flexibility or rigor. The resulting theory is an explanation of categories, their properties, and the relationships among them. The results lead to an evolutionary body of knowledge that is grounded in data. The in-depth interview data were transcriptions from the interview audiotapes and hand-written notes. These rich accounts detail participants' perspectives on their behaviour. This method gave the participants the opportunity to explore the meaning of their behaviour. The result is 290 individual interviews, yielding nearly 5,000 pages of transcripts and an additional 3,000 pages of related documentation. For all cases there is a core set of data on standard questions, plus a great deal of information specific to each case.

The development of coding categories involves the interaction of theoretical concerns with the empirical observations contained in the data. For each study, the vast amount of data collected in the interviews was organised into analytical categories. The analytical process focused on similarities and differences among participants and attempted to understand what would account for these. This process began with a number of areas of interest, developed from the data. These included the risk and

protective factors that young people had in their families, peer groups, neighbourhoods, and schools; issues related to poverty and life on the street; gender identity; membership in anti-social peer groups, crews and gangs; engagement in violence and offending; and gang recruitment processes. During the course of the interviews, it was discovered that the participants' experiences with the criminal justice system varied depending on whether they had done their time in young offender facilities, adult facilities or both. A continuum of participation on the peer group—gang continuum was identified and the author investigated how roles played in these collectivities were related to a variety of different experiences regarding degree of violence and criminal activity, use of identifiers, and future outlook on life outside of the group/gang.

The theoretical position taken was best tested through a life history approach - it suggested that involvement in serious offending and gang activities was the result of a lifetime of events and that this involvement, in turn, contributed to the risk of involvement in acts of severe violence and other serious crimes. The life histories of participants had to be documented, along with contextual factors (for example, growing up in the child welfare system, witnessing the abuse of mothers, developmental impairments) which contributed to participants' accounts of violence and use of gang signifiers (such as tattoos, displaying 'role calls' on buildings and objects in their geographic turf, displaying graffiti which put down and 'dissed' rival gangs). The specific processes of joining gangs and recruitment into various roles in the gang had to be documented. Finally, how the youth and adult criminal justice systems responded, and how participants had fared since their convictions, were important areas to explore. This approach is premised on the existence of multiple pathways into gang involvement and serious offending and through the correctional system after conviction.³¹

A final issue related to in-depth interview data analysis concerns the accuracy of participant accounts. The intent of these studies was "to document the world from the point of view of the people studied."³² However, in-depth interview methodology is susceptible to specific problems regarding interpretation and evaluation.³³ Evaluating the "truth status"³⁴ of gang member's accounts is of particular concern, because some participants use "socially approved vocabularies"³⁵ to justify their violent and criminal behaviours. Norman Denzin notes that interview situations are not unlike conversations between strangers. Because it is difficult to tell if a person is lying, there is a tendency to fabricate in order to present oneself in a positive light. Respondents "... may selectively distort, mask, or lie about their attitudes on [answers to] any given questions"³⁶. How truthful are gang member's accounts? It is expected that some gang members might attempt to rationalise, legitimise, and minimise their behaviour. This is common in qualitative studies on individuals engaged in deviant behaviour, and can lead participants to deny both negative things they have done and negative experiences they may have had. Another response bias is "faking bad": participants attempt to appear markedly deviant because they perceive some advantage to doing so. Some posers (wannabees) seek to present themselves as "bad".

Rigorous methods for assessing truth status have been previously described and were utilized in the studies described in this paper. They include triangulation of data sources³⁷ and investigative discourse analysis.³⁸ A total of 24 cases were excluded from the analysis due to concerns about accuracy and consistency.

Findings

At the time of these studies, approximately 50% of the participants were aged 15 – 17 years; the other half was aged 18 – 26 years. For those participants convicted of crimes, some were tried as young offenders, others were tried as adults. Roughly

one-half (150 participants) were living in the community at the times of the various studies.

Approximately one third of the sample (97 participants) had been convicted of homicide. The majority (of this group of 97) had served time in adult facilities along with having served time in youth facilities (ie., for those who had committed the murder or manslaughter when under the age of eighteen years, most had been either tried as adult offenders or had completed their sentences in adult facilities).

Of the sample of 290 gang members in the six studies, 108 had served adult time in prisons and/or provincial jails. Of this group of 108 who had served time, 97 had been convicted of murder or manslaughter. Of this group of 97 who had committed murder/manslaughter, 71 had teardrop tattoos under one of their eyes (all were male). Of the 108 who had served adult time, a total of 81 (all male) had the teardrop tattoo under an eye (including the 71 who had been convicted of murder/manslaughter). In other words, 10 participants had the teardrop tattoo but had not been charged nor convicted of murder or manslaughter).

Gang Type and Role in the Gang

The classification of gang typology and participants' role within the gang was accomplished using the multidimensional frameworks previously described in this article. Using this method, all participants were categorized on a continuum of gang involvement into one of the following groups: street gang; mid-level gang; or criminal business organization. Then, participants were classified into one of the following roles within the group/gang: wannabee/poser; new recruit; striker (also referred to as 'soldier'); associate (also called 'core member' or 'affiliate'); veteran (or 'heavy' or 'higher up'); or leader (also called 'President' or 'Captain'). Of the 290 participants, 184 were classified as members of street gangs (including 120 new recruits, 35 higher ups, 19 core members, and 10 leaders), three belonged to mid-level gangs (all three were higher ups), and three were part of criminal business organizations (all three were new recruits into outlaw motorcycle gangs, in which their fathers were members).

Meanings Attached to Teardrop Tattoos

Some participants had more than one teardrop under the same eye, and there did not appear to be any consistency in the accounts related to the significance of whether or not the *placement* of the tattoos (under left or right eyes) had any particular meaning for the participants, nor did an *open* or *closed* teardrop have any clear difference. It is very clear that this tattoo, along with other tattoos worn by participants, is a form of communication within the gang and also a means of communicating with rival gang members. Gang members know what these symbols mean and these methods of communication are found in all gangs. For example, many participants said that the teardrop sent a message to rival gang members to "not mess with me because I am dangerous and will kill you."

When questioned about the teardrop tattoo, all participants indicated that it was a way of communicating with other fellow gang members and with rival gang members. The three answers given on a consistent basis to the question "What does the tattoo mean to you?" were:

- the murder of a rival gang member
- the death of a fellow gang member or death of a family member
- time served in a correctional facility.

Some with the teardrop also had spider web tattoos on their elbows, and a small minority had only the spider web tattoo. From their accounts, both the teardrops and spider webs signified time having been served in these adult facilities. There were only a few participants who had served time solely in youth facilities who had teardrops and/or spider web tattoos which they said signified time served.

Although a couple of participants talked about deaths of a fellow gang member or family member, they all reported that the main reason for them to get the tattoo was because they had served time in prison (none of these participants had been charged nor convicted of murder or manslaughter). This was not an area which was probed at the time of the studies (the interviewer did not go on to ask further questions about these deaths nor how the teardrop tattoo signified this loss).

It is clear that the teardrop tattoos displayed by participants represented to them (i.e. the meaning ascribed to the tattoos based on their accounts) one or more of the three events described above. Despite the fact that some participants had experienced more than one of these events (committing murder, serving time, the death of a family or gang member), all 71 who had committed murder/manslaughter indicated that their teardrop signified this killing (i.e., they did not say that the tattoo represented time served in a correctional facility, even though they had obviously been imprisoned). The additional 10 participants with the teardrop tattoo (no one in this group had been charged nor convicted of murder or manslaughter) reported that it represented having served time. In other words, some participants had experienced all three events, some had experienced two events, and very few had experienced only one event. This means that one cannot ascribe one meaning only to the teardrop tattoo worn by an individual without having access to other supporting data. It is not possible to just look at someone with this tattoo and verify the meaning without having specific information on the individual and his or her gang.

It is clear from the data that participants who had been convicted of first or second degree murder or manslaughter were highly likely to be truthful about these teardrop tattoos compared to those participants who had not been charged. All potential participants who had been charged and were awaiting trial were excluded from the six studies due to the fact that all data could have been subpoenaed by the court and used as evidence against the defendants. Accounts related to the teardrop provided by young adults on parole were also highly likely to be truthful. This is due to the fact that they had nothing to gain by lying – they had already been convicted of murder and had made parole into the community following time served in federal prisons.

The results can be generalized to street gang members outside of the research sample due to high face validity and high internal reliability. The findings have a high degree of consistency, suggesting that the data are credible. The findings support and expand upon the data in the existing literature, suggesting validity. The reliability or repeatability of the measures is good. These measurements have consistently yielded similar results in comparable samples.

Conclusion

Findings from this study address a significant gap in the literature on meanings attributed to the teardrop tattoo by young gang members. In Canada, there is a complete absence of these data. In other parts of the world, data is based primarily on interviews with adult men in prisons. The implications of the data relate

to three primary areas: 1) the use of expert witness testimony in criminal cases wherein the accused has apparently been tattooed with a teardrop following the alleged homicide of a rival gang member; 2) the importance of providing tattoo removal services for young people wanting to exit from gangs; and 3) further exploration of gendered meanings attributed to the teardrop.

In Canada, there has been very limited use of expert witness testimony in criminal proceedings against individuals charged with the killing of rival gang members. The judiciary has been reluctant to allow evidence from such testimony to be used in trials. This seems to be related to the fact that if the prosecution can prove that the teardrop tattoo was inscribed on the accused following an alleged homicide of a rival gang member, this could be interpreted as the ‘smoking gun’ required for conviction.³⁹ With the addition of further peer-reviewed research into the meaning of teardrop tattooing, the judiciary may be more open to allowing such testimony.

It is incredibly difficult for members to exit from street and mid-level gangs. At minimum, a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary team effort is required to support young adults in moving beyond the gangster lifestyle. In such a team, the intervention of faith-based, cultural,⁴⁰ social service, legal, educational, vocational, and health representatives is needed to wrap services around the ex-member.⁴¹ In particular, laser tattoo removal services are expensive and not readily accessible for these young people. The teardrop tattoo is arguably the most visible and widely understood of all gang tattoos. It is critical that these removal services be made available for free or very low-cost to young people.

Finally, there is no published research on young female gang members’ use of the tear-drop tattoo, nor their perspectives on young men who have the tattoo. In particular, it would be important to investigate if young women involved in gangs are intimidated by the tattoo, particularly if they are intimately involved with a boyfriend who has this tattoo.

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End Notes

- ¹ Totten, 2008, 2009b.
- ² Mellor, MacRae, Pauls and Hornick, 2005.
- ³ Young adults are defined as those between 12 – 30 years.
- ⁴ Totten, 2000a, 2001; Gordon, 2000.
- ⁵ Totten, 2008; Mellor et. al., 2005.
- ⁶ Block and Block, 2001.
- ⁷ Klein, 2002.
- ⁸ Grennan et al., 2000.
- ⁹ Totten and Dunn, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c.
- ¹⁰ Valdez, 2000.
- ¹¹ Op.cit. Totten and Dunn.
- ¹² Totten, 2009b.
- ¹³ Totten, 2008.
- ¹⁴ Totten, 2006b,c; 2010; Jackson and McBride, 2000; Leet, Rush and Smith, 2000; Adamson, 1998; Lane, 2000; Valdez, 1998; YSC, date unknown.
- ¹⁵ Palermo, 2004.
- ¹⁶ Valdez, 1998.
- ¹⁷ Op.cit. Totten.
- ¹⁸ For example, Dr. George Palermo, a medical doctor and clinical professor of psychology, Medical College of Wisconsin and Adjunct Professor of Criminology, Marquette University, writes "The open teardrop tattoo of a Latin King member means that the person has killed a member of an opposing gang, while a solid teardrop means a death of a close family member." (2004: 16).
- ¹⁹ Op.cit. Totten; Palermo, 2004; Knox, 2000; Lane, 2000.
- ²⁰ Totten, 2006b,c, 2010.
- ²¹ Totten, 2000a.
- ²² Totten, 2000b.
- ²³ Totten and Reid, 2002.
- ²⁴ Kelly and Totten, 2002.
- ²⁵ Totten, 2002.
- ²⁶ Totten, 2006a.
- ²⁷ Interested readers should refer to other publications by Totten, including Totten, 2000b, 2001.
- ²⁸ See APA, 2002 section 8.01 – 8.15.
- ²⁹ For example, see Thrasher, 1927; Whyte, 1943; Spergel, 1964, 1966; Keiser, 1969; Moore, 1978; Campbell, 1984; Hagedorn and Macon, 1988; Vigil, 1988; Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991; Mathews, 1993.

³⁰ Glaser and Straus, 1967.

³¹ Totten, 2009a; Kelly and Totten, 2002.

³² Hammersley, 1992:165.

³³ For example, see Gubrium and Holstein, 1997.

³⁴ Silverman, 1993.

³⁵ Scott and Lyman, 1968:46, 52.

³⁶ Denzin, 1989: 108.

³⁷ Denzin, 1989: 237.

³⁸ Rabon, 1994.

³⁹ For example, in *R. v. Abbey*, Totten's expert witness testimony on the meaning of the tear drop tattoo was initially disallowed by Ontario Superior Court Justice Todd Archibald in January 2007 for this reason, along with the fact that there was a paucity of quantitative research on the issue. On August 27, 2009, this decision was overturned by the Court of Appeal (Justices David Doherty, James MacPherson and Susan Lang), ruling that the trial judge had erred in excluding such evidence as too prejudicial. The Court of Appeal determined that Justice Archibald used faulty criteria to exclude the evidence of Totten, demanding that it meet tough scientific standards, rather than the accepted methodology of his field. The Court of Appeal ruled that the jury should have been allowed to make up their own minds about Totten's opinion that a teardrop tattoo, in gang culture, could mean the death of a fellow gang or family member, that the wearer had served time, or that he had murdered a rival gang member. The killing happened at a time when two Toronto street gangs, the Malvern Crew and the Galloway Boys, were fighting a bloody turf war involving several drive-by shootings. Abbey, allegedly associated with the Malvern Crew, was arrested 14 months after the slaying. During his trial it was agreed the shooting was gang-related and at least one Malvern member had killed the victim (Simeon Peter), believing he was a member of the Galloway Boys.

During arguments without the jury present, the Crown argued Abbey's teardrop is a symbol within urban street gang culture and sought to introduce it as an admission of guilt.

⁴⁰ Such as Aboriginal Elders

⁴¹ There is only one street gang exit program in Canada – the Regina Anti-Gang Services program (RAGS). This program is currently being evaluated by Totten and Associates. Interested readers should refer to Totten and Dunn, 2009c, 2010c. Tattoo removal services are only considered on a case-by-case basis, and there are not any free removal services in Regina.

About the Author

Dr. Mark Totten works with groups across Canada and in other countries on evidence-based practices in the areas of gangs, crime prevention, mental health, and violence. He is President of Totten and Associates, a consulting company with the mission of "doing social justice science that makes a real difference in the lives of complex need people and their communities". He is currently collaborating with groups across Canada in the development and evaluation of multi-year gang prevention, intervention and suppression strategies. Mark is past Director of Research at the Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa (1987-2007) and has worked with high-risk children, youth and families for three decades. He has a Master of Social Work and a Ph.D. in Sociology. He is an expert witness on gangs and a certified social worker. He has authored over 60 books, academic articles and government reports, including *Guys, Gangs and Girlfriend Abuse* (2000), *When Children Kill: A Social-Psychological Study on Youth Homicide* (2002), *Promising Practices for Addressing Youth Involvement in Gangs* (2008), and *From Children to Outcasts: The Tragic Lives of Canadian Gang Members* (2011). He is a frequent media commentator and keynote speaker at provincial, national and international conferences.