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Abstract

This study is based on twenty-four interviews conducted in 1998 with representatives of different agencies in Manitoba (including criminal justice, inner-city schools, social services and community groups) whose job involves intervening in the lives of gang women. In-depth interviews explored the respondents' experiences with, understanding of and responses to gang women. These second-hand accounts of female gang affiliation contribute to the task of making the social and material circumstances of female gang member more visible.

Consistent with previous research on female gang members (and traditional criminological research on male gang members), respondents in this study suggest that female gang members typically come from poor socioeconomic backgrounds, survive "dysfunctional" childhoods, have suffered extensive abuse, live in the deteriorating inner-city areas, and are predominantly Aboriginal—that is to say, from a marginalized ethnic group. Gang life satisfies some of the unmet needs of these women. It provides a sense of family and acceptance, it supplies members with money, drugs and instant gratification, and it gives marginalized, alienated and disenfranchised women a sense of power. The comfort, excitement and clout that the gang provides may seem to be the best they can hope for.

The gang world is highly patriarchal—a "macho" environment characterized by male domination of power. As such, while gang affiliation provides a temporary relief from the pains of marginalization, gang women remain in situations that are dangerous and abusive.

Female gang members have been largely overlooked in gang research and in prevention and intervention programming. They would benefit from flexible opportunities for educational and occupational training, positive, realistic role models to give them the encouragement and confidence to access those opportunities, and support for their own community involvement and responsibility.

Currently most if not all of the gang strategies and programs in Manitoba are created with male gang members in mind, and may not necessarily meet the needs of female gang members. This neglect should be addressed and alternatives and opportunities developed specifically for gang women.

1. Introduction

Most of what is known about gang activity and involvement centres on males. With the exception of sensationalized and simplistic media reports, female gang members have largely remained invisible in research about gangs and in gang prevention and intervention programs. The purpose of this study is to redress this inattention by elaborating on the nature and extent of female gang affiliation, as described by frontline workers who are charged with the task of responding to young women who are connected to gangs. The accounts presented here come “from the outside” in the sense that we are not hearing the story from the female gang members themselves. To this extent, the important work of interviewing female gang members—and developing policy that meets their unique needs—remains to be done.

The report begins with a demographic profile of the female gang members that respondents in this study come into contact with. From there, I delineate what respondents suggest are the basic motivations for gang involvement, the activities of female gang members, the gang hierarchy and structure, and the possibility and circumstances of exiting the gang.

2. Methodology: Research Site and Sample

At the time of this research in 1998, Winnipeg had developed a reputation as the “gang capital” of Canada. The gang-related killing of “Beeper” Spence in 1995, the Headingly Correctional Institution Riot in 1996, and the fatal shooting of Jeff Giles in 1997 brought the issue to national attention. In response, several initiatives were implemented. The Winnipeg Police Service developed a specialized gang unit in 1995. Beginning in 1997, the Gang Prevention Coordinator oversaw monthly meetings of the Inter-Agency Gang Coalition, which consisted of various community agencies in the city. Also beginning in 1997, the correctional institutions in the province responded by creating the position of Gang Coordinator within each institution. Yet despite the attention paid to the issue of gangs, little is known about the role that women play within gang life.

This research is based on twenty-four in-depth interviews conducted with agency representatives in 1998.¹ In selecting the sample, I sought out a broad range of respondents who come into contact with gang women for different reasons. In particular, I considered the primary job mandates of the different agencies and the reasons they were coming into contact with gang women. Based on these criteria, I created three occupational groups: (1) Criminal Justice

agencies; (2) Social Services; (3) Community Based agencies.

1. Criminal Justice

This group is comprised of eleven individuals who deal with female gang members in conflict with the law (Winnipeg Police Service Street Gang Unit; Probation Services and Adult Corrections with the Manitoba Department of Justice; Manitoba Youth Centre; Portage Correctional Institution; Winnipeg Remand Centre). The primary mandate of these agencies is to detect, control and monitor individuals in conflict with the law.

2. Social Services

Six individuals who work in government and social service agencies (individuals who work in inner-city schools; Child and Family Services; MacDonald Youth Services; Street Gang Prevention) make up this group. The primary mandate of these agencies is to manage and provide social services and guidance to at-risk youth.

3. Community Based

This group consists of five individuals who work in community and Aboriginal organizations (Rossbrook House; Native Alliance; Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre; Inner City Youth Alive; Weetamah Salvation Army). The primary mandate of these agencies is to empower and provide alternatives to

marginalized and high-risk individuals, often youth.

The gender distribution was equally balanced across the sample, with twelve female and twelve male respondents in total. The majority of individuals were between thirty and thirty-nine years of age. In total, seven of the twenty-four respondents described their ethnic origin as Aboriginal. One of these respondents was from the Criminal Justice group, two were from the Social Services group, and four were from the Community Based group. Two respondents chose not to specify their ethnic identity, one from the Criminal Justice group and the other from the Community Based group. The average education level was Grade 12 with some additional training courses. When asked about aspects of their personal history which may have prepared them for dealing with gangs, many of the respondents cited various occupational training courses. Six of the respondents (three from the Social Services group and three from the Community Based group) described personal histories which gave them first hand knowledge of the street world. The majority of respondents said that, in terms of their immediate occupational duties, the reality of the gang problem in Manitoba emerged in the mid-1990s.

3. Characteristics of Female Gang Members

3:1 Identifying Gang Members: Problems of Classification

It is difficult to define and measure the actual number of gang members. Definitions of what constitutes a gang member vary. The majority of the agencies involved in this study did not have an explicit definition of a “gang,” but used various objective and subjective criteria to determine gang membership or affiliation. The standards utilized by the Winnipeg Police Service were the most comprehensive:

We have a six point [set of] criteria that we devised that was established by the Criminal Intelligence Service of Canada that are based in Ottawa and the criteria [are an] attempt to objectively identify people as either associates or verified members. That being said, the criteria still often have to be interpreted subjectively. (R1:4)2

The National Police Gang Criteria are as follows:

1. involved in a gang motivated crime (i.e. for the support of, protection of, or enhancement of the gang);

2. identified as a gang member by a reliable source of information (i.e., police, schools, probation services, known gang members, preventative security file);

3. observed association with gang members;

4. acknowledged gang membership;

5. court rules the subject is a gang member; and/or

6. common and/or symbolic gang identification or paraphernalia

(RiverEast School Division / Continuing Education, 1996).

An individual who meets one of these six criteria is designated by the police as a gang *associate*. In order to be designated as a gang *member*, the individual must exhibit three of the six criteria, with one of the six being “involvement in a gang motivated crime.”

Other agencies use more subjective standards to identify gang members, such as informal experiential knowledge and hunches —they “can just tell.” Respondents said that they looked for particular characteristics and defining features that are known to be gang affiliated, as well as personal hunches and second hand information. One respondent suggests:

There’s certain things you look for in a person. There’s certain things, certain tattoos, certain colours that they wear, that will identify them as gang members. Certain ways that they’ll even hang up a telephone that will identify them as a gang member. Plus, they flash signals ... [S]ome of the signs they may flash, without you knowing that they’re flashing a sign. You can tell by haircuts. You can tell by different, various things. (R7:2)

3:2 The "Invisible Members": How Many Are Out There?

You rarely hear someone say, 'So and so is a gang member' when it comes to females, at least with the youth. 'They're going out with a gang member.'

The difficulties with defining gangs and identifying gang members have been recognized and debated since the study of gangs began. This situation is exacerbated when we try to estimate the number of female gang members. Gang affiliation is considered to be a male behaviour. Consequently, women have rarely been labelled as gang members, even when their gang affiliation is relatively obvious. One respondent explains the policy at her agency:

I think it goes back to people talking about females and males differently. A male that's acting up is gang affiliated, gang involved ... Very rarely would someone refer a youth to me, and, let's say her name was Tara. 'Tara is heavily involved with I.P. [Indian Posse]²³ or 'Tara is an I.P. member.' You don't hear that. You hear 'Tara's boyfriend is I.P.' It's connections, it's affiliations with the girls. You rarely hear someone say, 'So and so is a gang member' when it comes to females, at least with the youth. 'They're going out with a gang member.' Or, it seems to be explained that they're hooked up

through family connections or something like that, but you don't hear them say that they are this or they are that. So, we would often document that as, 'So and so's affiliated with Deuce,' but not necessarily document them as a gang member ... And not to say there's not female gang members, because there is. But I don't think I've ever had a teenage girl described to me as an actual gang member. And maybe they are a gang member, but it's never been brought to my attention that way. (R14:7)

With this said, respondents differed in their estimations of the percentage of female gang members. In fact, estimates ranged from 10% to 50% of Manitoba gang members being female. The lowest estimates of female to male gang affiliation came from the Criminal Justice agencies. For example, according to respondents working for the Winnipeg Police Service and Probation Services, 14% to 25% of all gang members are female. Those respondents who work in Manitoba's Correctional Institutions (Portage Correctional Institution, Remand Centre and Manitoba Youth Centre) estimate that only 10% of all gang members are female, with the number of females who are gang members varying, at any given time, from 20% to 50% of the female inmate population.

The highest estimates of the proportion of female gang members came from respondents who worked in Community Based agencies. Some Community Based agencies service clientele who live in the inner-core or North End of Winnipeg. In these neighbourhoods, chances are that many of the clients have gang ties in some way. If half of that clientele

is female, the respondent would then suggest that half of the gang population that they come into contact with is female. Consequently, the *identification* of female gang members depends not only on the agency's particular strategy for identifying gang members and individual subjectivities, but also on the clientele that the particular agency comes into contact with. One respondent working in a Community Based organization suggested that there were just as many female gang members as male. In fact, out of the youth she worked with, proportionately more women were involved in gangs.

And in that ratio [of females that she works with], in a year, out of a hundred, I would say 80% are involved [in gangs], to some degree ... So, in terms of a ratio, I think there's a little bit less boys, like 70% are involved. So, it's less than the females. (R20:8)

Another Community Based respondent suggests that the overwhelming majority of females she works with are gang affiliated:

So, I think throughout the week ... at least 75% or 80% are gang affiliated. Yeah, it's the minority of girls who aren't affiliated with gangs. (R22:5)

3:3 How Old Are Female Gang Members?

The age of female gang members ranges from as young as eleven to as old as their late thirties, with the majority

between fourteen and twenty-five years old. The fastest growing segment of the street gang population consists of young children, many under sixteen years old.

Seventy-five percent of known gang members are over the age of eighteen. But the highest recruitment age is under eighteen right now. So, they're the ones in the most danger. (R5:8)

Most of the juveniles coming out of the [Manitoba Youth] Centre are gang affiliated, unfortunately ... They have a major problem there. We call it the 'crib,' or the birthing ground, of gang members at the Manitoba Youth Centre. (R12:5)

3:4 Female Gang Members and School

Gang girls are typically two to three years behind their age cohort in school. According to the majority of respondents in this study, it would be very rare to find a gang member with a grade ten education. Many, perhaps even the majority, of gang girls end up expelled from school, usually for gang-related incidents and chronic truancy. Their average education level is junior high (grade seven or eight).

They're the at-risk kids in school, the ones that don't show up. Attendance is poor. A lot of them get kicked out of school. Some might commit crimes, like assaults, in schools. Intellectually they can handle it, it's just the social circumstances. The gang life plays a part in it, too. (R6:11)

3:5 Disheartening Family Backgrounds and Abuse Histories

All of the respondents in the study suggested that most female gang members endure horrible home lives.

They join the gangs for all the things that they don't have, things that they are lacking.

They've been abused. They come from poor socioeconomic situations, an abnormal home life, neglected, sexually, physically abused, unwanted, felt that nobody cared for them ... (R8:5)

Just a lot of chaos. And little girls taking care of their sisters at eleven years old. As soon as they get old

enough to break loose from having that kinda stuff imposed on them, they break loose. A lot of girls, they're like nine or ten, and they're taking care of two or three brothers and sisters. (R21:13)

Quite often, gang girls grow up exposed to parents and extended family with severe alcohol and drug problems. Many of the girls have suffered physical and sexual abuse by family members. In fact, respondents suggest that the majority of these girls have a history of abuse—emotional, physical and sexual. Their childhoods were characterized by neglect. They grow up with a lack of supervision, attention and love. Not surprisingly, there are no positive role models in their lives. In Winnipeg, gangs have reached third generation status.

This means that some young women are exposed to gang affiliation from very early on in their lives, from their parents and even grandparents, and so for many the gang lifestyle simply seems normal. Generational gang involvement usually means that the children of gang members are “blessed” into the gang from birth.

3:6 Female Gang Members and Racial Marginalization

The overwhelming majority of identified female (as well as male) gang members in Winnipeg are Aboriginal.

A lot of them are Aboriginal. Yeah, the ones that I work with, almost all of them that I work with are Aboriginal. (R6:7)

Estimates range from 60% to 98% of all female gang members being Aboriginal, depending on the agency and what area of the city is involved. For example, a Community Based agency that specifically services an Aboriginal population reports that over 90% of gang members are Aboriginal. Another agency whose mandate is to service youth who have been ordered by the court to do community service orders (CSOs) reports that, while the majority of gang members are Aboriginal, a substantial number of white youth are increasingly involved in gangs.

It is well known that the Aboriginal population has suffered generations of systemic discrimination and abuse. This

has created conditions for fragmented and chaotic family systems, with many Aboriginal families trying to survive in the cycle of poverty.

3:7 Summary: Characteristics of Female Gang Members

Gang women most often come from conditions of extreme poverty. Low socioeconomic status typically involves living in deteriorating inner-city neighbourhoods characterized by, among other things, high crime rates. The respondents in this study suggest that female gang members typically live in the inner city of Winnipeg. The characteristics of the “typical” female gang member, as described by those who work with them, call to mind a picture of a woman whose life is constrained and contoured by structural inequalities of race, class and gender. The female gang member is typically young, single, unemployed, undereducated and Aboriginal.

Speaking for the majority, they'd be Aboriginal women ... Probably very little family structure, or if there is, no family support ... Probably low self-esteem. (R18:9)

The characteristics of female gang members point to what is lacking in their lives, which often translates into their motivations for joining a gang in order to have those needs met.

4. Motivations for Gang Involvement

4:1 The Gang: A Surrogate Family

The gang can provide young women with some of the things they lack in their lives—a sense of power, purpose and acceptance. The sense of family provided within the gang is one of the major motivations to gang involvement.

They join the gangs for all the things that they don't have, things that they are lacking. The majority of the kids that get into gangs have little or no family life. No support at home, or anywhere, I guess. They needed to be needed and wanted. Their support and comfort seemed to come from the kids on the street. (R12:16)

Other respondents agree that gangs can fill certain needs. In particular, the gang makes the women (and men) feel a sense of belonging and purpose, like they have a “family” backing them in a harsh world.

They don't feel like they belong anywhere. So it gives them that sense of belonging, that family. And you'll hear that from the girls, 'This is my family.' (R13:6)

4:2 Recruitment of the Vulnerable: Security, Acceptance and Protection

The gang recruits those who are vulnerable, offering them acceptance, security, fun, money, and power. Young,

marginalized and alienated youth are particularly vulnerable and susceptible to gangs.

With youths, they don't have to be criminals before they're taken into the gangs. The gangs will turn them into criminals. They just have to be impressionable. They just have to be manipulatable and, vulnerable, and that's [the gang] their life line. They have so much access to it in the schools. They have so much access to it in the street, the local hang out, the [Manitoba] Youth Centre, the shopping malls, 7-11 ... we have kids that are five and six [years old] telling us what gang they want to join when they grow up. It's not a good thing. And by eight to eleven, they're already that way ... by twelve, thirteen, they're sworn gang members. (R1:43)

One respondent describes a particularly effective recruitment strategy:

I don't know if you're aware of this, but the Deuce have the tendency to ride around the city of Winnipeg right now in stretch limos. Young guys going around in stretch limos, girls in the back seat, open liquor, so on and so forth. It's like an army recruiting poster. And they drive through these neighbourhoods and they say, 'Hey, this is my life. How's your life?' You know? (R3:29)

Other times, they join a gang for protection in the neighbourhood in which gangs operate.

I know there's this little girl, and here's a classic story. This little girl came into town [Winnipeg]. Her family came into town from way up North, from a reserve ... And this little one is, like, as naive and as totally unsophisticated as anybody could be. So she's out there, and it's like she's got a big 'V' on her face, you know, like victim.

'Come, here I am. Take advantage of me.' So, the I.P. [Indian Posse] girls in the neighbourhood are just giving her a heck of a time, just all over this kid. They eventually kidnap her, these other girls from I.P., keep her in an apartment for the weekend. They're basically saying, and they're threatening her with all kinds of stuff, and they want her to go work for them. You know, turn her out [to prostitute on the streets]. She's scared to death. Like, she doesn't, she's got no experience with anything like this ... [The] next thing we know, she joined Deuce so the I.P. would leave her alone. (R11:34)

4:3 Expected Gang Affiliation

In many cases, gang affiliation is *expected*, even mandated. One respondent recounted a story of a girl who fought the peer pressure to join a gang as long as she could.

The latest one that I had contact with, she's twelve years old. She's a gang member now. She fought it. She kept coming to me for about a month. She fought it, trying to stay away from [the gang]. She didn't want to have anything to do with it. Because of her friends, her family, the sort of lifestyle, where she lived, it was just all around her. And her friends kept saying, 'Oh come on, come on. Join. You've got to be part of us.' ... And then she came one Sunday, and she pulled out her rag [gang bandanna], and said, 'I'm a member. I was initiated in over the weekend.' She was 'jumped in,' beat up, and she had to do something. I'm afraid she's going to have to do a lot more. (R24:5)

The families of gang members occupy a complex position with respect to the gang.

In this area, [the gang is] so family-related. Like, there's just large groups of one family,

and large groups of another family, like cousins, or step-sisters, or whatever, and they're all in the gang somehow. It's like one big family. It's kinda like this network thing. Their brothers and then their sisters are [in the gang], and so we have some younger girls that are, like, ten years old, that are in this family network of gang stuff. And, they're in it. (R22:4)

4:4 Los Angeles Wannabe's: The Media and Gang Glamorization

Many respondents expressed their concerns about the effects of the media on gang affiliation, particularly the normalization of, and subsequent desensitization to, acts of violence. Another effect that the media have propagated has been the exposure to and glamorization of American street gangs.

The powerlessness of marginalized and alienated Black youth in America is countered by the excitement, the sense of family, the money and the drugs, and the undeniable power in numbers that gang membership provides. It is not a far leap to postulate that Canadian Aboriginal youth can relate, in many ways, to the history of socioeconomic marginalization and alienation experienced by the Black youth in the United States.

The youth gangs that they're starting [in Manitoba] are based on the American experience. Everything that they do. The music. The clothing. The names. The signing. You know, some of the symbols they tattoo. It's all American. It's not like they've invented something new. They've borrowed it. (R11:4)

4:5 Power: The Ultimate Rush

Not only does the security of the gang provide a sense of family and belonging, but the backup of the gang offers a woman an immediate sense of protection and power. Suddenly, she has the clout of the gang behind her. Others fear her.

And, unfortunately, you have the gang element in there, and you have the attitude there, you have the whole mentality of the gang, and it's like, 'Don't fuck with us, because you know, we're bad. We're in a gang. And if you mess with us, me and my boys or my girls are going to come down on you, and we'll take care of you. Like we demand respect, because we belong to Indian Posse.' So, once this girl, who's never experienced that, joins this gang, automatically her self-esteem goes up. Because she feels she's a part of something. Because she's getting respect right away. Because everybody fears her. Because she's part of this group now. And, nobody will challenge this group because they're in fear, because they're scared they're going to get beat up. So they stay away from the group. So, the group can go right through the school, and everybody will move out of the way, you know. (R23:10)

Considering the abuse histories of many of these women, coupled with the fact that they are structurally disenfranchised and alienated in society, the gang provides immediate and tangible demonstrations of power.

Then another aspect, I think, is that whole idea of really wanting to feel, you know, some sort of power. That whole idea of fame. That whole idea of people looking up to you. Having a reputation of being, 'Oh look, that guy's a Deuce. That guy's an I.P. Or, that

woman is connected with the gang. Or, she's got a gang guy who's really cool, and he's giving her stuff.' That's part of it. So that whole idea of fame or power or recognition that comes with it. (R4:23)

4:6 Summary: Motivations for Gang Involvement

Gang girls join gangs for a sense of family, to achieve a sense of worth and acceptance, for power, excitement, and protection. The media glamorizes gang life. As gangs encroach on particular territories of the city, many vulnerable youth feel forced to join the gang in order literally to survive in their neighbourhood. When joining a gang seems like the only available option, it becomes all important.

I think in spite of the violence and the negatives, and the illegal activities, our kids tend to feel a sense of importance, a sense that someone really wants them. And whether it's for all these awful reasons, it's still that sense of worth that this group, that they see as all powerful, has an allegiance to them that, the saddest part is that that allegiance goes nowhere. (R15:9)

5. Activities of Female Gang Members

5:1 A Key Feature of Gang Life: Mandated Violence

The gang mandates particular behaviours and activities. There is a code of ethics within gang subculture. The fun-

damental thread, interwoven throughout *everything* the gang does, is the predominance of violence. Violence increases status. Violence translates into power. Police and correctional officers interviewed for this study report that female gang members tend to be charged with more violent offences than other female offenders generally. This is not surprising, given that female gang members have extensive exposure to violence and that the gang code of ethics celebrates violence. As one respondent explains:

So, violence is a very, very large part of everything to do with gang life and because of that, I think, to get back to your original question, if I compare a female who's not a gang member, identical age, identical area where she grew up, identical socioeconomic background, the gang member will generally be much more violent, much more prone to resort to violence in some fashion to resolve whatever conflict she finds herself in. (R1:20)

Violence becomes a normal way to respond to situations; it is a way of life. For those who have little or no power in their lives, violence is the most immediately effective way of getting it.

They will use violence as a first alternative, as opposed to a last alternative. (R3:6)

5:2 "Beat-ins" and Other Gang Initiations

While initiation rituals vary with each gang, the most common method of ini-

tiation is to get “beat-in.” This involves suffering a beating by a specified number of gang members for a specified period of time. For example, “four for five” means that four people beat you for five minutes. You cannot cry out. You cannot scream. You cannot fall down. You *must* endure your beating in order to prove to the gang that you are “solid.” One respondent describes that “the beats” demonstrate:

[H]ow badly you want in [the gang]. To see how tough you are. To see, also, if you can keep your mouth shut. That if five or six other girls beat you, so you get knocked down, you get kicked you get punched. And then, right after that, they’ll have basically a process where they clean you up. They hug you. They accept you as a peer, as an equal. (R2:12)

Another way to get initiated is through a staged fight. This is when the potential initiate must fight somebody who has a reputation of being extremely tough.

A girl would have to go fight another girl who’s considered very tough. The girl being initiated would have to go and start the fight. And one girl last summer was pregnant and, instead of being beaten in, they thought it would be safer for her if she went and started a fight with someone else. I don’t know how that would be any safer. But, that’s what they decided would be better instead of having, like, eight people beating on her. (R14:14)

There are easier ways to get into some gangs. For instance, some gangs might only require that the initiate commit a crime for the gang or recruit another fe-

male to prostitute for the gang. By far the easiest way to get into a gang is to be “blessed in.” Essentially, this is when babies are born into the gang through their gang parents.

“Swarm attacks” are a common method of recruitment in prison:

[T]hey would come into a location, there would be five or six gang members ... They would swarm three or four people in a row. And, finally, you end up with now maybe ten gang members who are all committed to each other fanatically, faced up against a whole bunch of non-aligned people who really just didn’t want to get into this, they just wanted to do ‘quiet’ time [while incarcerated]. And if you multiply that by location after location, this gets to be quite a critical mass within the Institution. (R3:04)

They will use violence as a first alternative, as opposed to a last alternative

Research in the United States has suggested that some women get “sexed in” to gangs, meaning that they have to have sex with a specified number of male gang members. None of the respondents in this study found that to be the case in Manitoba.

5:3 Illegal Activities and Gang Life

Not only does the gang mandate violence, it also mandates involvement in criminal activity. In fact, doing time in

jail represents a badge of honour in the gang world.

You know, they'll do their stints in [Manitoba Youth Centre], and that's another prestigious thing, if you do time. They learn more things in there, too. (R20:13)

A lot of the muggings that we have downtown happen to be girls. A pack of four or five or eight females attacking one or two other females

The majority of respondents in this study stated that women participate in illegal gang activities to the same extent as the men do, including: robbery, assaults, murder, thefts (especially automobile), break and enters, drug trafficking, and general acts of violence, including threats and intimidation. Respondents also agree that female gang

members utilize weapons just as much as the male gang members do.

They do all the things that the guys do. Shoplifting, assaults, robbery's, B & E's. It's all pretty much normal activity in the gang. (R6:19)

"Banging" is another common activity:

A lot of the muggings that we have downtown happen to be girls. A pack of four or five or eight females attacking one or two

other females. A lot of times it will be just a crime of opportunity ... A lot of times, the threat is used first, 'Give us your jacket, give us your purse or whatever' and a lot of times they will say no, or just try to ignore them. And then the next thing they know they are 'swarmed.' (R2:15)

One respondent suggested that women, because of their lower status in the gang hierarchy, were often used as "bait":

I remember being trained on how to rob somebody. I never did it. But they were teaching me what to do, and what I was to do, as the female. They were using me as bait. And I know that the gangs will always use the females as bait, either to get another female who's going to 'get it,' or another male who's going to 'get it.' The females are being used as bait by the males. And, they always have and they always will. (R17:40)

The gang takes advantage of the fact that crime and gang affiliation are defined as "male" activities. The male gang members know that the females are less likely to be searched by authorities, such as the police. Therefore, the females are used to do the runner work, such as carrying the goods or driving the car.

5:4 Prostitution: The Gang as the Pimp

Prostitution, while a lucrative business (for the men), is considered the lowest activity in the gang, and a woman's participation in the sex trade depends on her status within the gang. The majority

of respondents in this study suggest that women who prostitute regularly for the gang are not considered members. These women merely work for the gang.

I would say that probably around 20% [are hooking]. Well, [pause] well, that's kinda high too. I would have to say maybe a little bit lower ... [T]hey're just the working girls, you know? And, they're pretty much addicted to the cocaine, which of course is controlled by either the I.P. [Indian Posse] or the [Manitoba] Warriors. (R23:17)

While women do not receive profits from the sex trade, those who put new girls on "the track" increase their status within the gang hierarchy. The respondents in this study described recruitment to the street as extremely violent, and usually involuntary. The prostitutes are given enough money to just barely survive or, typically, the ones addicted to drugs are simply given their next fix.

5:5 Other Gang Activities: Hanging and Banging with the Bros

Gang members spend the majority of their time with the gang. The gang is their family and they spend all of their time hanging or being "down" with the gang. As reflected in their low levels of educational attainment, school is strongly discouraged and, because all of their time is spent with the gang, they are often expelled from school — which further entrenches them into the gang lifestyle. Other activities that the gang engages in are drinking, doing drugs and fighting. Typically, they have house

parties with an abundance of drugs and alcohol.

[T]hey're primarily engaged in partying, and in committing crimes so that they can get into the partying. Drugs and alcohol. A good, if you want to understand [what] a perfectly typical Indian Posse crime is, they run out of funds at some point in the week. They decide that they either have to do a B & E or an armed robbery somewhere. They figure out that they need to steal a car in order to be able to make a get-away from the place. So they go steal a car. They go and commit the B & E or the armed robbery. They go and party. And, it just repeats itself until they get caught. That's a typical Indian Posse crime. (R3:32)

Unprotected sexual activity and multiple partners are common within the gang. Sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancies result. While estimates by respondents of the number of female gang members who get pregnant vary, the consensus is that the number is rising. This, however, is consistent with other women of similar demographics. In fact, "Manitoba has one of the highest rates of adolescent pregnancy in Canada with approximately seven teenagers becoming pregnant each day" (Manitoba Government News Release, 1998:1).

I would say at least probably 50% [are moms], would be safe to say. And, out of that 50%, or it could even be higher, but I would say that almost 100% of those moms, their kids are from gang member fathers. (R23:16)

We have a twelve year old male gang member that we arrested this year. His claim to fame is that he's going to be a dad twice,

two separate young girls. He's twelve. (R2:7)

Another respondent discusses a young gang mom:

We have a twelve year old male gang member that we arrested this year. His claim to fame is that he's going to be a dad twice, two separate young girls. He's twelve.

One young girl, she just turned twenty [years old]. This is her fifth child. And she has two living with her, the others are in foster care. (R24:11)

Another respondent voices her concerns about teen pregnancy within gangs, and the implications of inter-generational gang involvement.

We have an awful lot of females in the program who are pregnant, and often carrying a gang member's baby ... When the kid is born, he'll [sic] probably end up with a rag [gang bandana] on his head, or a little [Manitoba] Warrior's jacket on. I don't know if

you've ever seen that, but it's rather scary, seeing little babies wearing Warrior jackets. And what are we talking already, that's a fourth or a third generation Warrior. (R14:8)

5:6 Summary: Activities of Female Gang Members

Female gang members participate in most of the same activities as male gang members. The women survive violent

initiation rituals, commit illegal activities and spend the majority of their time with their gang family. Robbery is the offense of choice, and the evidence suggests that women involved in gangs are just as likely as men to use weapons. While female gang members occasionally prostitute for the gang, the regular prostitutes are not considered members. Unprotected sex and subsequent unplanned pregnancies among female gang members, as with adolescents in Manitoba generally, are additional areas of concern.

6. Gang Structure and Organization

6:1 Gang Hierarchy and Evolution

All the respondents agreed that the street gangs have a definite hierarchy. Similar to bureaucratic organizations or more organized crime collectives, there is a chain of command in gangs, with a powerful few at the top, followed by various levels of "workers" underneath.

Well, they have, again, they've taken on the premises of the biker gangs, where you have your President. And then you have your War Chief underneath your President, or the bikers call them Sergeant in Arms. And then you've got your Foot Soldiers, your financial people, people that will take care of all your money and all your dealings. It boils down to the Foot Soldier who does all the dirty work. So, yeah, there is a hierarchy. They are government-type structured. That goes without saying. Even though these street gangs aren't as well organized, I guess that's to our benefit, as they could be. They

have some form of organization, and they're not just running loose, all of them. They all have to answer to somebody. (R7:12)

I mean, there's the gang leaders. And they, in turn, have Strikers for them who do all the dirty work, whether it's B & E's, different criminal activity, selling drugs, recruiting young women to work the streets, things like that. (R20:12)

Winnipeg provides a unique sample in that there are different gangs, each at different stages of evolution and different levels of organization. This allows us to see the changes that occur as gangs evolve and become more organized. For example, respondents have noticed that, as individual gangs evolve they attempt to become less visible. Their hierarchical structure becomes more rigid. They begin to sanction particular crimes and not others. And, they seek out other lower status gangs to do the predatory and risky runner work. As a gang evolves, the number of members in jail usually decreases. In the world of organized crime, street gangs are at the bottom of the pecking order.

6:2 Variation in the Degree of Female Subservience

The most recurrent theme in all of the interviews was that "men rule." Patriarchal control and misogynist attitudes reflect a prevalent macho mentality.

But, you're not going to have the [Manitoba] Warriors recruiting females to be in their gangs, in the sense that the gang is. You're

not going to be a hard core member of that gang. Never going to. Like, you're never going to be a hard core member of a biker gang. I mean it's a male dominated hierarchy, and they [girls] are going to be a commodity. (R11:4)

The degree of female subservience varies with each gang. In some cases, as with biker gangs, women aren't even allowed to attend gang meetings. In other cases, the women may be allowed to form their own hierarchy, their own sub-gang, but that female gang is still utterly subservient to the male gang.

The less organized gangs appear to have a less rigid hierarchy, and women affiliated with these gangs seem to have more power and status than those in the more organized street gangs. Stated differently, women have the lowest status in biker gangs and appear to have the most status in the least organized street gang in Winnipeg, the Indian Posse.⁴

6:3 Hierarchies and All-Female Gangs: Power in a Male World?

[Women are] the ones who get thrown around, sort of thing. I can't imagine that they're in a power position in the gang. That's why I think, some girls kinda, they're not really in their own gang, but they do their own things together, like en masse, and they end up taking it out on other girls. (R16:12)

It appears that a separate hierarchy exists amongst the female gang members, with some women having more power and status than others. Personal characteristics, such as a relative in the gang or exceptional performance in gang

activities, can give some women more clout over other female gang members and, to some degree, recognition by the male gang members.

‘Cindy’⁵ was never anybody’s bitch or prostitute or whatever. She was very much, her brother’s one of the founding guys, so why would she have a lower status? They wouldn’t even allow her to be used or beaten by those other gang guys. So, she had some power. (R4:19)

Respondents disagreed about the existence of all-female gangs within the city. Many respondents suggested that there are, currently, no all-female street gangs operating in Manitoba.

It is the female, and this is another phenomenon I can’t quite explain, the females have, in Winnipeg, have from time to time attempted to establish their own stand-alone gangs. The Sisterhood is one example. Ace is another. What we see is that female gangs as a separate entity don’t last. They don’t seem to be able to maintain their own separate stand-alone gangs. Sisterhood typically gets reabsorbed back into the [Indian] Posse. Ace is the female component of the Deuce gang. But for all intents and purposes, most of the time they forget that and just refer to themselves as Deuces. So, again, it comes up every number of months, all of a sudden the females get together and decide to form a stand alone gang, still in association with the male gang, but they want their own identity. But, it just doesn’t last. I don’t know why that is. But, they don’t seem to hold an organization as a stand-alone gang. So, currently, yeah, there are still a lot of girls calling themselves as Aces, but there’s probably, the majority now just refer to themselves as Deuce. The Sisterhood is not in existence at all. (R1:14)

While police reports and community agencies suggest that there are currently no all-female gangs active in the city, a correctional officer thinks differently:

They have their own little thing going on. With the Indian Posse, one of the more popular gangs in the city here, their female version of their gang is called the Sisterhood. And it’s run strictly by women. And everything that’s done, or dealt with, is dealt with through these women. So the male counterparts have absolutely no say in it, they just give the ultimate approval or denial of whatever plans the Sisterhood may have.

(So you’re seeing the Sisterhood as still being active?)

Oh yeah. Oh, they’re still active. They’re quite active, actually. (R7:9)

So what is happening here? Are some respondents wrong? Are they using different criteria to distinguish an all-female gang? Or are they both right? One plausible suggestion is that female gang members only form women-only gangs when they are in a prison setting. Then, when they get back onto the street, back onto turf that is already claimed, they have no choice but to fall under the umbrella and security of the male gang. In an all-women environment such as prison, control over status provides a source of power. Another correctional officer comments:

Like, there was one women that we had who was very strong, and all the other girls did what she said, kinda thing. But I think in the community she would be falling under somebody like a male organizer. (R9:7)

This is obviously another aspect of female gang dynamics that needs further exploration.

6:4 Summary: Gang Structure and Organization

Street gangs have a definite hierarchy, with different sects and members accorded different statuses and roles within the gang. As with more organized criminal groups, female gang members rarely hold the status of male gang members. Generally, it is a male member who has the ultimate say in the gang's activities. The women do, however, have a separate hierarchy amongst themselves. This hierarchy makes itself especially apparent within the correctional system, where women will form their own gang in response to sharing an institutional setting with rival female gang members. On the street, however, turf and resources remain controlled by and contested amongst the male-dominated gangs. While women are not as visible in these gangs, and are regarded as subservient to men, they participate in and are exposed to all of the activities that gang life entails. Yet, they do not receive the same benefits as the male gang members and often suffer abuse at the hands of male gang members.

The gang lifestyle is all encompassing and, like the cycle of poverty, difficult to get out of. The next section ex-

amines the possibilities and circumstances of leaving the gang.

7. Exiting the Gang

7:1 Difficulties Leaving the Gang

It appears that there are two schools of thought on the possibility of leaving the gang. While some respondents suggest that it is not that difficult, others say that it is impossible. The gang is everywhere: "When you're in, you're in." It is especially difficult for youth because they cannot leave the neighbourhood.

You may quit the gang, but you're still in the same neighbourhood. And now that you're in that neighbourhood, not only are you not protected by your gang, but you've got to fear your gang now. So, it's pretty hard to get out. Even though they say, 'Oh, I can retire at any time.' Well, you can, but it's always going to be there for you. It's always going to be in your face. And it can be a very painful experience to quit. (R7:19)

None of the women have ever told me that they wanted to leave the gang. Not one that I've talked to ... One girl I mentioned it to, who seems to be fairly up in the I.P., she said, 'Well, how could I do that? My whole family is involved.' It's, like, inter-generational for her ... But, no. Not one has released that, that they've ever wanted to leave the gang. Some have said they want to make changes in their life, but the change never seemed to be that they wanted to leave the gang, just wanted to make some changes so that things were a little bit better for them. More of the men have told me they wanted to leave the gang than any of the women. (R9:19)

In many cases, the only way to get out of the gang is to relocate, to completely remove yourself from the geographic area, from most of the people in your life, and from a lifestyle that may be all you have known.

Sometimes, however, even attempts to relocate do not work. One respondent tells the story of a woman who tried, unsuccessfully, to leave the gang life.

[H]er family's affiliated with the Manitoba Warriors, and everywhere she turned it was there. And she had gone to Thompson, to get away. The social worker had made the decision to send her to Thompson. And they [Warriors] sent a limo to Thompson to bring her back. I mean, she was worth a lot of money to them. And she ended up coming back, and back on the streets. So the power that these guys have, even compared to all Corrections, Child and Family Services, Social Work, all the supportive things to compete against that, what they're going to give her 24-7 [24 hours a day, seven days a week] versus what we can do during office hours or working hours, or 'if it's in our mandate,' things like that. Gangs offer kids a lot. Whether we determine that as meaningful stuff or not, the kids do. So they're in, they're in it, you know? (R14:10)

Alternatively, some respondents have found that it is not as difficult as people seem to think. In their experience, individuals *have* successfully left the gang.

It's easier now [for kids to leave the gangs] than it was three years ago, I would say. Three years ago, they would be threatened. Their life would be threatened, or their families. And so you would notice more drive-by shootings and things like that. Whereas, now, they have to either pay a due, money-wise, or service-wise. (R20:29)

7:2 The "Red Road": Reviving Aboriginal Traditions

Reflecting the predominance of Aboriginal people in gangs, some gangs respect those who leave the gang to "walk the Red Road." They allow Aboriginal members to leave the gang in order to explore their Aboriginal roots and traditional culture.

We've heard that if people, the Aboriginal youth, if they decide to go the Red Path, the walk of the traditional culture, that they're allowed out. (R5:19)

And, that if you want to leave the gang to get involved more in Aboriginal culture — you want to be a traditional drummer, you want to be a traditional dancer—that is highly encouraged ... That's walking the 'Red Road.' (R15:18)

There's a possibility that, for some of the gangs, they respect the Indian way of life, the cultural way of life ... it's important to maintain that at all costs ... They will be allowed to exit, so to speak. They will still be affiliated, but not in the violent life. (R19:6)

7:3 Some More Catalysts and Motivations for Leaving

Sometimes a crisis situation serves as a catalyst, encouraging individuals to leave the gang. For instance, the recent death of a gang member shook up some of the other gang members to the point

that they were considering leaving the violent life of the gang.

[I]n November he was stabbed to death, throat cut and everything. We wanted him to stay, but he went to a party and things broke out. And this is by his own, his own gang members, you know, at a party, a fight broke out within the gang. And the 'family' kinda turned on each other, their so-called family. He went to break up a fight, and one of them turned on him and slashed his throat and everything. So, I spent the day in the hospital. He was dying. They couldn't save him. So you have the privilege of sitting there as you watch one of the young people you worked with for seven years bleed to death. And trying to deal with the other members, other family members to gang members, to this young lady, how she kept saying, 'Joe will never know his dad. Joe will never know his dad.' And Joe was only 2 years old ... And some of them actually said, 'Maybe I better start thinking about where I'm going.' Now, in saying that, I see small changes. I see some of the ones that were at that party here more often. If they're here, they're not out there [on the street]. (R24:12)

Also, as they get older, some gang members may leave the gang simply because they get sick of the lifestyle, sick of watching their back, and sick of being in and out of jail.

Sometimes pregnancy prompts a woman to leave the gang or, at least, decrease her involvement with it. Keeping in mind that gangs are very sexist, the woman typically finds herself trying to raise the baby alone. Consequently, intended or not, pregnancy usually decreases the woman's level of gang activity. As described by one respondent:

[U]nfortunately, there's a lot of cases of teenage pregnancy. And when that happens you don't see their lifestyle continue in the same manner. Once they've had a couple kids and what-not, you tend to see them slow down or go into a different area where you have some of them getting involved in crime, such as drugs or working with other drug people, getting other people working for them. So you don't actually see them continuing a lot of the lifestyle. Whereas the boys can get the girl pregnant and they can maintain their current lifestyles. (R5:13)

Some female gang members bring the baby into the gang family, "blessing" the new member in. Not only is this often expected, but the mother views this as the safest option for her baby. Her thinking is that her baby, who is coming into a harsh world, will at least have the protection of the gang.

Sometimes female gang members feel safer themselves, protected from rival gang members, when they carry their baby around with them:

The girls seem to feel a sense of security, like they're tougher, like nobody's going to beat them up if they're pushing a stroller. And, so they get pregnant, or they've got their baby with them all the time. I've seen girls who have lots of enemies and have that baby with them at all times, you know? So, and you know what? It made me realize that, I think, I felt the same way when I was younger. I had enemies, and I wouldn't step out of my place without the baby in the stroller. 'Cause who's going to fight me if I've got my baby in the stroller, right? If I've got my baby strapped to my chest, you know? (R17:22)

7:4 Summary: Exiting the Gang

This research provides strong evidence that it takes a lot of motivation, determination, resources and support for individuals to leave the gang. Relocation seems drastic and unlikely given that many gang members are young children and adolescents from poverty-stricken families. Sometimes, a crisis — a death, a “hit” that went wrong—will scare some individuals out of the gang. Other times, female gang members are faced with raising a child alone. While this may give the appearance of decreasing gang numbers, the reality is more likely to be that the young woman will be forced to raise her child in poverty, usually in a gang neighbourhood. And the cycle continues.

8. Conclusion: Community Responses to Gangs

Kids join gangs because they’re hopeless. It’s a sense of hopelessness. And they don’t really care what’s going to happen to them, because they can’t see anything for themselves in the future. You know? So, there’s just a sense of utter hopelessness. (R10:16)

I think there needs to be other alternatives. It just seems like it’s all like a cycle right now. And somehow you have to stop the cycle. (R22:20)

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate—or even to list—the extensive and ever-changing system of

programs that have been put in place in response to the growth of gangs in Winnipeg, it is possible to offer some observations.

First, this research demonstrates with clarity that, while some appropriate programming is in place in Winnipeg to support young women and help them avoid involvement in gang life, those initiatives are hampered to the extent that they ignore or under-value issues of race, gender, and poverty.

Gender

Women have been largely invisible not only in research on gangs but also largely in programming designed to meet their needs. In fact, at the time of this research, *none* of the agencies in this study offered programming specifically designed to address the needs of female gang members.

We even offer employment training. We have a Carpentry Skills program and they even get paid while they’re in training.

(Are there any women in it?)

No, it’s only for the boys.

(Are there any programs for the girls?)

No. Actually, no. Nothing. (R22:24)

Another respondent discusses how much the boys enjoyed playing hockey. I asked him, ‘What do the girls do?’:

Well, hmmm, that’s a good question. There really isn’t that much programming for the girls. It’s easy. The guys want their floor

hockey, and they basically get involved in that. But the girls, they just sort of hang around and don't have too much to do.

(Why do you think that is?)

I don't know. Old stereotypes. It's easier to set up a gym, get some guys playing some sports, or doing some weight-lifting. There's a little less that the girls can do. (R21:16)

Young women who are at risk of getting involved with gang life would benefit from programs that address their experiences as women. Since many have experienced emotional, physical and sexual abuse, the availability of such programs that offer women-only spaces should be ensured.

As well, further research on the lives on young gang women needs to be done.

Community Mentors

As we have seen, there is a sharp contradiction between the glamour and safety that gang life may seem to promise from the outside, and the violence and despair that women generally experience once they have joined a gang. This represents gangs' "weak point": they are rarely able to deliver on their promises, or if they do, the benefits come at a terrible price.

Given this reality, several respondents argue that an important component of community support programs is the involvement of former gang members. Gang members are powerful role models for many of the young women who are potential targets for recruitment by

gangs. Former gang members who testify to the violent and destructive consequences of gang life, and describe how women are treated within the gang, offer a unique and effective perspective. They can also suggest practical skills for avoiding and getting out of gangs.

[P]revention, of course, is the best medicine for this situation, that if you target very young kids, and you start from there up to address the issue and to teach them about the myths of gang involvement. Because, boy, they just have those myths about you gaining financially, and you don't. Because, ultimately, it's the two or three people that control the pot of money. That they're really there for you, the sisterhood and the brotherhood, and when it comes down to the bottom line, no, they're not. You're just, you know, their ass is first, before yours. That it's all powerful. Not true. You don't really own anything. You're not really powerful. You're hounded by the police. You end up in jail. And in jail you're beaten. You're offended against. So, dispelling all those myths for kids who might be thinking that, 'Wow. This is awesome. This is cool.' That's the best thing to do, to start from there and dispel those myths. (R15:19)

Support for First Nations' People

Some respondents also emphasized the importance of programs and resources specifically geared to help Aboriginal people immigrating to Winnipeg from reserves.

I think you really need somebody to be a mentor for them. You need someone, another Aboriginal person would be the best. A person that is 'successful' in the urban setting, a successful mentor that can teach them about Winnipeg, teach them about

urban life. Whether it be just the simple fact of taking the kids to school, registering them properly. All the little things, like taking them shopping, whether it be Supervalu or Safeway or whatever, just to sort of be their resource person for a while. And I know other organizations, or other groups, do it. I know of people that have immigrated to Canada from, let's say, whether it be Russia, or a country like that, and a lot of times they put themselves into that community, and all of a sudden the church is a major player, the youth organization is a major player. So they have a lot of people that they share something in common with, that can climatize them. You could have a lot of agencies, I would suggest, a lot of agencies already out there, that probably could provide that service. (R2:11)

Youth-Centred Programming

Another key theme to community responses to gangs is that programming must be based on what gang members themselves say they need.

[S]ome of the programs assume what the kids need, and they don't incorporate or collaborate with the youth in terms of their needs. So, when they go to finding out, 'Why isn't this program working? Why don't you come?' 'Well nobody asked me what I needed. Nobody talked with me about what would help me.' So that's another critical piece, that we go off as adult helpers half-cocked, in terms of what we think, and what we believe, and it doesn't always match what the [women's] needs are. (R15:21)

Community Development

Finally, it is clear that the root causes of gangs lay much deeper than media

images or the chance at a glamorous lifestyle. It is no coincidence that gang members are predominantly Aboriginal and poor; as one of the respondents pointed out, even in the world of organized crime, Aboriginal street gangs are near the bottom of the hierarchy.

Gangs represent a rare chance for poor and disenfranchised young people to wield some power not just within their community, but as a community. In other words, gangs are community organizations — albeit generally crude, marginalized, and destructive.

The path to addressing the issue of gangs that holds the most promise involves supporting community-based initiatives that fight poverty, racism, and sexism. The existence of street gangs is inextricably tied to these phenomena, and so anti-gang efforts that ignore them are almost certain to fail.

The respondents in this study overwhelmingly said that young women join gangs because gang life addresses very real needs: it gives them power and a sense of community that are unavailable to them in any other way. Rather than ignoring these needs and simply attacking the symptom — street gangs — it is clearly preferable to address the needs themselves. Community-development initiatives can create economic activity, increase the community's capacity to absorb that activity, reduce poverty, and give young people who might otherwise see gangs as their only option a chance to participate in community organiza-

tions that have a positive impact. The very people who are now at risk of joining gangs also have enormous potential to strengthen their communities from within.

We have to give them opportunities. That's the bottom line. The key here is getting the community back involved ... The gangs will be as strong as the community will allow them to be. That's the bottom line. If the community's strong, the gangs won't be strong. If the community's weak, the gangs will be strong. (R19:8)

Notes

1 In total, I conducted twenty-six in depth interviews. Two interviews were omitted from analysis because the participants felt they did not have any experience with gang members. In one case, a respondent who worked in a group home suggested that she did not come into contact with any gang women. In the other case, the particular agency had limited contact with clients, generally, and the respondents in this interview felt that they could not make any conclusive statements about clients who may or may not be gang affiliated. For the purposes of this research project, then, the sample size is twenty-four.

2 All interviews were coded to preserve respondents' confidentiality. The notation "R1:4" signifies that this quote comes from the fourth page of the interview transcript coded '1.'

3 At the time of this research, the three major street gangs active in Winnipeg

included the Manitoba Warriors, Indian Posse and Deuce.

4 Gangs evolve, change, acquire and lose turf. At the time of this research, the most organized street gang in Winnipeg was the Manitoba Warriors, followed by Deuce, and then the Indian Posse. However, the gang world is constantly in flux, and the status of these gangs in Winnipeg may differ now.

5 As with all individual names used within this report, 'Cindy' is a pseudonym.

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I want to sincerely thank all of the respondents who took the time to participate in this study. Sharing their knowledge and insight breaks new ground for understanding female gang affiliation and is an important step towards addressing the needs of these young women.

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Finally, I dedicate this paper to all young women who survive the particularly violent and disheartening conditions that make gang affiliation a rational choice in their lives. I hope that this report contributes to community efforts to meet the needs of young women in gangs. And I hope that it encourages the development of alternatives to the harsh and violent world in which gang women live.

About the Author

Melanie Nimmo is a Doctoral student at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. She lectures at Grant MacEwan College and is a board member of the Elizabeth Fry Society. Her areas of specialization include criminology and deviance (street gangs, violent offenders, female offenders, young offenders), research methodology (quantitative and qualitative), and gender and feminist theory.

The “Invisible” Gang Members

A Report on Female Gang Association in Winnipeg

by Melanie Nimmo

June, 2001