

“Survival kicks in...and that’s that”: Exploring the Pathways of Aboriginal Women Into,
Through and Out of the Gang Lifestyle.

by

Jasmine Brazil

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Department of Sociology
University of Alberta

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Abstract

This research project sought to explore the answer to the following research questions: 1) Which experiences do Aboriginal female gang associates identify as reasons for gang membership? 2) Which experiences do Aboriginal female gang associates identify as reasons for gang-exit? and 3) Were there community supports that could have provided prevention or intervention support for female gang membership? The goal of this study was to hear about the experiences of Aboriginal women with gangs from *their* perspective, providing a picture of what gang life is really like for a woman. Often the experiences of women are speculated on and generalized based on research conducted with male gang members. In-depth interviews were conducted with seven women and their experiences depict that they take a unique pathway to gangs, often with abuse at the center of their journey. In all of the cases, the key ages for gang entry were between 12-15 years old indicating that identifying risk factors when they were young was imperative in setting the life course of these Aboriginal women. The pathway to the gang and the gang lifestyle has different challenges for the women and as a result provided them with a unique experience when trying to leave the gang. The distinctive path that women in gangs experience needs to be addressed by both prevention and intervention programming to focus on the more gender-specific issues that we can only learn from listening to the stories of the women who lived it. This research provides insight into the involvement of females in the gang lifestyle and generates discussion on how research focused on women should be utilized as we move forward in developing and implementing gang intervention and prevention strategies. This research should begin conversations on the role of women in this lifestyle and how it impacts their decisions and abilities to leave and the programs and supports available to them when they make this often difficult decision.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Jasmine Brazil. The research of this project received ethics approval from the University of Alberta Ethics Board, Project Name: “Aboriginal Female Gang Membership and the "Hooks" for Gang Exit,” No. 37087, May 22nd, 2013 (renewal May 14, 2014).

Dedication

*I would like to dedicate this thesis to
those who always supported me and never gave up on me.*

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Chapter One: Introduction

At the beginning of my University career I would have never seen myself in graduate school. At that point in time, I was not even committed to a major in Sociology. Yet through years of hard work, inspirational professors and with finding a love for research, here I am – writing a Master’s thesis. A lot of students go into their degree having some idea of what they want to research, just as I did when I started this journey. When I took “Introduction to Criminology” with Dr. Jana Grekul in my second year of University, she brought in two “lifers” who told us their stories of what it was like to spend a lifetime in prison. I will never forget listening to these men share their experiences of leaving the institution and not knowing how to use a bank machine or where to go to access basic everyday needs. I vividly remember one of the men telling the group of attentive students that before he left prison he sat on the bed, staring at the shoe laces tied into his shoes and contemplating suicide because the idea of dying was not as scary as re-entering society was. From that day, I knew that I was interested in this process of leaving the institution or leaving a criminal lifestyle and how we, as a society, aid or hinder the process of transitioning this individual back into a “regular citizen.”

I continued on my undergraduate degree with a focus in Criminology and how our society and the structural factors within it affect offenders, particularly when they are trying to get out of the criminal lifestyle. When I began graduate school, I wanted to focus on researching the transitioning of male gang members from prison into the community. As I completed my coursework and met with my supervisor, the project appeared to be very difficult to complete under the timeframe of a Master’s degree, especially considering the ethics and application process through corrections. As my supervisor and I discussed the options, I determined that I still wanted to focus on gang members but instead of the ones transitioning out of prison, I would talk to ones that are already in the community and have them reflect on the impact of the gang lifestyle. When we discussed some of the relevant literature and existent research, she looked at me and said, “Why not focus on women? Have you ever considered that?” and instantly the project took form. There is a huge gap involving research with First Nations women and gang membership, particularly in Canada. My goal was clear that I wanted to begin to fill that gap by

talking to women about their experiences with gang membership, gang exit and how we aid or hinder that process with existing systems and programs.

Unlike my original expectation of graduate school, where I had an idea and executed it, I truly believe that my research found me. Despite the fact that it was not my first intention to enter my graduate program with this topic, as I completed the research I learned not only about women and gangs but I also learned about myself.

As the research process began and I met the incredible women involved with this project, I reflected on myself and how my story, although not anywhere near the same as the struggles of these women, ran a parallel track. I wanted to hear about their life paths, how they got where they were today and their reflections on their childhood, their life as part of a gang and how that impacts them now. When I completed my first three interviews the true realization hit me that this research is an extension of me and is part of a learning and healing process for my life story. In my thesis proposal defense, my committee asked me, “How are you ever going to be able to relate to the experiences of these women?” and even though I am not Aboriginal myself, I assured my committee that I was able to relate on another level. As I write now and look down at two tattoos on my wrists saying “Always be strong, Always be confident”, I reflect on experiences of my youth and experiences of my family members when they were young and how if it was not for amazing support systems, our life paths could have been very different. Through listening to these women, I reflected on my past and I can see the two different paths that life could have taken me, one ending right where I am today and another possibly ending me on the other side of this research. As I was trying to finish writing this thesis, I was faced with multiple challenges in my life and witnessed the struggles and pain of a family member who did not feel she received the support she needed to deal with a difficult path, a life of struggle, addiction and a never-ending search for relieving the hurt of the past. Although this relative of mine was not a gang member, her abusive past, addictions and experiences of loss in her life resulted in a daily struggle to live and one that I truly believe finally overcame her motivation to keep pushing through. Her way of processing her life and the experiences she endured was writing and she wrote a lot. Upon her passing and after reading the experiences of abuse in her childhood and how these moments that tainted her childhood so deeply wounded her in adulthood, it made the realization of this research hit home. By the end of this process, I was somehow more connected

to this research than I ever could have expected because despite the focus being on gang associates, it is more than that, it is about women and the experiences that inform the rest of their pathway through life. When I truly think about that, I look to the stories of these women and wonder if I would have made it to where they are now? Would I have been able to cope and survive within this lifestyle? The true answer... probably not!

Even though I did not go into this research with the slightest realization of what it would truly mean to me, it is clear that it did find me. This process, sitting and listening to the stories of these women and reflecting on not only what their story means to the research but what their stories mean to me, made me a stronger researcher and a stronger woman. My only hope for this research is to continue to inform the academic world and more importantly the community that the experiences of women are not only important but informative. With the increase in women involved with criminal activity and gangs, especially at the young and critical ages of 12-15 years old, conducting research that places women at the center and privileges their experiences and interactions with the criminal justice system, within the gangs and with the community supports will be the most informative when attempting innovative and effective approaches to gang prevention and intervention. The following thesis is a depiction of Aboriginal women and their histories, the state of gang research as it relates to women, a discussion of the method of learning about women from women and the stories of seven First Nations gang associated females who have lived it.

Chapter Two: Background & Literature Review

i. Introduction

In the last decade, particularly in the Prairie Provinces, there has been an increase in the attention paid to Aboriginal gangs (by crime officials and media) and the impact they have on individuals and communities (Crime Intelligence Services Canada, 2010; Grekul & LaRocque, 2011; Totten & NWAC, 2010). A recent headline on a CBC News (2014) article reads: “Gangs, youth crime concerns Edmonton ethnic communities” and the article describes representatives of the community concerned about crime and disorder and its impact on the feelings of safety in the community. The Edmonton Police Service Acting Chief said “police are focused on cracking down on gang activity in the city” including the implementation and support for multiple youth programs (CBC News, 2014). However, she also indicated that the relationship between the Aboriginal people and the Edmonton Police Service has not always been a strong one and it will take time to rebuild trust on both sides to work together to tackle this issue. In order to help combat the gang phenomenon in Edmonton, the Chief’s Community Advisory Committee (CAC) was created, comprised of eight committees representing Aboriginal, African, Black, Chinese, Indo-Canadian, Jewish, Muslim and sexual minorities. Their role and responsibility is to help inform the Edmonton police about the issues facing the community and their perception of safety. The CAC, which was implemented in 2004, acts as a means to inform policy, a process whereby information relayed from the committee to the Edmonton Police Service has already resulted in policy changes and insight into the issues facing the communities (CBC News, 2014). This is just one example of the attention being paid to gang involvement both from an individual level by implementing programming based on risk factors but also at a community level by recognizing the work and effort involved on a large scale to attempt to combat the issue. But what exactly *is* the gang issue?

Although there is no agreed upon “gang” definition and it is commonly assumed that any official statistics of gangs and gang membership are likely underestimated, the discussion about gangs and gang members has become more pervasive. One definition of gangs is: “social groups that are organized around delinquency” and are commonly involved with the sale of drugs and

commission of violent crime (Gover, Jennings & Tewksbury, 2009, p. 104). A more broad and general definition is that, “street gangs are visible, hard-core groups that come together for profit-driven criminal activity and severe violence” and that, “in Canada, most street gangs are based in ethnically marginalized neighborhoods and reserves and do not expand outside their turf or province” (Totten, 2012, p. 29). The social impacts of gangs are directly linked to the drug trade, violence, weapons trade, and the sex trafficking of women and girls. Statistics show that 22% of all gang members are Aboriginal and that there are between 800-1000 active Aboriginal gang members within the Prairie Provinces (Totten & NWAC, 2010, p. 13). The emergence of Aboriginal gangs in Canada can be traced to social inequality, rooted in poverty and racism (Totten & Totten, 2012). “It must be remembered that the experiences of the Aboriginal youth or adults who join gangs are too commonly rooted in personal experiences of colonialism, poverty, and discrimination, all of which affect the relationship of the individual to the community and to others” (NWAC, 2007, p.1; Totten & NWAC, 2010).

In Alberta, research indicates that there are multiple gangs in the region including: Asian gangs, Aboriginal gangs, Outlaw motorcycle gangs, traditional gangs (Mafia), white supremacists as well as Eastern European organized crime (John Howard Society, 2001a; Totten & Totten, 2012 p. 68-70). More recent analysis has indicated that Alberta and Edmonton gangs in particular are organized along ethnic divisions including: “Central-East African, Persian, Chinese, Middle Eastern, and Central European alignments” (Totten & Totten, 2012, p. 69). Research indicates that Hobbema, Alberta likely has one of the highest rates of gang activity in Canada with at least thirteen reported gangs in the area. Some of the more established gangs include Indian Posse, Samson True Soldiers, Alberta Warriors, East Side Players, D-Block and Redd Alert (Totten & Totten, 2012, p. 69). These gangs are not limited to one area; they also have a presence in Edmonton, within and around rural Alberta and on First Nation reserves and Métis settlements. These gangs are involved in a variety of offences and the women within the gangs can be involved at many levels. Typically, street gangs in Canada are involved in numerous criminal activities, the most prominent being the trafficking of illicit drugs, facilitation of street-level prostitution, theft, robbery, fraud and weapons offences (Criminal Intelligence Service Canada, 2010; Linden, 2010, p. 5).

Historically, females have been systematically excluded from the field of criminological research and differentially treated by the criminal justice system (Franklin, 2008). The intent of

this claim is not to single out any particular writers or researchers for their use of blanket or “catch-all” statements, however there are findings that have been reported over the years strictly pertaining to men with a statement indicating that women report or even “likely report” the same behaviours but at a lesser frequency or a lower intensity. This has been described as the generalizability problem (Covington & Bloom, 2003). It is not to say that this statement is never true, it is likely that in some cases it is- but too often in the past, results from a study involving only males have been generalized to the female population as well. As one example, current sentencing laws and practices are often based on male characteristics and thus often ignore women’s characteristics as well as their responsibilities and roles within crime (Covington & Bloom, 2003). The field of feminist criminology was developed out of the recognition that despite gender being “such a strong predictor of offending, arrest and sentencing outcomes” it was too frequently left out of analyses (Burgess-Proctor, 2006, p. 30). Moving forward and in response to this gap, the discipline encourages scholars to ask different questions and pursue problems that have been previously ignored by the field (Burgess-Proctor, 2006). Most of the knowledge we have about gangs is heavily derived from research undertaken with male participants and there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding female gang members, particularly Aboriginal females. The colonial mainstream attitude of many Canadians is nearly the complete opposite of the views, beliefs, traditions and experiences of Aboriginal people, particularly Aboriginal women (Fontaine, 2007). In particular, Aboriginal gangs are not what the dominant white socially constructs them as — “[as] a malignant and deviant thorn in the side of a so-called upstanding, productive, middle-class Christian civilization” (Fontaine, 2007, p. 114). They are more of an adaptation to the intersectionality of colonialism, mistreatment, discrimination and a search for somewhere to belong, particularly for Aboriginal women. “Colonialism and its effects have contributed to the grinding, racialized poverty of inner-city communities” and as a form of resistance to these effects, Aboriginal street gangs are formed (Comack, Deane, Morrissette, Silver, 2013, p. 17).

The roles and activities of girls and women who are associated with Aboriginal gangs appear to be different than those of boys and men and these experiences warrant further investigation (NWAC, 2007; Totten & Totten, 2012, p. 78). If the experiences, roles and activities of men and women differ than their pathways into, through and out of the gang are likely different. Thus both men and women deserve the same dedication of time and research to

understanding the pathways to, through and out of gangs. Through drawing on the theories of standpoint feminism and life-course theory, the research presented here sought to explore the stories of female Aboriginal gang members. Feminists, particularly standpoint feminists, have expressed the need to explore the ways that women's experiences have been shaped and conditioned by the constraints imposed upon them by class, gender, and racial inequalities (Comack, 1996; Franklin, 2008). In order to understand these constraints, it is necessary to listen to the voices of the women themselves. The Aboriginal females that were participants in this study identified and shared specific life-course events both at the individual-level and the community-level that influenced their choice to join a gang, remain in a gang or to leave the gang (Fleisher & Krienert, 2004). The processes surrounding the decision to leave the gang were of particular interest in this research study. The literature describes these moments where a choice is made to desist crime and delinquency as a "hook for change" (Proctor, 2009, p. 4). As this is an area of gang research that has not been investigated frequently it could be very informative with regards to the development of gang intervention and prevention programs.

The conversations with each of women aimed to understand gang membership from the perspective of Aboriginal (First Nations, Inuit and Métis) females and explore what they felt were important factors and life-course events that influenced their gang involvement. In conjunction with uncovering these factors, this study also explored how current programs in the community affected their decisions to remain in or leave the gang, particularly for the women who have been in contact with the criminal justice system. My goal was to explore the following research questions: 1) Which experiences do Aboriginal female gang associates identify as reasons for gang membership? 2) Which experiences or "hooks for change" do Aboriginal female gang associates identify as reasons for gang-exit? And 3) Were there community supports that could have provided prevention or intervention support for female gang membership?

This research was open for all women who self-identified as Aboriginal (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) however since all of the women who participated in this research self-identified as First Nations, this background information will focus primarily on explaining the history of First Nations in Canada.

ii. Aboriginal First Nations Peoples, Colonization & the Residential School System in Canada

In order to fully understand the experience of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, we must first explore the historical journey that First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples have faced in our country. An important piece of understanding the current social state of Aboriginal peoples is by explaining colonialism and the impact it has imprinted on the First Nations population and culture. The Oxford dictionary defines colonialism as “the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically.” Oppal (2012) also offers a definition of colonialism as “a global descriptor for the historically unjust relationship between Aboriginal peoples and successive governments in Canada” (p. 15). It has been documented that before the first treaties were signed, Aboriginal peoples had “the ability and collective will to determine their own path in all aspects of their culture and had control over their own political, economic, religious, familial and educational institutions” (Quinn, 2008, p. 72). Prior to the implementation of residential schools, there were various educational practices among First Nations populations whereby instruction was based in spirituality and related to their everyday lives and the spirits that guided them. Most importantly, there was no expectation that all the various cultural groups were to “subscribe to a uniform system of socialization, instruction, and vocational training” (Miller, 1996, p. 16). The early European settlers imposed an “alien society” onto an established culture and expected a “perfect fit” so to speak. However, it has resulted in tarnishing a vibrant culture leading some (albeit not all) left to navigate difficult pathways as they attempt to find their cultural and social identity.

The whole effect emphasizes the strategy of civilization, the goal of re-socializing the children by movement from circle to square: from a world to be navigated by belief, dreams and spirit guidance to one of secular logic and reasoning, from rhythms that came from the body and needs of the child to those in which the child was to respond to the corporate needs of the school and from learning by living, observing and doing, to living and learning by discipline in preparation for a life governed by the dictates of an alien society (Milloy, 1999, p. 136-137).

“Aboriginal gangs are the result of the colonial experience and context in contemporary Canada” (Fontaine, 2007, p. 114). For First Nations peoples in Canada, colonization remains one of the most destructive elements affecting societal structures (culture, religion, law, class, family, and education) today, the very same societal structures that in turn affect their involvement in the criminal justice system (Kubik, Bourassa & Hampton, 2009). Spiritual, traditional and cultural practices were damaged due to the attempts by the government and the Church to assimilate First Nations peoples into mainstream European society.

Simeone (2013) describes a strong link between the words we use to describe ourselves and our identity. It is for that reason that using specific terminology will in turn reflect how a group understands or defines itself. The term “First Nations” has been more widely accepted as the replacement for the term “Indian” but it is also important to note that the term “Aboriginal” as it applies to First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples encompasses hundreds of different communities and many different languages. For example, in Alberta there are forty-five First Nations in three different treaty areas and one hundred and forty reserves. The most common First Nation languages spoken are: Blackfoot, Cree, Chipewyan, Dene, Sarcee and Stoney (Nakoda Sioux) (Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, Government of Canada, 2014).

The term “First Nations” has become common for identifying a particular group of the Aboriginal population (Kesler, 2009). The term “First Nations” is a Canadian term that came about as a result of historical and political events. It was first used in 1981 to address the Canadian rhetoric about the “two founding nations” separating the Indigenous peoples from the French and British settlers (Frideres & Gadacz, 2008, p. 22). More recently, this term generally indicates legal connection (often through membership) to reserve communities. For example, in its most restrictive form the term would only refer to Aboriginal peoples who have status and are members of a First Nation, thus excluding the non-status Aboriginal people, those with Aboriginal ancestry, the Inuit population and the Metis population (Kesler, 2009).

In an attempt to assimilate First Nations people of Canada, social structures (such as the family, religion, law, economy and class) were used as the pillars for colonization and the residential schools. The system was “marked by the persistent neglect and abuse of children and through them of Aboriginal communities in general” (Milloy, 1999, p. xiii). Beginning in 1879,

children were taken from their parents and communities and placed into a schooling system founded and operated through a church-state relationship (Miller, 1996; Milloy, 1999; Woods, 2013). Along with enforcing the mandatory separation of children from their families, residential schools also included: “the deliberate suppression of language and culture, substandard living conditions and second-rate education, and widespread physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual abuse” (Smith, Varcoe & Edwards, 2005, p. 40). It has been clearly established that the schools have been the “most damaging of the many elements of Canada’s colonization of this land’s original peoples and, as their consequences still affect the lives of First Nations people today, they remain so” (Milloy, 1999, p. xiv). The living conditions and treatments within the schools produced thousands of individuals that had great difficulty living healthy lives or contributing positively to their communities. The children who were taken to the residential schools were forced to inhabit buildings that were deteriorating and overcrowded. In many cases the schools were built hastily, with no consideration for lighting, heating and ventilation – which often resulted in the rapid spread of disease (Woods, 2013, p. 174). Milloy (1999) accounts for a report completed by Dr. A.B. Simes, a Medical Superintendent who visited Elkhorn School in 1943-1944:

On approaching the school one received the impression that there was a lack of organization, supervision and interest. The grounds were very untidy, articles of clothing and other wearing apparel were scattered over the yard, school entrances and steps. Many window panes were broken. The unbroken panes had the appearance of having been treated for a BLACKOUT [Simes’s emphasis], they were so dirty. Inside the building these impressions were confirmed by findings wherever you went. Filthy is the only word and even that does not adequately describe the conditions of the mattresses, pillows and bedding... Not a single toilet bowl in the whole school had a seat. The majority of the bowls were badly stained, and had an uncared for appearance (Milloy, 1999, p. 114).

He continued on to describe the “dirty and disgraceful appearance” of the children. He wrote how the staff tried to convince him that the children were well fed however he was easily able to see evidence of malnutrition as many of the girls and majority of the boys were underweight. The children in the schools were often mistreated and abused, threatened, isolated and exposed to multiple traumas (Chansonneuve, 2005). Many other reports indicated witnessing children chained to tables and visible lashes and marks from discipline (Milloy, 1999). There are reports of survivors accounting the years of physical and sexual abuse they endured while held at the residential schools. As part of the learning tactics for assimilation, the young First Nations

children were forced to physically disconnect from their families, mentally disconnect by no longer being able to think or speak their own languages, emotionally disconnect by teaching the children that their past and those they loved were “uncivilized” and lastly they were forced to disconnect spiritually by learning the new religions and leaving behind years of cultural beliefs and spirituality (Chansonneuve, 2005).

Although funded by the Federal Government of Canada, the residential schools were often run on a day-to-day basis by the guidance of the church and by employing administrators for the education system. The schools were not attractive to highly qualified administration, teachers and staff. The majority of the schools were in isolated areas, away from urban centers, and the salaries were not competitive, thus the children were often left in the hands of unqualified and unfit “parents” (Milloy, 1999). Even when the schools were able to secure the most qualified administration, teachers or staff, they often struggled under the conditions of school and often left early in their employment. The schools were “sites of struggle against poverty, the result of underfunding, and, of course, against cultural difference and, therefore, against the children themselves” (Milloy, 1999, p. 129). The conditions of these schools are what “pushed the application of discipline over the line into physical abuse and transformed what was to be a culture of care into one of violence” (p. 129). The staff were never provided any directive on what is considered abuse or when the punishments crossed a line of being excessive. There is documentation to support that in order “to keep them in line, the staff could deprive them of food, or strap them, or confine them, or lecture them” (p. 138). Since there were no guidelines to ensure proper treatment of the children in care of the residential schools, the principals, teachers and other staff behaved as they saw fit when it came to punishment and this often resulted in a system that “taught harshness and treated children harshly” (Shepard, O’Neill & Guenette, 2006, p. 229).

This flaw in policy development led the staff to play a central role in the neglect and abuse of the young First Nations children who inhabited the schools (Milloy, 1999). It is estimated that 55% of children sent to the school did not benefit from the education they were being provided as they died prior to reaching a graduation point (p. 78). For the young First Nations boys and girls who did survive the residential school system, there were many implications from their experiences that were permanently adopted as the “proper” way to live a

civilized life. A lot of the treatment they witnessed as young children carried with them outside of the schooling system and into their family lives for generations to come. Some of the implications from colonization, residential schools and government policies include: loss of parenting and coping skills; loss of culture, language and gender roles; compromised self-government and land negotiations; social dependence (welfare, housing, etc.) and mental health issues or concerns (Brownridge, 2008).

iii. Gender Roles, Intergenerational Effects & Trauma

“Gender was an omnipresent factor in the lives of those who lived, worked, studied and often suffered in the residential schools, as it was in the lives of non-Native Canadians everywhere” (Miller, 1996, p. 248). The residential schools were no exception to gender norms. “Euro-Canadian norms for what constituted proper female and male behaviour were overlain in the residential schools with a coating of racially motivated attitudes” (p. 248). Gender roles and expectations that were emphasized outside of the residential schools were only intensified within them. Young girls were often supervised more attentively because of an assumed trait of heightened sexuality and there were clear divisions amongst behaviour and activities that were meant for girls and boys. For example, boys would play hockey outside and girls would sit inside with dolls and learn to cook. Historical accounts of the residential schools indicates that although on the outside it appeared as though the “males gave instructions and the females carried them out, the day-to-day reality was different” (Miller, 1996, p. 249). This runs a very interesting parallel to the stories told by the First Nations women in this study and their experiences in the gang, a finding that will be discussed further in this report. This account of the forced gender segregation and adoption of gender specific roles could be responsible for the current state of relationships between men and women in First Nations communities. Many of the young boys and girls who survived residential schooling left with the expectation they were going to uphold these gender roles, perform them to the expectation of the greater non-Aboriginal society and practice the teachings from the residential schools. These young girls and boys were expected to suppress all the inherent traumatic experiences of the “civilizing” residential schools and become upstanding citizens of Canada.

“It was a policy of assimilation, a policy designed to move Aboriginal communities from their “savage” state to that of “civilization” and thus to make in Canada but one community- a non-Aboriginal one” (Milloy, 1999, p. 3). First Nations family organization, child rearing practices, political and spiritual life as well as work and social activities have been deeply affected by the legacy of the colonial system in Canada (Kubik, Bourassa & Hampton, 2009). Prior to colonization, writings of Aboriginal peoples included descriptions of a strong loving relationship between children and parents, intelligent and composed, strong and subtle in their dealings, and a rough governance where they honor and obey those who rule (Chansonneuve, 2005). Residential schools in Canada have historically appeared to cause a negative effect on the family and reduced opportunities of natural bonding and nurturing to occur within the homes of First Nations in Canada. The structural supports to maintain First Nations culture and reduce victimization were absent during the implementation of the policies of the residential schools, which has been described as causing Aboriginal First Nations peoples, to struggle to negotiate their place in contemporary Canadian society (Hanson, n.d.).

Research focused on the intergenerational effects of residential schooling has found that First Nation youth with previous generations who were attendees at the schools were more likely to have thoughts and attempts of suicide, were at an increased risk for depression and substance use and were more likely to have difficulties with educational outcomes (Bombay, Matheson & Anisman, 2014, p. 324). Many survivors of residential schools share common symptoms such as: anxiety, hyper-vigilance, mistrustfulness, emotional disconnection, feelings of low self-worth, depression, confusion about their roots and concerns about their ability to parent (Shepard et al., 2006, p. 231). All of the effects of the years in residential schools have accumulated over generations and are responsible in part for the breakdown of “complex family kinship networks and social structures” (p. 231). Statistics indicate that the highest number of Aboriginal children in childcare is in the Western Provinces and that many of the parents of these children are survivors of or generations following survivors of residential schools (Quinn, 2007, p. 73). Although the research is still in early stages, there is indication of a statistically significant relationship between the number of relatives who experienced residential schools and the increase in psychological distress for the following generations (Bombay et al., 2014, p. 331). This research also indicates a potentially cumulative effect of the intergenerational transference of distress from trauma (p. 331). It is important to note that these intergeneration effects that are

being passed from generation to generation are rarely intentional and are being relayed through parenting unintentionally or subconsciously as the only way they know from their experiences (Shepard et al., 2006, p. 232; Smith et al., 2005, p. 47).

Trends among Aboriginal Canadians

The Aboriginal population is the youngest and fastest growing population in Alberta, with one-third of the Aboriginal population being 14 years of age or younger (Anderson, 2011, p. iii). Beyond having a younger population, many of the effects of colonization are represented in recent statistics involving the Aboriginal population in Canada. Statistics Canada (2006) reports that the rate of high school completion among all Aboriginals is higher now than it was a decade ago; nevertheless approximately 28% of Aboriginal women aged 25-64 years old report having less than a high school education (compared to 13% of non-Aboriginals). Unemployment rates are higher for women in all population groups. Aboriginal women even have higher unemployment rates than Aboriginal men. In addition, 38% of Aboriginal people in Edmonton were living in low income households compared to 16.5% of non-Aboriginal people (Quinless, 2009, p. 30).

Aboriginal women and men have been victims of poor economic conditions, the cycle of poverty, overburdened and understaffed schooling and loss of cultural identity (Molidor, 1996). I believe it is important as a responsibility of those who have done harm, to advance socio-economic development programs to counter the side-effects of years of oppression. However, in Canada the media and Aboriginal organizations based around fighting for the rights of these individuals report that structural support and programming for Aboriginal people continues to fall victim to budget cuts and economic rationales. As a result, many Aboriginal peoples have seen their ancestors suffer under colonization and now continue to suffer under the current social climate in Canada. Totten and The Native Women's Association of Canada (2010) report a variety of structural influences (education system, criminal justice system, and the economy), colonization, health determinants and violence that make Aboriginal women more vulnerable and marginalized than non-Aboriginal women in society.

These multiple oppressions (poverty, racism, victimization) that many Aboriginal females continue to experience, have translated into a "myriad of social problems" that are

intergenerational (Kubik, Bourassa & Hampton, 2009, p. 29-30). As explained by the life-course theory, intergenerational transmission refers to the idea that children who are born into families who have achieved social and economic stability might fare better than the children of less stable families with histories of criminal involvement (Giordano, 2010). St. Denis (2007) describes the role of Aboriginal women in their cultures as the futures of their nation, the hearts of the peoples, and the educators. If the Aboriginal women, who are the main supports and caregivers for these families are mistreated, victimized, unsafe and unable to care for their families- they may turn to whatever means they can find to maintain support for their families. This decision could potentially include becoming a gang member, running drugs and prostitution, thus disrupting the stability within the home further affecting the next generation. This research will seek to explore these decision making processes and how women who may have been victimized or who grew up in unstable homes choose to join the gang and what motivates them to potentially leave the gang.

iv. Double Victimization of Aboriginal Females

Aboriginal people have been marginalized by racist policies and attitudes that were instituted by British colonizers (Kubik, Bourassa & Hampton, 2009). The women in these Aboriginal communities are doubly affected. Racist policies and attitudes affect men and women but there is also inherent sexism within those ideologies (Kubik, Bourassa & Hampton, 2009). Aboriginal women experience higher levels of violence (incidences and severity) and are disproportionately represented in the number of murdered and missing women across Canada (Oppal, 2012). “Violence against women continues to be a serious and pervasive social problem despite years of concerted effort” to try and reduce incidences of abuse, it is part of a broader pattern of marginalization and inherent inequality (Oppal, 2012, p. 7). A report by Amnesty International discusses the stories of Aboriginal women who have gone missing or have been killed in Canada and this report specifically documents the social and economic marginalization of these women alongside the history of government policies that have disrupted Aboriginal families and communities. It is not the policies themselves that are responsible for the missing women, but the broader beliefs and practices that have contributed to this tragedy. This includes the living conditions of many of the women who have gone missing or were murdered, such as living in inadequate housing, food insecurity, health inequities, extreme poverty, drug

dependency, drug withdrawal, and entrenchment in an unhealthy community (Oppal, 2012, p. 14). Significant is the fact that colonialism, the residential school system, and the entrenched social and economic inequalities have made Aboriginal women subjects of racialized and sexualized violence in Canada (Human Rights Watch, 2012; Totten & Totten, 2012, Chapter 4). This statement rings true not only hundreds of years ago but also in Canada's current economic and political climate. Statistics provided by The Native Women's Association of Canada documents 582 cases of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls in Canada as of March 2010, with 39% of the disappearances and deaths occurring post the year 2000 (Human Rights Watch, 2012). A more recent report from the RCMP has revealed that 1,017 Aboriginal women were victims of murder between 1980 and 2012 and 164 Aboriginal women are missing (K.R., 2014, p. 1).

Victimization statistics of Aboriginal females goes well beyond the cases of murdered and missing women. Research shows that Aboriginal women are significantly more likely than any other group in Canada to die at a younger age due to suicide, homicide or serious illnesses and they suffer disproportionately elevated risks of sexual and physical abuse as children and adults (Statistics Canada, 2006). Aboriginal women are four times more likely to experience violence in general than are non-Aboriginal women (Brownridge, 2008, p. 363). This is once again represented in the many missing and murdered Aboriginal women who were victims of the patriarchal society introduced by European belief systems (Brownridge, 2008). Statistics Canada (2006) reported 54% of Aboriginal women experienced severe and potentially life threatening violence (compared to 37% of non-Aboriginal women). About 90% of federally incarcerated Aboriginal women report that they have been physically and/or sexually abused (Totten & NWAC, 2010, p.14). The rates of fetal alcohol syndrome (linked to mothers' alcohol use during pregnancy) are allegedly higher in the Aboriginal population and Aboriginal females make up the majority of individuals in Canada involved in the sex trade (Totten & NWAC, 2010). It is important to note that there is an overlap between the sex trade and gang membership. In some cases, young women in particular, are given minor roles in gangs such as being sex trade workers on the streets (Totten & Totten, 2012). A recent study on the sexual exploitation of women indicates that gang influences is increasingly becoming a factor in the sexual exploitation of youth, particularly in the Prairie Provinces (Sikka, 2009).

Many young Aboriginal women, particularly those that get involved with gangs, live in impoverished urban “underclass” communities where violence is extensive, including but not limited to reserves and low income neighbourhoods in Edmonton. In these neighbourhoods there are “sanctioned response[s] to the oppressive material conditions” related to inequality, segregation and isolation (Miller, 1998, p. 430-431). This environment is one where violence flourishes and power dominance is acted upon. For Aboriginal women specifically, there is a power dynamic that exists within their community and within their households. After the introduction of Christianity and Christian marriages, the building of residential schools and the introduction of alcohol to Aboriginal communities, the role of women changed significantly (Fontaine, 2007). Comack (1996) states that there are many factors that are relevant to women’s pathways to crime (the experiences that occur in their life-course that lead them to committing criminal activities), but one in particular stands out, and that is the centrality of abuse that exists in women’s lives. The European patriarchal mentality was introduced through colonization and Aboriginal women’s odds of violent victimization may be accredited to this mentality (Fontaine, 2007). As a consequence of colonization, Aboriginal women were “disempowered and oppressed within both the Euro-Canadian mainstream and the indigenous collective” (Fontaine, 2007, p. 117).

As a result of the oppression, Brownridge (2008) suggests that it could have resulted in the Aboriginal men taking their frustrations created by European men out on Aboriginal women. The European patriarchal mentality set the context for oppression of Aboriginal females and these women faced victimization and oppression not only by the European men but also by the Aboriginal men in their own families. Many Aboriginal people have indicated family violence as their most important health concern despite prevalence of other devastating health concerns (such as diabetes, mental health issues and substance abuse) among this population (Brownridge, 2008). These forms of marginalization have further pushed women into dangerous situations that include “extreme poverty, homelessness and prostitution” (Kubik, Bourassa & Hampton, 2009, p. 28). This type of oppression and victimization has cycled through generations leaving Aboriginal women still at risk of oppression and victimization, particularly the females that choose to join gangs. “In most wars women and children are collateral damage, and we can extend this concept in which ‘gangs’ constitute, within the Canadian colonial context, external/internal warfare whereby women and children are both victimized” (Fontaine, 2007, p.

117). When faced with these extreme conditions with nowhere left to turn, the best case scenario for potential gang members may be to gravitate towards the other gang members, who understand what nobody else seems to.

v. Female Involvement in Gangs

“The gang phenomenon... reflects the attempts of young women to cope with a bleak and harsh present as well as a dismal future” (Tobin, 2008)

The research available thus far indicates there is no “one type” of female gang member. Since there are limited official statistics about gang membership, researchers commonly rely on the information gathered from community agencies, correctional facilities and from female gang members themselves. One study in Winnipeg estimated that between 10% and 50% of gang members are female (Nimmo, 2001, p. 6). This estimate range was developed from three sources. Correctional facilities rated female gang membership as lower (around 10%). Female gang members rated the percentage of females to be between 20-50%. Lastly, community agencies remained consistent with the reports from gang members and stated it was on the higher end of 20-50% (Nimmo, 2001, p. 6). Since community based agencies work at a neighbourhood level, they tend to see how many individuals interacted with the gangs in the Winnipeg core. With the assumption that those who would know the most about gang membership are the gang members themselves and that the community agencies rated female participation the same as the gang members did- it leads the assumption that community agencies would be attuned to the realities of gang life on the streets. Since it is difficult to “spot a gang member” on the streets of Edmonton, it made the community –based agencies that work with the gang population appear as the next best location as a starting point to help begin to learn more about the gang population.

There are three types of gangs involving females that have been discussed in the literature (Eghigian & Kirby, 2006; Tobin, 2008). The ‘auxiliary gang’ is a support system for a main male gang. This female auxiliary gang has its own leadership structure and takes on a feminine version of a male gang (i.e. “Kings” and “Queens”), such groups are actively involved in gang activities for their own gain and potentially in conjunction with their male counterparts. The ‘coed gang’ has both male and female gang members, there is no gender separation within the organization and status within the gang is based on respect gained whether male or female. Finally, there is

the rare 'independent gang', an exclusively female gang that is not connected to any male or coed gang. It is the least common type of female gang though research is beginning to show that some auxiliary gangs may evolve into independent gangs (Tobin, 2008).

Over the past few decades, research on female gang members has shifted focus. Early studies minimized the role of female gang members as "present but invisible", "tomboys" or "gang girls" (Tobin, 2008, p. 119). The "tomboys" were females who demonstrated their physical abilities and proved they could hang out and fight alongside the males. The "gang girls" were defined as "loud, crude groups of girls who not only curse and are sexually active, but who take no pride in how they dress" (p. 119). The femininity of women was used to advance the cause of the gang by helping them carry weapons because of their decreased likelihood to be searched (Tobin, 2008). Women were also used to fight with other girls in enemy gangs, to provide sexual favours to other members in their gang and to bait rival gangs' members (EPS 2012a; Huff 1996; Tobin, 2008). Research has revealed that females are just as capable as males of being ruthless and/or violent, and this is illustrated by how female gang members have more recently begun to develop more central and independent roles within the gang (Huff, 1996; Molidor, 1996; Nimmo, 2001, p. 12-16). Contrary to what is widely believed, "a girl doesn't have to end up in a gang as someone's squeeze or by taking johns into a dark alley or into a room rented by the hour", some girls are respected as being tough individuals and can be seen as an asset to the gang (Pearce, 2009, p. 137). Female gang members occasionally prostitute for the benefit of the gang or for their male counterparts, but the "regular" prostitutes are not often considered to be members. Some research indicates that the likelihood of prostitution is based on status or rank within the gang (Nimmo, 2001, p. 14). The older definitions are becoming less relevant regarding the roles females play within gangs. Research needs to investigate whether new roles have developed for the Aboriginal female gang member and what form these potentially new roles may take.

The Canadian Correctional Investigator of Canada (2011) reported, "In the last 10 years, the number of Aboriginal women in custody has increased by 86.4%, compared to 25.7% over the same period for Aboriginal men; 34% of the incarcerated women offender population is Aboriginal" (p. 50). It has also been reported that there is an increase of gang presence in the prison system (p. 71). There are commonly reported statistics on Aboriginal female offenders but

rarely is any attention paid specifically to female Aboriginal gang members, nor is there often much critical discussion on why these women are committing offences, why they are joining gangs, or why they chose to stay in or leave a gang.

Predictors of gang membership that have been identified are: knowing gang associates, having negative attitudes (particularly towards schooling), poor community functioning, unemployment, and substance abuse (Law, 2004). As Tobin (2008) explains, what varies most in risk factors for females versus males is that they are more likely to be influenced specifically by peers such as boyfriends and male relatives. They are also more likely to join because of lower levels of self-esteem and higher levels of social isolation than their male counterparts (Tobin, 2008). These risk factors appear to be parallel to the overall reasons that Aboriginal female and male gang members have reported for joining gangs. These include: identity, “family”, acceptance, protection, and the feeling of power (Huff, 1996; Molidor, 1996; NWAC, 2007; Tobin, 2008). In some cases, for Aboriginal females joining a gang it is not like the glamorized media portrayals (such as gangsters in movies or rap songs where violence is normalized), it literally becomes a survival mechanism and the only available option (Nimmo, 2001, p. 11). As will be discussed in this research, women often acknowledge some of the already reported reasons but their pathways to the gang, through the gang and away from it, can differ from their male counterparts.

vi. Aboriginal Women: The Appeal of Joining a Gang

There tends to be an interrelatedness of gender, race, ethnicity and class structure that factor into the establishment of a particular gang and many females (and males) join gangs because of their experiences with racism, classism and poverty. As stated by Fontaine (2007):

Aboriginal gangs are the product of our colonized and oppressed space within Canada – a space fraught with inequity, racism, dislocation, marginalization, and cultural and spiritual alienation. There is nothing “post-colonial” about Aboriginal peoples’ experiences. They continue to endure dislocation, de-culturalization, ecocide, and forced assimilation. (p. 116)

“[Aboriginal] girls and women are particularly vulnerable to gang recruitment, partly because of sexist and misogynistic values and practices in many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities” (Totten & Totten, 2012, p. 55). Research involving female gang members and

their reasons for joining the gang often points to the link between victimization and women's criminality. Often the term "criminal women" as opposed to "law abiding women" imposes an Otherness upon those who have committed crimes. This automatic assumption ignores the processes of criminalization or how the idea of 'criminal' is socially constructed (Comack, 1996, p. 11). It is possible that victimization of Aboriginal women, the oppressive effects of colonization and the current social climate of Canada contributes to a pathway into gang membership for these young women (Scott & Ruddell, 2011). With a reported increase in the number of Aboriginal gangs and female members within these gangs, the question posed is whether women's increased involvement in gang activity may be related to their vulnerability and marginalization in Canadian society (Miller, 1998; Totten & NWAC, 2010). For marginalized, abused, and vulnerable women, there are many positive aspects of the gang lifestyle that make involvement attractive as a strategy to deal with their daily life.

Marginalized ethnic groups faced with rejection and alienation are more likely to band together for reasons of social support and acceptance. It is important that society be aware of the reasons why individuals are attracted to gangs and not encourage further isolation and alienation of ethnic groups (John Howard Society, 2001a).

Totten & NWAC (2010) acknowledge that Aboriginal gang members often talk about how the gang provides a sense of family and belonging, a safe place, an identity and a good source of income. For young Aboriginal women, the gang provides, "a sense of power, purpose and acceptance" or in other words the sense of family (Nimmo, 2001, p.9). When individuals come from a community that is characterized by high unemployment, poverty and violence, gang involvement becomes a viable and rational choice, a "legitimate opportunity for employment and protection" (Totten & NWAC, 2010, p. 13). Gangs also provide physical and emotional shelter for females (and males) who have suffered from racism and adverse effects of colonization (including the intergenerational effects of residential schooling).

The Edmonton Police Service (2012a) has found that the appeal of gangs can start as early as eight years old. Many women reported that they are seduced by the gang lifestyle for a variety of reasons (Edmonton Police Service, 2012a). Some of these reasons include: a way to cure loneliness, secure warmth and protection, satisfy the need to belong to a group (fulfilled in part by dress codes and traditions as signs of solidarity), express anger and frustration, cope with poverty and unemployment, and satisfy the desire for excitement or thrill of being involved with

a gang or criminal behaviours (Edmonton Police Service, 2012a; Messerschmidt, 1999, p. 120). Women who are involved with gangs are more likely to lack a formal education (sometimes 2-3 years behind), have negative impressions of school, and come from severely dysfunctional low-socioeconomic status families with abuse and alcohol abuse within the home (Molidor, 1996; Nimmo, 2001). The John Howard Society (2001b) also indicates some of the same risk factors and/or need predictors associated with wanting to join a gang including inadequacies or deficiencies in a number of social, family, economic or personal factors (p. 2). Although these risk factors are indicators that have proven to lead to gang membership, many individuals who experience these risk factors do not join gangs.

However, for gang involved women there is evidence to show that they turn to gangs as a means of protecting themselves from violence and as a way to negotiate the abusive environments in which they live (Miller, 1998; Nimmo, 2001). Since there is a higher percentage of Aboriginal females (in comparison to non-Aboriginal females) who are experiencing these abusive settings then it seems logical that there would be more Aboriginal females trying to escape these abusive settings by becoming involved with a gang. This is one reason why female Aboriginal gang members are likely over-represented in the female gang member population. However, we should not be so naïve to believe that escaping victimization in abusive homes by joining a gang prevents victimization (Gover, Jennings & Tewksbury, 2009). This remains an area we know very little about, and thus is an area where research should be focused.

vii. Victimization within the Gang

“They are not leaving the Brady Bunch for the Hell’s Angels” (Tobin, 2008, p. 129).

Gang members in general are at a greater risk of victimization because of the involvement in deviant and risk taking behaviours such as fighting and drug and alcohol use (Gover, Jennings & Tewksbury, 2009). As discussed, Aboriginal women already face double victimization. In many cases, circumstances worsen within a gang as it has been reported that female gang members are significantly more likely than female non-gang members to be victimized before, during and after gang membership (Fox, 2013).

This victimization within the gang takes place on multiple levels and can be quite complex. Not only do female Aboriginal gang members risk victimization from retaliatory behaviour from other gangs but they also risk sexual and physical victimization by fellow gang members (Gover, Jennings & Tewksbury, 2009). Within the gangs, women are often devalued and thus face gender-specific victimization risk. In one study, results found that 75% of young female gang members were physically assaulted and 62% of young female gang members had been sexually assaulted (Fox, 2013, p. 1017). Females associated with gangs are at a greater risk of victimization during initiation rites, conflicts with males in enemy gangs, as well as conflicts with males and females alike within their own gang (Gover, Jennings & Tewksbury, 2009). There are several outcomes for females involved in gangs: 1) mistreatment and victimization of girls by members of their own gang, 2) the view of women as sexually available, and 3) the reaffirmation of the mentality that women are not a threat, nor would they pose one and should be punished if they overstep the boundaries (Miller, 1998).

Female gang members report higher instances of sexual assault, dating violence, and physical assault prior to gang membership than their male counterparts (Gover, Jennings & Tewksbury, 2009). Young gang involved females report disproportionate histories of victimization in comparison to non-gang females (Miller, 1998). Ironically, many females turn to the gang as a way to escape or seek protection from victimization, only to be further victimized once within the gang. For example, entering a gang usually involves painful and humiliating initiation rites. Some examples include “walking the line” (young woman walks through a double line of gang members who severely beat her to test her strength), “pull a train” (have sex with multiple gang members), get tattoos or participate in criminal activity, such as a robbery or drive-by shooting, to show dedication (Molidor, 1996). Other forms of initiation found in a Manitoba study by Nimmo (2001) included: “beat in” (which involves quietly enduring a beating by current gang members), “staged fight” (fighting someone with a known reputation), or to be “blessed in” (being born into the gang through parents who are already gang members) (p. 12-13). More often than not, females fall subject to victimization in some form in order to join the gang and remain within it.

Ultimately, it comes down to the fact that young female gang members believe that they have traded unknown risks for known ones (Miller, 1998). This known victimization is a

preferred alternative to victimization by strangers; it is victimization at the hands of friends or under specified conditions (such as breaking the rules). Thus, the decision to remain associated with a gang and participate in gang activity becomes a reasonable and pursuable option for many Aboriginal females. Have these Aboriginal females accepted or decided to tolerate being a victim? As illustrated thus far, it is possible that these women know nothing other than victimization. What are their stories? When along their life-course did this path become a viable “option”? What happened within each woman’s life course that made her decide to join a gang and what would need to happen for each woman to decide to leave the gang?

viii. Finding a “Hook for Change”

“Hooks for change” are specific events within the life-course that influence the individual to leave the criminal lifestyle (Giordano, Cernkovich & Rudolph, 2002). For example, one study by Proctor (2009) is based on the life paths of minority women at Topeka Correctional Facility (TCF) in Kansas and their experiences appear to share some similarities with those of Aboriginal women in Canada, particularly those who were involved in this thesis research.

Proctor (2009) asked female inmates to describe their “hooks” through telling their stories, a similar approach that was taken within this thesis research. Prior to learning what helped them get out of the gang lifestyle, she asked about what got them involved in a criminal lifestyle in the first place. She found that most female inmates shared a similar story, with various stages that were more or less similar amongst the women. These stages included: environmental childhood strains (poverty and/or parental abusive relationships), rejection and abuse during childhood, the “door to female criminality” during adolescence (participating in illegal activities with deviant peers), difficulties with the school system, associations with deviant men and substance abuse (p. 10).

Upon learning how these women arrived in conflict with the law, Proctor (2009) also asked the women to indicate what made them decide to desist from crime and delinquency and change their life. The women incarcerated at TCF indicated four main “hooks” that contributed to their decision to leave behind the criminal lifestyle. First, was finding religion or spirituality while incarcerated. Since many drug and alcohol programs are faith based this shift is not unexpected (Proctor, 2009). Interestingly, some inmates believe a close relationship with God or

some other form of spirituality, helped them to recognize that bad experiences were “blessings in disguise” and that when “awful things occur, God is leading people to learn lessons and grow spiritually stronger” (p. 13). Second, inmates used future aspirations as a deterrent from crime. Particularly, “the adoption of a legitimate career premised upon an identity that embraces one’s deviant history” otherwise known as an “ex-deviant identity” was commonly identified by female offenders as an aspiration (p. 14). These are the women who want to serve as mentors or counsellors for young girls or women who are currently facing the same problems that landed them in conflict with the law. Third, inmates indicated self-awareness as a “hook for change.” They acknowledged the impact of substance abuse or past childhood victimizations on the mistreatment they experienced at the hands of men or other abusers in their lives. They were able to see how these feelings of pain led to their criminality. Finally, the women indicated that they wanted to ensure that other women did not follow in their footsteps. A big part of this involved “counseling women or advocating for them by raising public awareness to prevent the physical and sexual abuse of girls,” a situation almost all of the women had experienced at least once in their lifetime (p. 20). These four “hooks for change” identified by the female inmates in TCF were consistent with the stories of the First Nations women who participated in this thesis research. The results will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

Another study on female gang members indicated that pregnancy and childbearing were viable reasons for women deciding to leave the streets (Fleisher & Krienert, 2004). Major transition events, such as marriage to a stable partner or finding stable employment have also been reported as a source of redirection for females involved with criminal behaviour (Giordano, 2010). In some cases, a death or another unexpected crisis will be enough to ignite fear in women to decide to leave the gang (Nimmo, 2001).

If there is a program available that supports the woman with staying connected to that “hook” then there could be a permanent change in that woman’s life-course. Proctor (2009) also discusses that reliance on these “hooks” might make it possible for offenders or ex-deviants who have been in prison or involved with a criminal lifestyle to effectively change their lives. Ideally, this move would consist of taking them from “the role of a career criminal into the role of an ex-deviant who no longer engages in a criminal lifestyle” (p. 7). My research provides some more insight and some varying perspectives to determining whether or not the gang lifestyle poses any

unique challenges or any different “hooks for change” particularly with regards to Aboriginal female gang members in Canada. More importantly, identifying the “hooks for change” allows for exploration into how these “hooks” play a role in the decision to exit the gang lifestyle.

ix. Gang Exit

There are many considerations that the gang lifestyle brings to the forefront when considering program supports for Aboriginal women in the community. “The notion that there may be gendered pathways into crime, leads us to assume that there could be gendered pathways out of crime as well” (Giordano, Cernkovich & Rudolph, 2002, p. 996). Nimmo (2001) indicates from her research on female Aboriginal gang members that “it takes a lot of motivation, determination, resources and support for individuals to leave the gang” (p. 22). Leaving the gang lifestyle provides many challenges such as no longer having protection, having to move far away from where she is recognized, having anyone who is helping her know and understand the rules of the gang, and having the family be involved and committed to exiting in order for the strategies to work (Eghigian & Kirby, 2006, p. 50). This is a major complication in the decision to stay in or leave the gang. From the initial decision to join a gang it is a “public proclamation of their rejection of the lifestyle which the community expects from them” and thus they have instantly claimed the label of an outsider (Totten & Totten, 2012, p.82). If the female gang member considers her “family” the gang, then she only has two options: 1) remain with the gang for “support” which is no longer gang-exit or 2) leave the gang, and be left on her own.

Significant is the fact that when a member manages to get out of a gang, he/she still loses the gang’s protection but does not lose the former enemies (Edmonton Police Service, 2012a). This returns us to the irony that it is better to know one’s abuser or the conditions of abuse, than face unknown victimizations without any protection from the gang (Miller, 1998). Challenges such as these are the ones that make leaving the gang lifestyle complicated and could result in female gang members deciding gang exit is not in their best interests. Even if they are able to separate their life from the gang, these women may be faced with raising a child on their own, likely in poverty and more often than not, in a gang neighbourhood. Here we see an example of how the cycle is intergenerational (Nimmo, 2001, p.16).

These are just some of the challenges that have been addressed in the small body of literature that exists. The remainder of this discussion will be based on understanding standpoint feminism, the method I used to answer my research questions and the results from interviewing seven First Nations women about their gang experiences.

Chapter Three: Taking a Standpoint for a More Complete Picture

i. Standpoint Feminism

“Standpoint cannot speak for women; it can only offer a way of making sense of women’s lives.”
(Comack, 1996, p. 34).

“Feminism is a theory that seeks to describe and explain women’s situations and experiences and support recommendations about how to improve them and is based on respect for women’s own perspectives and authority” (Green, J., 2007, p. 21). When the focus is only on individual action, social factors such as poverty, racism, and the impact of cultural violence are often ignored and families, schools, communities and governments are not held accountable (Totten & Totten, 2012). Although there is an important individual aspect to the “gang problem”, social factors are also important (p. 21). This type of “theorizing [should] be rooted in the realities of girls’ lives, not in stereotypical thinking” (Singer, 2000, p. 27). Many female Aboriginal scholars found that feminism was yet another theory rooted in the dominant society and was not entirely applicable to the issues being raised in their communities. However, in recent years, many scholars have begun to recognize the place of feminism in Native studies and Aboriginal education: “[we] can no longer deny the relevance of this important body of scholarship, analyses and activism” (St. Denis, 2007, p. 33). With this in mind, this research was conducted using a feminist standpoint theory approach. This included considering the structural locations of women and the use of standpoint feminism as a method for exploring women’s lives (Comack, 1996). “Women around the world have found themselves oppressed through a variety of social, religious, political and cultural practices” and feminism is about the importance of considering women’s experience particularly in relationship to the cultural boundaries they may face (Green, 2007, p. 27). When the research adopts a situated-knowledge view, it asserts that the “social position shapes and limits what we can know because it influences the kind of experiences one has” (Intemann, 2010, p. 784).

Standpoint theory emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a feminist critical theory about the relations between the production of knowledge and the practices of power (Harding, 2004). The theory rests on two assumptions: 1) “that all knowledge is located and situated” and 2) “that one

location, that of the standpoint of women, is privileged because it provides a vantage point that reveals the truth of social reality” (Hekman, 2004, p. 227). Historically, various forms of oppression (racism, sexism, and classism) have influenced the living conditions, the opportunities and the treatment of oppressed groups in a variety of social settings (Intemann, 2010). As Harding (2004) explains, standpoint theory was developed as a way of “empowering oppressed groups, of valuing their experiences” and helping to produce oppositional and shared consciousness in oppressed groups (p. 2). This becomes knowledge and awareness of both the dominant worldview of society and the view of the oppressed (Swigonski, 1994). It is believed that in some cases, it is natural that the dominant and the oppressed view of the world will be opposite. When dominant groups adopt and disseminate only their views of the world, the dominant groups maintain, reinforce and legitimate their dominance. Many standpoint theorists would argue that this view is naturally incomplete because it is missing the view of the oppressed group. Standpoint feminists take this a step further and indicate that it is the views of women, particularly minority women that are being missed. Thus, for the purposes of this research, a feminist standpoint theory takes a perspective from the Aboriginal females as the oppressed group and gives voice to their perspective within the dominant viewpoint of broader sociological and gang related theories.

Even if we were to remove the issue of oppression from colonization, Smith (2007) argues that there is inherent sexism present within all Aboriginal cultures (arguably, within the dominant culture as well) and thus there is still a need to adopt a feminist perspective focusing on the views of women about women. Using this theory as a basis for research has the aspiration to create a more complete view, in this case, of Aboriginal female gang membership (Swigonski, 1994). There is no question that race, class and gender all play a role in gang membership. As discussed by Comack et al. (2013), racism is manifested in gang membership as a collective response of “racialized resistance” to the conditions that were produced by colonialism (p. 73). Given that the conditions which resulted from colonization were impoverished, the gang represents a vehicle for navigating a capitalist society and a means to access money and power (Comack et al., 2013, p. 73). Lastly, being a woman in the gang involves “doing gender” accordingly and performing the appropriate hypermasculinity or emphasized femininity particularly in relation to accessing money within the gang lifestyle (Comack et al., 2013, p. 73).

Taking it a step further, standpoint theory reflects a “standpoint in a position in society, involving a level of awareness about an individual’s social location, from which certain features of reality come into prominence [and] from which others are obscured” (Swigonski, 1994, p. 390). The oppression and marginalization of women has been the key underlying factor in the need to take a woman’s standpoint as a means of learning about their position in society. Oppal (2012) describes three overarching trends that contribute to the marginalization of Aboriginal women including: “retrenchment of social assistance programs, the ongoing effects of colonialism, and the criminal regulation of prostitution and related law enforcement strategies” (p. 12). As feminist standpoint theory requires rooting the research in the lives of women including their placement in society, these social and economic trends should be indicators of the placement of these Aboriginal women.

Building on the understanding of the social and economic trends of Aboriginal women, the goal of standpoint feminism is to explore what each women’s life was like to this point in history and shed light on how they arrived at their current position, including the decisions and circumstances that brought them there (Comack, 1996). There is a sensitivity to how each woman has come in contact with and been affected by structures such as capitalism, racism, patriarchy and colonialism (Comack, 1996). As Dorothy Smith (2004) explains, as sociologists, we should be “committed to discovering society from where people are as participants within it” (p. 266). It is important to note that individual actions, behaviours and knowledge will be shaped by social positioning and that structures like capitalism, patriarchy and colonialism do exist and place control and regulation over people’s lives (Comack, 1996). Also significant is the fact that for Aboriginal female gang associates, a discriminatory patriarchal capitalism exists both prior to their gang membership and is also actively present within the Aboriginal gangs themselves.

Although standpoint feminism continues to gain momentum and is widely used with regards to researching issues affecting women, it has its critics. Intemann (2010) accounts for some of the critiques of standpoint feminism by noting that the theory has falsely assumed that “all women or oppressed groups have some sort of universal shared experiences or interests in virtue of being oppressed” (p. 783). Since the theory rests on the assumption that the view of the oppressed group is being withheld, there is also the critique that “membership in an oppressed group is sufficient for having a less distorted view of the world and that this epistemic advantage

would be present in any epistemological context” (p. 783). What this critique infers is: what makes the view of the oppressed any more realistic than the view of the dominant? Why do women have a less distorted view of the world than men? Even though there are arguments that the oppressed group does have insight into the workings of everyday life that the dominant does not, the framework or theory that many feminist scholars base their work on is not that women know the world better than men. The framework behind this feminist work is that *women have a less distorted view of the world of being a woman*.

Despite some of these mentioned critiques, the field continues to refute the claims and focus on the basis that women have a “distinct way of knowing” that is different from men (Intemann, 2010, p. 784). More importantly, “standpoints are said to be *achieved* through a critical, conscious reflection on the ways in which power structures and resulting social locations influence knowledge production” and “a standpoint is a distinctive insight about how hierarchical social structures work” (p. 785). This exercise is often completed by the researcher lending a critical lens to the stories being heard and determining the power structures which are present in the lives of the women.

Most importantly, feminism in itself is an “on-going process involving responding to changing political and social contexts and issues” (St. Denis, 2007, p. 35). The rebuttals for standpoint feminism account for why this theory is the most relevant and fitting for this research. As it has been illustrated, Aboriginal populations have been targets of extreme measures of social oppression through multiple means (i.e. the government, religious groups, the general population). More recent research using feminism in the study of Aboriginal women also recognized that beyond “the impositions of imperialism, colonialism, racism and sexism from the dominant societies, the same body of thought has also illuminated impositions of power and practices *within* Indigenous communities, organizations and families” (Green, J., 2007, p. 25, emphasis added). For example, Aboriginal women face discrimination from the dominant society as well as from other men *and* women within the Aboriginal community on the same issues such as their gender, their cultural practices, and their relationships with their family members etc.

Women who come in contact with the criminal justice system and the gang lifestyle could be victims of oppression not only from a larger societal structure but from within their communities and then within the gang itself. Aboriginal female gang members experience the

ways in which race, class and gender “interconnect under patriarchal capitalism” (Comack, 1996, p. 29). The women in this study are wrapped up in a world where their inherent poverty and lack of social support (from family, school or otherwise) forces them into finding a way to secure monetary gain, often as quickly and easily as possible. The result of this intersectionality provides the social position where we find Aboriginal women with an increased likelihood for gang membership and due to their social position imposed on them, Aboriginal women are exposed to increased risks for the pathway to gang membership. Totten (2009) describes some of these pathways to gang involvement for Aboriginal youth as: multiple home placements, mental health disorders, social exclusion and devaluation and episodes of victimization. Although these pathways are strong indicators of possible gang involvement, they are not definitive predictors of gang membership. Despite all of the potential risks, there is the possibility to shift pathways. Thus this research into the lives and experiences of these Aboriginal women could provide valuable insight into breaking the silence around the power imposed on women and how it impacts their life path.

ii. Centrality of Abuse: Breaking the Silence

Many of the females in gangs tend to come from troubled backgrounds, likely even more troubled than that of their male counterparts (Huff, 1996). Aboriginal women are faced with childcare burdens and subordination to men. However, they are not exempt to the non-gender specific issues of limited opportunities and powerlessness of underclass membership either (Miller, 2004). Fleisher & Krienert (2004) indicated that 71.6% of female gang members reported physical abuse and victimization occurring in the home. As a coping mechanism, 26% of these female gang members reported running away from home to the gang to unite with individuals who shared abuse and other former traumas (Fleisher & Krienert, 2004, p. 611).

Within the criminal justice system, women in general have been subject to a preoccupation with their sexuality (Franklin, 2008). Franklin (2008) describes women’s sexuality as mandated morality where women who behave in sexually promiscuous ways are deemed as stepping outside of their socially prescribed sexual or gender roles (p. 344). Comack (2006) illustrates female’s differential treatment by using the example of Lisa Neve, a twenty-one-year-old Aboriginal woman who in November of 1994 became the second woman ever in Canada to

be labelled a dangerous offender and given an indeterminate sentence (p. 72). Lisa was adopted at a young age, expelled from school at the age of twelve for drinking and shortly after ran away to the streets where she was introduced to prostitution, drug use and violence. She was later convicted of aggravated assault, robbery, uttering threats and assault with a weapon. Throughout her appearances in court she was questioned about her history with prostitution and her sexual orientation suggesting that her violent behaviour must be a result of her “prostitute lifestyle.” Lisa has since been released and has been working hard to overcome the impact of her imprisonment. However, Lisa has the most difficulty with the reaction of others to her dangerous offender label. Comack (2006) concludes that Lisa’s story illustrates that “women and girls are routinely sanctioned not only for violating legal codes, but also for violating codes of conduct that regulate and patrol the boundaries of “appropriate” female behaviour” (p. 74-75). Aboriginal females continue to be no exception to this exclusion and mistreatment. St. Denis adds to this by alluding to the importance of other issues pertaining to Aboriginal females. She writes “understanding how patriarchy operates in Canada without understanding colonization is a meaningless endeavour from the perspective of Aboriginal people” (St. Denis, 2007, p. 44).

When exploring issues facing women in our society, feminist scholars insist that an intersectional approach is used. This refers to recognizing that race, class and gender are dynamic, historically grounded, and social constructed (Burgess-Proctor, 2006). As stated by Fontaine (2007):

The stereotyping and devaluing of Aboriginal women, a combination of racism and sexism, are among the most damaging of attitudes that find expression in Canadian society. These attitudes are not held exclusively by non-Aboriginal people either... Members of powerless groups who are subjected to demeaning treatment tend to internalize negative attitudes toward their own groups. They then act on these attitudes in ways that confirm the original negative judgement (p. 126).

Race and class intersect with gender and influence how abuse plays out in a woman’s life because each of these pieces of intersectionality determine her social position and structural location in society (Comack, 1996). In much of the current criminological research, the focus has been on violent behaviour and its connection to gang membership; however more attention is required on the role of victimization (Fox, 2013). Far too often experiences of victimization are socially censured due to fear of repercussion and the mentality that it cannot be changed. It is

time that we break the silence and bring the discussion about the role of victimization and abuse and its connection to gang membership to the forefront (Comack, 1996).

The theoretical framework of standpoint feminism is based on leaving behind the masculinist approach that dominates most of the research in criminology and focusing on the experiences of women and in many cases, these experiences stem from and are rooted in abuse. Comack (1996) emphasizes that the definition of abuse should be left up to the women to define as abuse can come in many different forms and effect each individual in a different way. In *Surviving Sexual Violence* (Kelly, 1988), Kelly describes a theory based on coping, resistance and survival where “women and girls who have been abused are actively engaged in a struggle to cope with the consequences of abuse” (p. 159). Kelly (1988) indicates that the abuse experienced by these women forever alters their life course and becomes part of their self-definitions. Comack (1996) expands on this by also including that the effects of abuse experiences are often not left as an isolated incident, rather, they are compounded and complicated by the ongoing nature of abuse in their lives. This theory remains highly relevant for Aboriginal women who have experienced abuse at young ages who then turn to the gang and continue to experience ongoing violence and abuse. Although they may feel that they are coping with the initial incident of abuse, they are likely exposing themselves to a high risk environment with an increased magnitude of abuse.

Comack (1996) insists that this choice is not as simple as a woman deciding to be a criminal, but rather they are forced to make choices within a given social situation and operating under limited available options. Thus, they choose what the best option is for them. In the case of this research investigation, it was the gang that the women chose. There are long-lasting effects of abuse including painful memories, feelings of shame, guilt, and anger and self-identity confusion. These experiences are often shared collectively amongst women in our society, particularly those who have experienced abuse (Comack, 1996). Despite the consistent findings that many women who enter into a criminal lifestyle, including the gang lifestyle, have had some form of abuse in their childhood or early years – not all women who experience abuse travel down the same path. Some women choose this lifestyle as a means for coping. A well-known theoretical connection in the field of criminology is the connection between gang membership and delinquency and crime (i.e. if you are in a gang you are much more likely to be involved in

delinquency behaviour or commit crime). Although this is merely the beginning to investigating Aboriginal women and their gang experiences, there is a lot to learn about the connection between victimization and gang membership, particularly for female Aboriginal gang associates. This research will hopefully become the basis for a theoretical connection between gang membership and victimization by addressing the victimization faced by Aboriginal women and its relation to their road to gang membership.

iii. “Doing Gender” in Gangs

There is clearly a gender dynamic that exists within gangs. This gender dynamic is complex and has multiple and contradictory effects on young women’s risk of victimization (Miller, 1998). Comack (2008) describes Messerschmidt’s concept of “hegemonic masculinity” as a “historically constructed pattern of power relations between men and women and definitions of masculinity and femininity” and how it comes to be reproduced in society (p. 17). Within the gang, socially acceptable forms of masculinity are constructed through violence and femininity is often constructed through sexuality of women (Grekul & LaRocque, 2011). An underlying notion of this concept is that men will “do” masculinity according to the social situations that they find themselves in. For male gang members, performing criminal acts within a gang can provide an outlet for “doing gender” and therefore affirm a particular type of masculinity (and femininity) dynamic within the group. Often within the gang, “socially constructed notions of exaggerated traditional gender roles” are developed and legitimized (Grekul & LaRocque, 2011, p. 133). Totten (2009) expands on this concept stating that men use violence and women use sexuality to negotiate gender roles. However in the gang setting, girls are able to negotiate gender roles outside of the traditional femininity- the gang provides a space to do gender differently (Totten, 2009).

As discussed, females’ routes to crimes are often very different from their male counterparts. One of these differences concerns the importance of victimization in young girls’ and women’s life courses (Singer, 2000). It is crucial to acknowledge the role that victimization and abuse plays in their adaptation of gender roles within the gang, particularly in relation to their male counterparts. The idea of hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to “emphasized femininity” where “femininity is organized as an adaptation to men’s power” (p.

18). The simple act of joining a gang can involve the female's submission to victimization at the hands of her gang peers. Gang initiation rites demonstrate a power dynamic between men and women and thus the genders cannot be treated the same. For example options such as "sexing in" (a form of gang initiation where the female is expected to have sexual relations with multiple male gang members) and "gang rape" are strictly gendered acts (Miller, 1998). Males and females are not treated the same and thus cannot be researched in the same way. There needs to be an understanding that women experience cultural and gender inequality and how they "cope with, resist and survive these experiences" is a unique process in society that is often overlooked (Comack, 1996).

There is a need for researchers to take the time to sit down with gang members and hear their stories, especially in the case of female gang associates. It is a responsibility of the researcher to inquire about what life has been like for them from childhood to adulthood and then a clearer and fuller picture will develop (Totten & Totten, 2012). It is important to search beyond seeing the individual as only a "gang member" but also as an individual with a story to tell. As stated well by Molidor (1996),

Perhaps one reason why so few theories explain female gang participation is that the female role is so often described by male gang members to male researchers and interpreted by male academics, rather than being described by the girls themselves (p. 252).

This description expresses how often the interests and concerns that have been disseminated in research were not women's and even more problematic, often counter women's actual experiences. Much of traditional criminology has been "masculinist", and focused on male offenders and male-centered assumptions about the nature of crime and criminal behaviour (Comack, 1996, p. 11). Historically, conceptual frameworks were androcentric, economically advantaged, racist, Eurocentric, and heterosexist and they ensured ignorance of the oppressors about the oppressed (Harding, 2004). By talking to women about women, we have made valuable headway with regards to issues such as childbirth, housework, abuse, rape/sexual assault, prostitution and so much more. Individuals who have lived through the experiences bring a more unique perspective than those who have merely read or thought about what the experience may be like (Swigonski, 1994). Simultaneously, standpoint theory makes it possible

to identify and control many individual and sociocultural assumptions and biases, which strengthens the research (Swigonski, 1994, p. 392). Instead of imposing the researcher's preconceptions of the experiences of these women, it will be the female Aboriginal gang associates that are informing the researcher about their life experiences. Feminists argue that a complete understanding can only be achieved when the interaction of sex, race, age and social class is studied and more qualitative research is needed to achieve this goal (Singer, 2000).

iv. Placing Aboriginal Women at the Center of Gang Research

With a firm grasp on the context of Aboriginal women's lives we can begin to understand why some Aboriginal women choose to join gangs and what the gangs and gang members are like in Edmonton and to some extent the Prairie region. Importantly, we can also begin to learn what support is needed to prevent Aboriginal women from being victimized or resorting to gang membership. The only way to complete the story will be to interview and listen to the females themselves. St. Denis (2007) clarifies that feminism from the perspective of Aboriginal women is not about being equal to men because within some Aboriginal communities "women are at the center" and are the backbone of the family. She is recognized by the family as the giver of life and her role as a woman and a mother is respected. In the Aboriginal communities where this not the case, and women are subjected to forms of patriarchal discrimination, they too should have a voice. Thus, in order to do justice to this body of knowledge while respecting the views of Aboriginal women, the best methodology would have to do the same. Thus, this research focused on placing women at the center and giving women a voice.

Hopefully, by taking the time to talk to these women, by taking the time to hear their stories, we can begin to understand the ways in which female Aboriginal gang members make decisions to join and leave the gang. "If we can use the Aboriginal women as the model for how we're going to build our response to women, then of course all women are going to benefit from that" (Beads & Kuokkanen, 2007, p. 228). Once the stories of these Aboriginal women are heard, I think their experiences can inform what programming is actually needed or what type of programming would be of benefit to them in making a change in their life course. Aboriginal feminist scholars write, "Some organizations [are] service-oriented. They [are] band-aids, right... I don't see how that [is] doing anything to eliminate violence against women. I still lobby for more services for women, but I don't think the services are what is going to improve our

condition” (Beads & Kuokkanen, 2007, p. 224). This scholar is advocating for a change in how Aboriginal women are viewed and not just the services themselves, but the mind frame the services are developed under. She is calling for support to hear women’s voices and their personal experiences and to learn the root causes of Aboriginal women’s involvement in crime and gangs. Further to that, she seeks discussion about women and their place in society. Instead of creating a quick and simple Band-Aid solution she is imploring people to truly listen and understand these women. Increasingly we are seeing a rise in scholars adopting feminist approaches like Tina Beads who are “motivated to both insist on the inclusion of Aboriginal women’s voices and needs, and on the incorporation of Aboriginal feminist analysis” in the running of organizations (Beads & Kuokkanen, 2007, p. 221). If we can learn where they come from and how their experiences helped shape their life path, hopefully we can learn how to create a different society for the young children and eventually their children who will be facing some of the same and possibly new challenges in the future.

The voices of women need to be heard and opinions of female gang associates will be the most informative source for knowing what *they* need to make a change. Moving forward, it is important to note that “qualitative research has been instrumental for sparking an interest in the connection between gang membership and victimization” and this research has the opportunity to begin to inform that process and the experiences of Aboriginal women with gang membership (Fox, 2013, p. 1017). This research project is the beginning to creating a body of knowledge that can inform the criminal justice system and community programs about the core of the issue that causes women to continue on this life path. From here, appropriate programs to assist in successful gang exit can be developed and prevention and awareness about the victimization of Aboriginal women in Canadian society can be more productively discussed.

Chapter Four: Method & Analysis

Females' participation within the gang lifestyle needs to be placed within the context of the lives of these women (Huff, 1996). One of the goals of my research is to provide the perspective of these women who are involved in the gang lifestyle. In order to establish context of the lives of these women, I approached seven women to hear: 1) their experiences with gang membership, 2) their experiences with gang exit and 3) their thoughts on what would help them leave the gang lifestyle. Research by the Edmonton Police Service (2012b) shows that generally, when a gang member learns that she can meet her needs in other ways she is more motivated to leave and the gang loses much of its appeal. If research can discover what these needs are, they could be addressed more thoroughly through community-based programs (Edmonton Police Service, 2012b).

i. Ethical Considerations and Ethics Approval

This project had full ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board One (REB 1) beginning May 15, 2013. All community organizations that I choose to work with were informed of ethics approval and the steps I took throughout the research process to ensure participants are protected and treated according to the standards set out in the Tri-Council Policy Statement. The ethics application process through the University of Alberta was a very important learning experience for me. Although it was not my first time seeing the ethics application, it was important to learn what the ethics board needed and what was relevant information from my research that had to be included. As I completed the ethics application I consulted with my supervisor when I was unsure what needed to be included in the application. The Ethics Review Board did come back once after my initial submission with a few revisions on the documents but the process, although fairly intensive, went smoothly. As I was nearing the end of the interview process, my one year ethics approval was coming to end so in order to ensure I could continue to do more interviews if I managed to find more participants I renewed the application once and it was approved (renewal date: May 14, 2014 with an expiry date of May 14, 2015).

In each of the interviews I distributed and reviewed an information sheet and a consent form to my participants informing them that their participation is voluntary, anonymous, and confidential and that all data will be kept in a locked and secure location with no name identifiers within any of the notes or transcripts. From the initial meeting with participants to the thesis document and further presentations, pseudonyms are used for all participants and careful considerations were used to remove any other identifying characteristics disclosed throughout the interview (i.e. I removed names of children, family members, and other gang associates/friends names from the transcripts). With permission from the participants I was able to record all of the interviews and transcribe them. Once transcription was complete, the recordings of the interviews were deleted in order to preserve confidentiality and anonymity. Locations of the interviews varied depending on the participant. In the majority of cases I met in the office of an organization that connected me with them, their place of employment, or a coffee shop. For the comfort of the women I preferred to complete the interview in a place they are familiar with and feel safe in (such as a community office). In order to continue to protect the information from this study, the transcriptions, consent forms and notes from the research are kept in a locked filing cabinet within a locked office for five years. Following the mandatory five years, the information will be destroyed.

Due to the precautions taken to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of each participant, I hope that any risk to the participants was minimized. I realize that there are rules and codes that many gang members adhere to, which could complicate each individual's decision to discuss certain aspects of their experiences with me. However, as the researcher, I took and will continue to take every safety precaution possible to ensure their identity is protected from initial contact to all dissemination of the research. Resources were on hand so that if any recollections of past victimization or if any struggles were reported, I had contact information and community resources available in the area to help address those needs such as pamphlets and contact numbers for programs in the Edmonton area. The benefit to participating in this project was to contribute to the field of knowledge about female Aboriginal gang associates, particularly regarding their decisions for gang entry and gang exit and how community programming could aid or hinder those life choices. It is interesting to note that a handful of the women expressed extreme interest in participating and also seeing the results of the project. They were extremely interested to take part in a study that focused on women and their experiences.

ii. Recruitment

“For too long, the voices of women behind bars have been silenced. It is time we began to listen to what they have to say” (Comack, 1996, p. 13). This same reasoning Comack (1996) applied to women behind bars applies to gang-involved women, many of which have also been incarcerated. For this research, I conducted seven semi-structured in-depth interviews with Aboriginal females who have been associated with a gang. Eligibility criteria for participation in this research study included: that the participant must be female, that the female self-identified as Aboriginal and that the participant had some association with Aboriginal gangs. Aboriginal women who felt they were exposed to the gang lifestyle but chose not to participate were also invited to participate in this research, as their perspective on why they did not join the gang would be an interesting comparison to why the other women, who shared very similar backgrounds, did join the gang. In this case of this project, only one woman participated that was not gang involved, five women participated who were gang involved but had left the gang, and one woman participated who is still actively involved with the gang. There were no criteria as to their length of involvement with gangs or whether they had to be “ex-gang” associates or not. Thus no participants were excluded based on their time involved with the gang, their time away from the gang or whether or not they were still involved.

In my search for participants, I began by emailing contacts I have gained through work and school to see if there was any interest or support they could offer. I also started to reach out to organizations in the City of Edmonton that were typical programs that would support the population I was interested in such as being focused specifically on women or Aboriginal women. I also approached organizations that would be interested in and possibly even benefit from this research. As the project evolved and I amended my ethics application to include “outside of Edmonton” for possible interviews, I made contacts in Wabasca and Calgary. Neither of these contacts ended with a completed interview, but they were promising and with more resources it could have been possible to spend some time in these areas to better situate myself and get more acquainted with these sources and the women that they may have been able to connect me with. A few of the organizations did take an interest in the research and invited me to come and meet with them to hear more. In some of these cases I was able to get interviews (and

those organizations have been asked to remain out of the final research report due to the nature of the research). Unfortunately in many cases due to privacy policies or limitations on access to contact information, some of the organizations were unable to help me find participants. In the case of finding Aboriginal women who had the gang lifestyle around them but actively chose not to become gang involved, none of my connections with community workers, community agencies or interviewees allowed me to access any other women who were interested in participating.

The glimmer of hope within all the rejection was the overwhelming acknowledgements I received regarding continuing to pursue this important research and invitations to share my results upon completion. All in all, I attended about a dozen meetings in the community with organizations working directly with Aboriginal women, gang involved individuals, or high-risk/high-need populations; two AGMs for organizations to learn more about available programming in Edmonton and two meetings with the Edmonton Police Service. I also made many phone calls and sent dozens of emails. Not including multiple follow ups with some of my contacts, I called or emailed 45 different sources in attempt to find participants or other contacts that could help me find participants. At one point, there was an email forward chain that made it all the way to a contact in Ottawa, and although she was not able to help in the completion of the research she has kept in contact and would like to hear about the results. I was lucky to have quite a few supportive leads, unfortunately not all of them were successful connections for interviews, but some of the leads did involve multiple calls and/or text messages with workers and possible participants trying to make arrangements to meet.

My sample was built by using the population that will know the most about the “hooks” for gang membership, gang exit and the role of current community programming, which is Aboriginal women who have been associates of gangs. Walliman (2009) defines this as theoretical sampling, or “selection of sample of the population that you think knows the most about the subject” (p. 439). This is commonly known as imposing a purposive sampling strategy whereby it is believed by the researcher that “certain categories of individuals may have a unique, different or important perspective on the phenomenon in question and their presence in the sample should be ensured” (Robinson, 2014, p. 32). However, I intended to approach community programs that would know of a woman for me to interview and I would interview

that woman and move to another organization and repeat. Naturally, this turned out to be a methodological ‘ideal’ that was far from reality. It turned out to be a mixed mode of theoretical sampling and some snowball sampling. As defined by Babbie & Benaquisto (2010), snowball sampling is “often employed in field research whereby each person interviewed may be asked to suggest additional people for interviewing” (p. 182). I found that I was able to secure interviews both from asking participants if they knew any other potential women who would be interested in speaking with me but also through asking community service workers if they knew someone else who could get me in touch with a potential participant. As depicted in Figure 2, I was sent in a variety of directions and never really knew where a lead would turn up. Due to the nature of this research, there were a lot of leads but unfortunately not every lead turned into an interview. The search for participants was primarily initiated by the researcher connecting with key people or organizations in the community. From there, some of those connections lead to further connections with other resources such as community workers or other organizations, or in some cases it landed an interview and in one case, the interview lead to two more interviews with other women who had gang associations. Out of the possible twenty interview leads, there were seven interviews that were confirmed and completed. A timeline of the project is depicted in Table 1.

Figure 1: Contact map depicting search for research participants

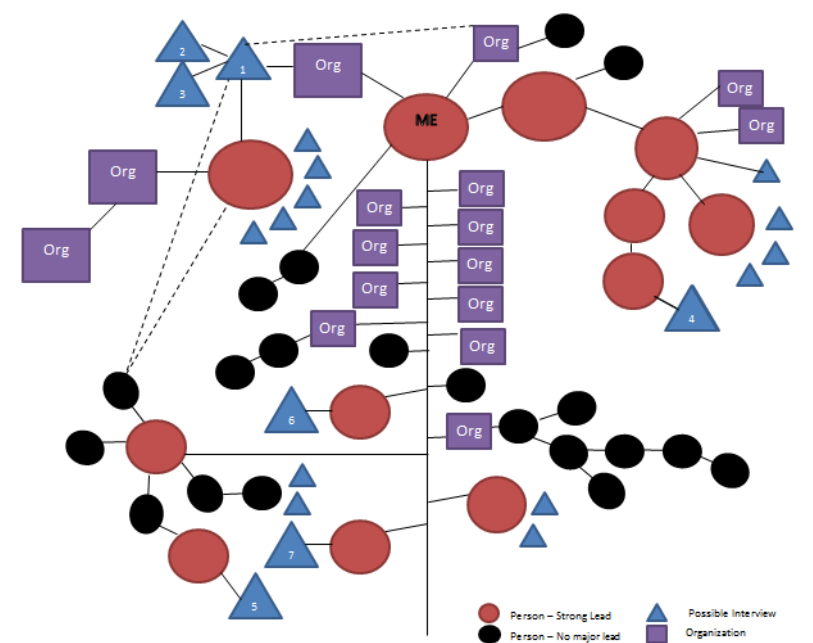


Table 1: Recruitment & Interview Timeline

Month & Year	Activity	Details
April 2013	Thesis Proposal Defense Completed	Thesis Supervisory Committee
May 2013	Ethics Approval Received from REB 1 – University of Alberta	
July 2013	Three Interviews Completed #1 – 43 minutes, 39 seconds #2 – 44 minutes 46 seconds #3 – 36 minutes and 15 seconds	All interviews were in a quiet room, one on one.
October 2013	One Interview Completed #4 – 1 hour, 12 minutes, 58 seconds	Interview was completed in a quiet room, one on one.
December 2013	One Interview Completed #5 – 1 hour, 18 minutes, 38 seconds	Interview was completed in an open but empty space; interview included participant and her friend (whom the participant approved staying for the interview).
January 2014	One Interview Completed #6 – 19 minutes, 47 seconds	Interview was completed in a coffee shop, one on one.
February 2014	One Interview Completed #7 – 31 minutes, 28 seconds	Interview was completed in a quiet room, one on one.
May 2014	Ethics Renewal Completed & Approved (exp: May 2015)	
December 2014	Final Thesis Defense	Thesis Supervisory Committee

Note: The interview times indicated in this table are specifically the time spent discussing questions in the interview guide. These times do not include the introductions, review of the information sheet and consent form and any other off the record discussions.

iii. The Interviews

Within the interview process “the researcher’s role is [the] listener, learner, and observer” (Rosetto, 2014, p. 486). Although it is not without its limitations, qualitative research interviews were the method chosen for learning about the experiences of Aboriginal women in gangs. Qualitative research interviews involve gathering information, listening to stories, and learning about the experiences of the participants (Rosetto, 2014). This approach is often recorded as therapeutic for the participants (Rosetto, 2014), results in descriptive richness (Trafimow, 2014) and focuses on how people make sense of their life experiences (Atieno, 2009). Challenges surrounding qualitative research interviews include maintaining boundaries of researcher and participants (Rosetto, 2014), there is no quantifiable data or statistical testing (Trafimow, 2014), and there is opportunity for the researchers objectivity to be imposed on the participants

interview through coding and making generalizations (Atieno, 2009). Qualitative research relies on trustworthiness and building rapport with your participants whilst maintaining a boundary of researcher and participant and these were a key component in securing detailed and engaged interviews with the women in this study (Cope, 2014). For the purpose of this research, the benefits and appeal outweighed the challenges of qualitative research and seven semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted.

The interviews varied in length from thirty minutes to over an hour and a half (when including introductions, review of the consent form and any questions the participants may have had). Each interview began with a review of the information sheet, signing the consent form and I provided the women with a bit of background on the research and who I was. All participants were asked if they were willing to participate in this project looking specifically at the needs and stories of Aboriginal women associated with gangs. It was clear at the beginning of the interview that no identifying characteristics would be attached to each participant when reporting the results in order to protect their anonymity. Screening questions were incorporated to determine whether or not the participants met the eligibility requirements. The one female who was not specific about her First Nations ancestry, indicated that she strongly self-identified with the First Nations spirituality and culture.

I started off with the intention to ask a few demographic related questions in order to have an overall picture of the women I interviewed and to build the rapport with the females I interviewed. Some examples of these demographic characteristics included: family structure, level of education, age and employment history. Interestingly enough, after asking the first question, “Where are you from? Did you grow up in the Edmonton area?” the majority of the participants immediately started their story. For example, they discussed that they were born here, moved to another city, got involved with drugs and that’s when they met so-and-so who introduced them to the gang. Before I was able to ask the next “demographic question” we were in the middle of their story to gang involvement. In the majority of cases, I returned to the demographic questions at the end of the interview to fill in some of the blanks about their childhood, education and family (see appendix for list of interview questions).

In a few of the interviews, there was a strong connection made with the women. I was able to tap into some of the emotion behind their childhood, gang life and post-gang life

experiences. There were a few experiences where the tissue box was needed as the women got emotional and really shared a piece of themselves with me. I met each of the women in a public place so that both of us would feel safe and comfortable. The majority of the rooms were private and the interviews that were conducted in private settings were often the interviews that were more emotional because the women were able to more freely describe their experiences. As the researcher, my goal was not to have a formal interview with these women; I wanted them to tell me about their lives and their gang related experiences. In order to do that, it had to be more of a conversation between two women. In a few of the interviews, the time got away from us as we discussed the details of how they got to where they were and how they reflected on where they are now. I felt a connection with the women because they opened up to me and provided me with an insight into their life that some of them had not shared before. A few of the women even thanked me, and were relieved that I was easy going and made it comfortable for them to share and more importantly, let them talk about what they felt was important. There was only one interview that did not flow as smoothly. During that interview, it was clear she was calculating her responses; it appeared as though she did not want to say *too much* but she still wanted to participate. Five of the women let the conversation flow very freely in the interview, no matter which direction it went and one of the women was very open with her responses, but it also appeared as though she had already determined what she was going to tell me and what she was not going to tell me. For more than one of these women they had told their story before in a public setting and in the case of those women, I felt that there was a bit more of routineness about how they discussed their life story. However, by using a few probes I was able to dig deeper and they would get carried away in a certain aspect of their story that would provide great insight to me about some of the underlying stories of gang life.

One of the most memorable moments of the research process for me was when one of my interviewees requested to meet me to do a “pre-interview” before she was willing to participate. I did not know at the time of the first meeting that this is what I was walking into, but I quickly realized her intent when I was grilled with questions about the research and why I was doing it. I was pleased to see her interest in the research but more importantly her dedication to only taking part in research that she felt was worth her time. After we chatted for an hour or so, she basically looked at me and said “let’s do this.” She explained that she felt I was genuine, approachable and that she could trust me. After successfully passing my “pre-interview” she not

only allowed me the opportunity to hear her story, but also provided me contact information for two more women she felt would participate now that she gave me the seal of approval. For these three women in particular, they were all amazed that someone wanted to hear the woman's side of the story and the fact that I was a female, one who they felt they could trust and that they wanted to talk to, allowed for me to become someone they could trust with their stories. I found this "pre-interview" that I was exposed to very effective in gaining the trust and more importantly the support for the research from the participants. It gave me a lead on rapport building in the follow up interviews because I already had the support of one of the women they knew. This was my very first interview of the project and it was an experience that helped shape the entire process. I was able to recognize what this research meant to the women and the value of listening to what each of the women had to share.

iv. The Sample

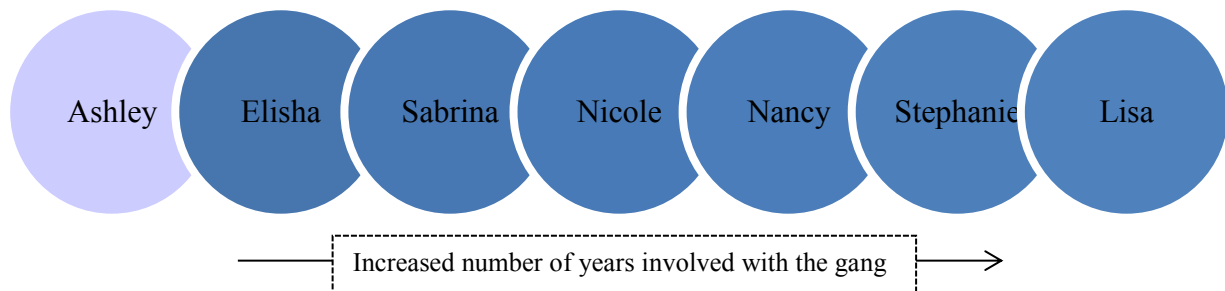


Figure 2: Seven women involved with the study; placed in order (left to right) by length of involvement with the gang (no involvement to 15+ years of gang involvement).

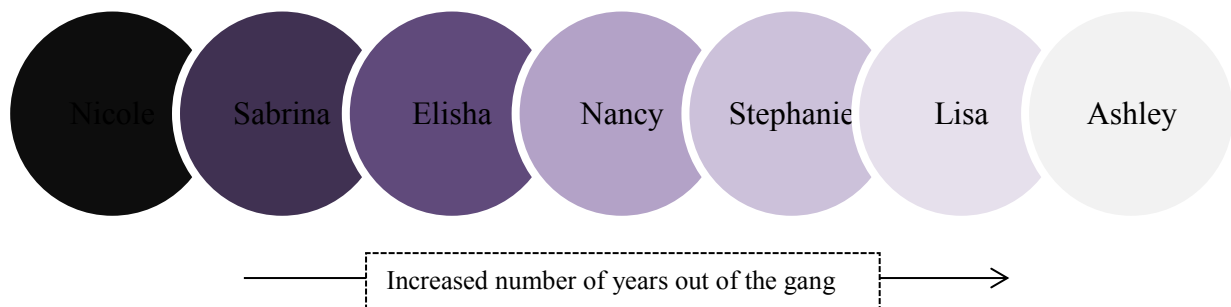


Figure 3: Seven women involved with the study; placed in order (left to right) by length of time out of the gang (from still involved to never involved with the gang).

The above figures represent the sample of women who participated in this research study. As shown above, there were seven women who participated in the interviews in some capacity. One of the women, Ashley, had not been associated with gangs but grew up with the gang influence in her surroundings and yet chose a different life path. She was included in the research results because her voice provided insight into why she *did not* get gang involved, which is a mirror to asking the other women why they *did* get gang involved. For the rest of the women, their gang associations ranged from approximately two years to over fifteen years of gang associations. Relative to their length of time gang involved, Figure 4 represents the length of time each woman had been out of the gang at the time of the interview. To protect identities of the women, these specific numbers are not included but the range included one woman who was still gang involved to women who had only been out a few years to women who had been out for well over 5 years.

As depicted below in Table 2, all of the women were between 22 and 35 years old. All except one of the interviewees were First Nations, but all have been associated with Aboriginal gangs. At the point of interview, the majority of the women had full time employment and had completed at least their GED. For the six women who were gang involved, prior to leaving the gang lifestyle behind only one of the women had “barely” completed high school, and all five of the other gang involved women had left prior to graduating. All of the women who were gang involved completed their GED, went back to school after leaving, or started their University degree *after* they left the gang lifestyle as part of their decisions to improve their life and get on a different path. Only one of the women was raised by both parents consistently throughout her childhood. The remainder had either single parent families, lived in foster homes or adoptive homes or in case of one woman, she ran away at a very young age and lived on the street ever since. The majority of the women indicated that they moved around a lot, but all of them have spent extended periods of time in Edmonton and surrounding areas and the six that were gang involved were part of Aboriginal gangs located in the same area.

Table 2: Sample Demographics

Basic Demographics	Total Women (n=7), Gang involved (n=6), Non-gang involved (n=1)
Age	All between 22-35 years old
First Nations	6 – Yes 1 – No, but self-identified with First Nations culture & spirituality
Currently Employed	5 – Yes 1 – On Maternity 1 – No
Education	2 - Less than Grade 12 2 - Less than Gr. 12 but went back (GED) 1 – University Degree (went back to school after leaving) 2 – University in Progress (never stopped attending)
Primary Caregiver	3 – Single Parent 2 – Foster Homes/Adopted 1 – Ran away young 1 – Both parents
Born & Raised	1 – British Columbia 6 – Alberta ----- 5 – Indicated Moving Around A Lot 4 – Spent time living on Reserve
Childhood Abuse *	7 – Yes 0 – No
Children **	4 – Yes 3 – No
Prison or Jail Time	4 – Yes 3 – No
When did it all start?	2 - 12 or 13 years old 4 – 15 or 16 years old 1 – N/A, was not gang involved
Involved with Aboriginal Gangs ***	6 – Yes 1 – N/A, was not gang involved
Left the gang now	5 – Yes 1 – No 1 – N/A, was not gang involved

Notes:

* from Family/Close Family Friends Prior to Gang Involvement (n=5 physical/sexual/psychological, n=2 psychological/emotional only)

** have their own kids now (n=4) or kids are in foster care/adopted (n=3, have at least one kid in foster care or one kid adopted by another family; all 3 also have other children in their custody)

*** there were at least 4 women who indicated in their stories that they were involved with another gang prior to becoming associated with an Aboriginal gang (i.e. African American Gang, Asian Gangs, Biker Gangs)

At some point during the interview, all seven women, despite whether they were fully gang associated or not, indicated that they suffered from childhood abuse whether it be psychological, emotional, physical and/or sexual abuse. Most of the women mentioned this as one of the major reasons why they started running away from home or acting up. Interestingly, many of the women did indicate this childhood abuse as one of the triggers for the life path that they entered, a few of the others merely saw this abuse as a part of their past- that they did not care to think about or connect to any part of their life path, it was just another experience they fought through to get where they are now.

Each woman was faced with decisions to join or associate with a gang, to stay in a gang, to commit acts on behalf of the gang, and the decision to potentially leave the gang. “From the life-course perspective, the onset of and desistance from gang involvement can be considered critical short-term transitions that potentially can redirect long-term trajectories” (Melde & Esbensen, 2011). I aimed to investigate the life-course of a female Aboriginal gang member from her viewpoint. For these seven women, I learned what hooked them to the gang lifestyle, what kept them hooked, and what was the “hook for change” if there had been one. I discuss these findings in Chapter 5.

v. Coding and Data Analysis

“Experience gives direct access to the necessarily social character of people’s worlds; it is *how* people talk, the categories they use, the relations implicitly posited among them, and so forth, and in what is taken for granted in their talk, as well as in what they can talk about.” (Smith, 2004, p. 265).

The goal was to take the women’s lives as a starting point and develop an understanding of Aboriginal female gang associates, their experiences, and how they are situated in our society. To reiterate, I wanted to explore 1) Which processes do Aboriginal female gang associates identify as entry points for gang membership? 2) Which processes do Aboriginal female gang associates identify as exit points for gang membership? 3) What are their thoughts on what would help them leave the gang lifestyle?

The field of criminology is lacking research that creates “knowledge with females at the *center* of the analysis” paying particular attention to the unique cultural experiences of girls and

women in the criminal justice system and specifically, female gang members (Singer, 2000, p. 27). As each of my interviews were completed I transcribed and analyzed the interviews using a thematic coding approach, where focused and selective coding was practiced to examine which codes are most significant or appear most frequently or predominantly in the data (Roulston, 2010). Prior to coding the interviews, a final version of the transcription was created. To ensure that the interviews were credible & the information was as reported by the participants (Cope, 2014), all of the women were given the option to review a password protected typed document of their transcripts prior to writing the final research report. Five of the seven women chose to get a copy of their anonymized transcripts and approved the typed transcription before coding was completed.

For the purpose of this research and my interest in being more involved and immersed in the data, each interview was transcribed by me and then reviewed. Each interview was then printed out and coded by hand on paper, with multiple colour codes and post-it notes indicating thoughts, observations, reflections and the different themes that were emerging in the data. From there, a spreadsheet was created with a tab for each code and all of the data related to each code was recorded. This method of analysis was chosen out of personal preference for how I wanted to interact with the data. By having the opportunity to be part of the data during the interview, through the hours of transcription of the interviews and then the multiple stages of coding that commenced, it allowed for multiple opportunities for me to engage with the data and also become more and more familiar with it as the process went on. Not only was I able to get to know these women through the interview process but I was able to see their stories shape individually and as a whole as I navigated through each of the interviews.

One quilt-making analogy was described by Comack (1996) that was very applicable and relatable to my research process. She described how in research such as this when you interview each woman they are each constructing their own quilt piece of their story. From there, it is my role to carefully stitch together the pieces to see the patterns that become visible depicting how the women have been rebuilding their lives over and around their abusive histories and their lives with the gang.

To continue with Comack's (1996) analogy of the quilt squares, each of the codes were constructed and developed out of these squares, looking for the commonalities and the

differences in the topics that each of the women described. As discussed by Roulston (2010), I used a constant comparative method where I compared data with data, determining incidents applicable to each category and then analyzed and determined how these categories relate to one another. For some of the “quilt squares” there were similar patterns and colour schemes and for others, the squares varied in their composition giving the quilt its uniqueness. From these codes, I developed an overall picture of which hooks, if any, play an important part in the life course of an Aboriginal female involved with the gang. As themes emerged, I brought them together to explore important aspects of programming that might be beneficial from their perspective. Women expressed both similarities and differences in their experiences related to the joining or exiting the gang and how current programs aid or hindered their adjustment in the community.

When all is said and done there is a massive vibrant quilt that tells the story of seven women who have shared their experiences. This quilt provides a unique picture of the lives of First Nations women in gangs.

vi. Limitations & the Problem of Stigmatization

There are numerous methodological challenges when it comes to researching gangs and gang members. For example, there is no gang census available to researchers and membership is difficult to determine and is often fluid (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008). It can be difficult to find gang members or ex-gang members (particularly when the sample is narrowed down to Aboriginal female gang members) who are willing to speak openly to researchers about their experiences in the gang lifestyle, in prison, and the challenges they face on a day-to-day basis. This was a problem that I ran into while searching for participants. There were a fair number of women out there but getting in touch with them, staying in touch with them and getting a commitment to participate was difficult. There is also the challenge of finding women to speak with that were still gang involved without the use of any correctional facilities. Although this research did find one actively gang involved participant, it was difficult to find any others that were willing to meet and discuss their lives in the gang.

The sample that I interviewed has the potential to be unrepresentative due to the fact that all experiences are not the same across all Aboriginal women (since the sample is composed entirely of women self-identified as First Nations) and that I only reached females who *agreed* to

speak to me. Also, it may be unrepresentative due to the small size of the sample. As it was described by many of the women I talked to, life is complicated and it is difficult to capture and entire aspect of their life in one interview. As described by Comack (1996), knowledge is partial and it is dependent on what is shared and what is asked. I was able to interview women who had left the gang, women that were still in the gang and women who had seen it all from the sidelines. Thus, I feel that it is a worthwhile contribution to a growing field of interest where more research is required.

The goal of this project was not to contribute to the stereotypes or stigma of Aboriginal females and to label them further. As female Aboriginal gang associates, particularly ones who have done time in prison, they are already faced with the stigma of being a criminal. It is that stigma that “discredits the individual and reduces trust” when they are trying to “make it” in the community (Proctor, 2009, p. 27). The goal was to examine, from *their* perspective, gang membership, gang exit and the availability of programming for women associated with gangs. Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson (2008) emphasize the important point that “racial and ethnic stereotyping leads to racial profiling and creates increased misunderstanding, labelling, mistrust and hostility between groups” (p. 62). However, by combining groups together we also lose the uniqueness of each group and attempting to deal with different roots of problems in the same way could prove troublesome in the end (p. 62). Furthermore, Totten & Totten (2012) note that many Edmonton gangs are organized along ethnic divisions and thus to maintain a more in-depth investigation into females and their pathways through gang membership, I chose to focus on one ethnicity. With the overrepresentation of Aboriginal men and women in the criminal justice system, it has been assumed that this population is also overrepresented within the gang lifestyle as well. If that is the case, research should dedicate its time to understanding the pathways of those whose voices or stories are not commonly heard. When it came time to deciding which voices were most relevant and also most frequently missed – it was the voices of Aboriginal women.

Chapter Five: Results

One thought remained constant throughout the interviews with each of the First Nations women who met with me, and that was “the research needs to be meaningful to these women” (Lennon, Liamputtong, & Hoban, 2014). Upon meeting with each of the women, it was clear that they had met with me mostly due to the fact that they were interested in a researcher who wanted to hear “their” side of the story, the “woman’s” side. When I first met Lisa, she said she could not believe that there was someone who wanted to know what it was like for a woman, someone who only wanted to focus on what that lifestyle was like strictly *for her*. It was then that I knew that not only was this research important to me, but it meant something to her and because it meant something to her, it was worthwhile for her to share her story with me. This same mindset seemed to resonate with all the women. They all noted at some point, a type of solidarity that no matter what position they held in the gang, no matter whom they were now or what they had done in the past- that they had been ignored. That is until now.

i. The Road to the Gang

Each of the women involved with this study have a unique perspective, one that is informed by their pasts, their lived experiences and the insight they have into their own life course. One of the deciding factors in the life course of these women was their past and how it contributed to their involvement with Aboriginal gangs.

Family Life before the Gang

As the literature suggests, often family life prior to gang membership can lead to gang involvement and can also serve as a tool of vulnerability for recruitment because the gang promises to fulfill the needs of a family (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008, p. 67). Although many of the women did not spend a lot of time discussing their family prior to the gang, the research did entail asking a few questions about what their life was like growing up with the hopes that it would trigger an explanation of their path and choices to pursue the gang lifestyle. Many of the women described dysfunctional relationships between their family members and in most cases their homes consisted of single parents or blended families.

“Basically in a nutshell, I was raised by my Dad, no Mom. She abandoned me and my sister and my mom chose another guy, whatever, and left my Dad. So, she said here’s your kids and raise them. So my Dad was a single Dad and raised us. And umm... I had a few step Mom’s I didn’t like, resented, wanted my real Mom.”
– Lisa

“I had such an unstable childhood. I was in foster homes and both my parents are survivors of residential schools but also are drug addicts, alcoholics”- Stephanie

“My parents were both sick. They were poor. They fought all the time. Home life sucked... they were always medicated, always having to call ambulances for them... and I ... would have to steal food to feed them [...] Like I had no purpose in life.” – Nancy

At some point throughout the interviews all of the women indicated that they had been abused in some form during their childhood. In the case of this research, the type of abuse, intensity of abuse and even the recognition that they were abused all varied with each of the women. For one woman, she continually struggles with the ongoing psychological and emotional abuse perpetrated by an alcoholic she lived with, whereas another woman simply brushed aside any emotional or psychological abuse as if it “did not count” and chose to focus on the fact that she was sexually assaulted multiple times by a family member when she was young. Regardless, the women indicated these experiences as pivotal moments in their life that triggered involvement with a criminal life course.

“One of my girlfriends, her Mom made them prostitute themselves to support her drug habit.” – Nancy

“I was like 11 years old, bounced around foster homes, abused sexually, physically, mentally - all around. All kinds of stuff. I felt abandoned because when me and my brother and my niece were all taken, they got to go back and I never did.” – Stephanie

“I was also sex... I was molested as a kid from my Uncle.” – Sabrina

Due to the abuse they were facing at home, in a lot of cases this is what drove the women towards the street or towards friends that were already living that lifestyle. In some cases, they were trying to connect with family that was on the streets as well. For some of these women, this started at a very young age.

“... I was about 8 years old. I was on East Hastings at the age of 10. Like homeless because I had run away from home because of stuff that was happening

at home. I had ran away from home and was like, full-fledged on the streets by the time I was 13...” – Nicole

“My step Moms were really mean and not accepting of us, of me and my sister, and umm... they were just horrible so we just felt kind of lost in the world as children. And so, we would always run away to reserves.” – Lisa

“I was put in another foster home, foster home, foster home, finally they just... social services couldn't handle me because... I put myself there. I wanted them not to handle me because I kept running away, I wanted to be with my Mom who was on the streets of Edmonton, like downtown... inner city... the drag... yeah was on the streets and I hanging out there 12 years old, downtown... just to be with my Mom... So she taught me how to survive on the streets.” – Stephanie

In a lot of the cases, the women also had family members or friends that were already gang involved and if not gang involved, they were known within the criminal justice system. For two of the women in particular, their last names were highly recognizable to law enforcement offices and other law regulators within the criminal justice system.

*“My last name, out in B.C., is like just everyday ordinary name. And then, my Mom that I came out here to like find my family out here, once I found out who my family was out here... like unfortunately were like notoriously fucking known and like yeah... there ain't an Indian out there that doesn't know somebody from my family. Like... *laughs*... yeah... I met my family, like met one of my Aunties and two of my Uncles and they were right up involved with it.” – Nicole*

“Actually some of [the gang] are family.... Right? Like I know some of them, I grew up with some of them. That's kind of how it started right?” – Stephanie

For the case of the women involved with this project, they were all running from something. There was at least one incident of abuse and they were trying to act out in order to get attention or find a place to call home. Even though this was the case for these six gang involved women, there are cases where that is not always true. Abuse and lack of supports in early childhood were huge contributing factors for these women but on more than one occasion they mentioned others they knew of that came from what appeared to be stable homes.

“So many of them come from working girls, and broken homes. Some of them have had the best parents, the best upbringing, like I know a couple of them that have had the best upbringing, the best parents... and they have even said, I was never deprived of anything, like, you know? They graduated, went to college, but during all of that they've been involved with gangs because the adrenaline rush, or the fucking ... there's something, it's dangerous, it's ... you know? It's ... and I'm like, really? What the fuck is wrong with you?” – Nicole

“They will take in anybody that is broken up. That’s what they want. That’s the thing, the gang cop that I hooked you up with, he will tell you how he has seen people in million dollar homes go to gangs.” – Lisa

Unfortunately for the women involved in this study, they did not come from million dollar supportive homes. Comack et al. (2013), indicates the “dysfunctional family” as one of the key factors for gang involvement but more importantly, we must recognize the “broader socio-economic forces that bear down on those families” shape how the relationships are formed (p. 23). For the First Nations women involved in this study, many of their families were directly impacted by the effects of colonization and the residential schools. Thus for more than one generation the effects had been compounded and were reflected in the experiences they were having in the home. For them, “home” consisted of alcoholics, drug addicts, abuse from immediate or extended family members, they felt they were abandoned or being passed around through foster care and they all truly believed there was no way the gang life could be worse. In the end, there was no one to stop them. Nobody told them they could do better, no family members stopped them during their downwards spiral and no one even batted an eyelash when they chose the streets, drugs, or the gang.

“[My Godmother] she had rules, she had stability, but it just... it was from one extreme to another, so I mean I started running away... I started getting into her liquor cabinet at 12 years old, and started doing stuff, skipping school. And when she found out from the school that I was skipping, she just ... she just never ... she just let me.” – Stephanie

“My teacher told me I wasn't smart enough... so... I quit school. Just like that. I believed her.” – Nancy

As discussed by White (2009), the family acts in three different ways: 1) family members are actual gang members, 2) gang members are viewed as family, and 3) the effects of a dysfunctional family leads individuals to the gang (p. 53). It is evident from the stories of these women that the family played a role both by being gang members and/or they were driven to the gang lifestyle based on the dysfunction in their families. The idea of gang members being viewed as family will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Addictions and Choosing the Gang Lifestyle

Not only had majority of these women quit school around the age of 15 years old, many of them by this time had already been drinking, doing drugs and in some cases already selling drugs. Following their difficulties in their home life, their lack of supports and their running away, all of them had become friends with one person or began dating someone who was connected to the gang through their drug use.

“Well... my boyfriend, the Asian guy, he ... he was friends with a lot of Native people and that's... I just met them all from him. From like being on 107 ave or whatever right?” – Sabrina

“I got involved with all this strictly through one person.” – Elisha

From that point forward, all of the women except for one became drug users and in order to support their drug habits they became dealers.

“I was attending school at the time, grade 9; I think it was grade 9 or something. And then, she kicked me out and then I met up with this guy who was in his 30's, he took me in, started me on cocaine and I liked it, whatever, and I had my friend who she also started it and umm... I did cocaine, went in and out of jail, worked for a Black gang prostituting and had a kid there, with that guy. It's a process... it's growth.... Drugs make people crazy too... that's the thing. You won't find too many gangs that aren't on drugs.” – Lisa

“Me and my friend were hanging out with drug dealers for like a year... for like, over a year and a half before I even knew what it was. I was so naive. Then I dropped out of school. I didn't know that people like did drugs all day long. Until I met him. Like first thing when you wake up they start smoking crack... I didn't know people did that. Till I met him right? And then it was downhill from there, I guess. Well at first it was just drinking... just drinking and then... it was to using, and then selling.” – Sabrina

“So then after I had her [her daughter] and then because I am from where I am from... when you turn 18 you get a big trust fund! So because I was in child welfare, all my family allowance... all my special pays, all that money doubled. Everybody my age, that turned 18 that year, got about \$18,000... I got \$35,000. Yeah... I was broke in two months. I was broke in about 2 months. I started using drugs. [...] its association, it comes with the money. So then you meet people, so that whole aspect of your life evolves... it slowly evolves.” – Stephanie

At this point, the women were asked if they made a choice to join the gang lifestyle or not. For four out of the six gang involved women, they had no doubt in their mind that they made an active decision to be involved in that lifestyle.

“Oh hell ya, I had a choice. My life wasn’t ALL that bad, I just had shit I was running from right? I could have probably dealt with that a different way, but I was truly convinced that this was the way to being a happier me.” – Elisha

“Oh hells yeah. Yeah, yeah! Oh yeah! I found the gang... because I was leaving the Black gang in Calgary and I needed the Aboriginal Gang to have my back against the Black gang. So I sought... kind of sought them out.” – Lisa

For the other two women they felt they got wrapped up in the lifestyle. They liked the attention they were getting and by the time they were getting involved with the gangs they were already addicts so instead of actively deciding to hang out with them, it would be more accurate to say that they were feeding their addictions and the gang just happened to be the source they fed from. They felt as though it all just happened and before they knew it they were fully involved and did not really realize the impacts until they got out. It appears as though there are some variations in women choosing the gang lifestyle and it is not always clear cut. In some of the cases they are actively seeking the gang, in other cases the gang finds them and capitalizes on their weaknesses (i.e. looking for a family or feeding their addiction). Whether they chose it or not, all six of these women ended up in the gang lifestyle.

“I’m like yeah, I’m loving this, I like this, I could have easily have said this isn’t for me, I rather be a Mom, I have a baby - I’m a young Mom, I have this going for me... I could have more of a life but nope. I chose that lifestyle over my child... so I then turned to a family member and I’m like “before child welfare takes her, I want you to take her because I just can’t do it. I don’t want to do it- this is fun” ... you know... I love my kid but see ya later. [...] so like that... I just went and my life was everything” – Stephanie

ii. Defining a Gang Member

The Label “Gang Member”: Women Can’t Be Gang Members

When each of the women were asked about their role and place in the gang many of the women stressed the point that they were not “female gang members” because no such thing existed.

“Well... I guess the... obviously there is no girl gang members... really... right?”- Sabrina

"See the way it works for women in the gang, is all the men that are in the gang have tattoos. No woman can have tattoos."- Stephanie

To officially become a gang member you have to be initiated, prove you are loyal and then you are “patched” and in the case of the gangs these women were involved with, this meant a tattoo representing the gang they belonged to. For women associated with these gangs, “getting patched” was an extreme rarity and there had only been very few cases where women were officially patched members. As far as their male counterparts were concerned, in majority of the cases, women are not members but rather associates or workers for the gang who perform a variety of tasks and hold a different and lower status than males, if they held any status at all.

Ironically, women do not hold a title within the gang, but outside the gang that is not the case. There is a huge contradiction between the street label of “gang member” and the law label of “gang member.” According to the criminal code, participation in a criminal organization- which is a group of three or more individuals who are committing crime for a benefit or gain (generally financial), qualifies you as a gang member (Canadian Criminal Code, 2012). By that definition, all six of the women who confirmed they were affiliated with Aboriginal gangs are gang members. However, none of them felt that title matched their real life experience.

Researcher: But by law you are a gang member? If you get arrested you are a gang member.

Nicole: Yeah, I am considered a gang member with the police.

Researcher: But on the street you are not?

Nicole: Nope. I am not.

Much like the example of Lisa Neve illustrated in the background to this research, a label whether it be “dangerous offender” or in this case “gang member” impacts their ability to reconnect with society (Comack, 2006). In this study, the women found the label of “gang member” a huge barrier when they discussed the difficulties with leaving the gang and trying to have a sober life. Despite this huge contradiction in that they were not actually considered members of the gang according to the gangs themselves, they were according to the police and thus many of them permanently are known by this label.

“But if the cops label you as that then that's pretty much ... how you are labeled. Just because the people that we hung around with called themselves that right? They just labeled us as that. Now it's stamped on my record” – Sabrina

“So I mean, once you are affiliated it fucks your whole life... that's it. Like I said, I am sober, I have been sober for how many years now, and I could still walk down the street and if a cop sees me they would be like "Stephanie!" [...] They will still know my name right?” – Stephanie

To make the label of “gang member” even more complicated, the women also discussed how although they are not gang members on the street- as soon as they are labeled as gang members with the police they lose their standings with gang. One of the most attractive features of gangs utilizing women is that often young women do not have criminal records, and thus they remain off police radar (Totten & Totten, 2012, p. 82). As “known” affiliates of the organization they are now on police radar and if they are on police radar they cannot perform their job, primarily continuing to sell drugs, without attention being brought towards them.

“When I went to jail there was a big disclosure on me being part of the gang and how they didn't want me back on the streets” - Stephanie

As Stephanie states above, as soon as she got out of jail there was an increased paranoia that having her on the streets and associated with the gang could result in bad attention from the police if she resumed the status and position. For her story, that was where she was finally able to exit because they no longer needed her anymore. From that point forward, she was unable to perform the tasks that she was kept around for- so, they let her leave.

*“I can't walk down the street because the cops are like, "Oh HEY STEPHANIE!!! WHATCHA DOIN TODAY??” *laughs, waves arms* I'm like oh... I can't do shit, I can't make moves right? So I'm no good to them because all of the guys are known by the cops that's why these girls can fly under the radar right?”- Stephanie*

The complexity of the label “gang member” warrants more study and attention. Prior to meeting with and fully discussing the topic of gang membership with these women, the term “gang member” would have been more loosely used. Now, after learning that applying that label to the women associated with specific gangs actually drastically changes their experiences inside and outside of the gang, throughout gang membership and following gang exit, the term was more carefully used. However, just because the gang does not consider them “gang members” it does not mean that they were still not part of the day to day activity of the gang.

If not “Gang Members”... then what are female “Gang Associates”?

Even though the women were not “patched” gang members, they were still very clear about the general role of women within the gangs. Not specifically talking about their personal role, a few of the women described the role that women play in the day-to-day activities of the gang. On more than one occasion, the women were described as the back bone of the gang. One of the girls, Lisa, was very clear that women had a variety of roles from holding drugs and weapons to being punching bags on bad days and prostitutes to bring in money.

“So yeah... women are the back bone of the gang I believe. Because without the women, those guys don’t have nothing.” – Lisa

“They are the ones that fix the fuck ups. When the guys fuck up, it's the women that are coming and fixing the fuck ups! It's not the men, the men sit there and go like, "well what the fuck are we going to do?" and it's the women that are like "Here, here, here, here".” – Nicole

Lisa described a variety of scenarios that women are involved with including income drivers (such as drug dealers or prostitutes) or as safe keepers (using body cavities for holding drugs or their houses with their kids as an inconspicuous place to hide weapons). Recent research is slowly beginning to look more closely at the role of women in the gang and these women were able to begin to enlighten the shift in roles that women in gangs hold. For example, Stephanie elaborated on the role of women by adding in that they were not exempt from violent behaviour and that women were often ordered to fight with other women either within their gang or with rival gangs.

*"There's other women that they use within the gang they just specifically use to go beat up people. They phone up this girl, "you go beat up that bitch, you go fucking beat up that bitch" and then you come back, you beat her up and we'll give you whatever, drugs, recognition, high five *laughs*, acceptance... attention... everything right?"- Stephanie*

The women also described situations where girls are just flat out used by others in the gang with regards to securing whatever they need for the day, the night or that week. For example Stephanie explains:

"Then there is other women that, that they use as their pawns, they use them for their money, for their house, for... even women they use for the credit that they have. Like, let's phone her because she has good credit, we can get her to rent us a car, she can rent us a car, get us a hotel room - we'll get her to do all that, keep her in the room and we'll just keep her high or we'll just keep her in there, and they will just do what they do and in the end her name gets screwed over and whatever right?"

A few of the women described status and judgment amongst other women, especially those whom were not really respected as “actually” working hard and contributing to the gang. There was a certain respect for some women depending on the amount of money they could bring into the organization. Other women were clearly looked at as nearly nothing and on the bottom of the totem pole, even by the women that were interviewed in this study. There was a certain level of contribution required to be respected by both men and women in the gang.

"The gang members have a lot more respect for the working girls that come and just do their business. Rather than the girls that they have working for them, some of the girls ... because like she said, like, the working girls put the money in their pocket. Some of them, a lot of the girls that work for ... or are "members", they are like ... well we call them "hood sniffs" and "squirrelies". They will like go from one guy to another and they will all "rep" and say they are a member, or they are members but they are fuck ups. [...] I bring the paper, well it's not their paper it's my paper." – Nicole

The relationship between women and women and between men and women in the gang will be discussed further in the upcoming sections as gender and relationships play a key role throughout the entire life track of these Aboriginal women who have associated with gangs. However, it is important to note that women do play an important and functional role in the gang and needless to say, after talking to these women, there was not a lot that they did not do. Despite

their important place in the gang, while describing the important jobs of women in the gang they also described how disposable and replaceable women were within the gang. For example:

"[Without women] they can't function. They can't. Even like, if they are selling drugs, the women are working for them... holding the dope, doing the dope, counting the money, because they can't do SHIT! The girls are like picking up the drugs, going to meet the connection, cutting it up, doing the counting of money, selling the drugs, holding the drugs. They just sit there, and do shit! The girls run the show! But, I mean, they don't have the respect or status"- Stephanie

"It's not healthy and for a woman, I think it's even worse because you are disposable, you are very easily traded out for someone else- even in the case of someone who has respect and power." – Elisha

"Once you start to get healthy they don't want anything to do with you anymore, really. They will just initiate more people. They look for broken up people, vulnerable people to gain the numbers. That's what a gang is all about, gaining the numbers right? And now there are so many different gangs out there that, it's all about the numbers and who can get into our clique, and who can be bigger right?"- Lisa

iii. My Role in the Gang

After explaining the general role of women in the gang, the women shared their specific reflections on their personal position within the gang. The description of their place in the gang did vary from one woman who was never gang involved, one who described herself as on the “outskirts” and then five that were full-fledged and fully dedicated to the gang. It was not uncommon for the women to express not really considering themselves “gang involved” until after they were out and reflecting on the experience. For example, Elisha says:

"You know, during that time of my life, I would have never said “I am associated with a gang” – it wasn't really until I was away from that group of people that I truly realized that I was in too far over my head.”- Elisha

Each of the women who indicated that they were gang involved described being in a position where they were “one of the guys” rather than on the bottom of the hierarchy. It was interesting to hear them tell the story from their perspectives and we are left to devise one of two circumstances. First they were all in fact “one of the guys” and that’s why they felt comfortable and more able to talk to me because they felt a bit more independence from the gang, or second,

there was a façade or an image that they had built up for themselves to portray and they were sticking with that image whether or not they were still gang involved. Both of these conclusions are speculation on behalf of the researcher and would require further investigation and discussion with the women and others who knew them during their time of gang involvement. However, for the purpose of reporting the story they have given me, all of the women considered themselves in a fairly favorable role, even though they still described contradictions in respect and situations of violence which will be elaborated on further in this paper.

Despite some of their experiences that lead them to the gang or the experiences they had within the gang life, they were also open to defending the fact that they did make a choice to join the gang and they held their own within the position they described.

“So... all the sudden I'm like... I'm like... in a gang and I didn't even realize till years later that you know, that even if I wanted to leave, I couldn't right? And it's not like I even wanted to leave because I never had to do nothing. I was surrounded by men that I was protected by, nobody could touch me, I had money at my expenses, I had drugs because I was a drug addict, I evolved into becoming a drug addict. I had power and control. If I wanted to say "go whatever" people would jump, they would jump for me. And I never had that, never had that in my life, so the fact that I was at that point, there was no way I wanted to leave. I didn't want to leave... shit no! You know?”- Stephanie

For these women, their involvement seemed to vary in level of intensity. All but one of the women were fully committed to their gang in that they were trusted by their male counterparts, they were committing crimes and doing time on behalf of the gang without any hesitation, and even one of the women described the fact that despite the rarity of females getting “patched” in the gang, she was very close to having that status. Despite having made a choice to become part of the gang, she also made an active choice to not get in too deep.

“I was straight up involved. There was a point when I decided I didn't want to. When they were going to patch me. That day that they were going to patch me, I did everything I could to disappoint them so that I didn't get patched. Because I knew that would be life. I would be giving myself a life sentence.”- Nancy

When they described “getting in” and how they found their place within the gang, the conversation focused mainly on making money, continued access to drugs and street smart survival. For four out of the six gang involved women, their association with the gang “just

happened” – there was no initiation that they could recall and the bottom line was that they were selling drugs and they were good at it and they knew people who were already in.

"[Was there any initiation?] No, not for me no. I just... they liked that I could make money. That's what attracted them to me." - Lisa

"Easy money. Selling drugs right?" - Sabrina

*"It just happened for me. I didn't ask for it to happen, it just happened and the other girls were really trying to get in, because they just wanted to be accepted."
– Nancy*

"I got involved with all this strictly through one person, and he had a lot of respect in the group and therefore I was sort of protected in that sense." – Elisha

However, especially in the case of relationship changes, all of the women were left to fend for themselves at one point in their journey. That is where their relationships with the other men in the gang were the most important, it became about street smarts and survival rather than the initial love and support that they were searching for.

"... I would support them and wear their colours but that was it you know? I went in with my own money so therefore in my mind they couldn't tell me what the fuck I can do but, it didn't work that way. But because like, I said I would support them and I was working in a certain part of their turf they expected me to be there 24 hours. Like it doesn't matter if you're sick, you sit there sick, and you fucking sell dope." – Nicole

These women had to adapt to their surroundings and in the case of all six gang associated women they described themselves as playing the “man’s role” within their gang. As this information comes strictly from the stories of these women it has been taken as their truth. This could be evidence of the idea that with respects to residential schools it appeared as though the “males gave instructions and the females carried them out, [however] the day-to-day reality was different” may be also applicable to the life in an Aboriginal gang (Miller, 1996, p. 249).

Standing on that assumption, it appears that the women adopted a masculine role as a technique to survive their time in the gang, as Lisa described:

"Well it's being street smart. Get in with the big guys and you will always be okay. I was smart that way. I learned that from a very young age. Where a lot of the girls are naïve and don't have a clue." – Lisa

This story was not unique across the accounts from the other women. Much unlike the accounts of hyper-masculinity for males and emphasized femininity for females that is discussed in previous research (Comack et al., 2003, p. 61), there is a female adaptation of the hyper-masculine persona. They all described traits that deemed them more like the males than the females in the gang. From the interviews, there seemed to be a very clear divide between what these women believed were the traits and roles of a man versus a woman in the gang and those traits or roles labeled how they were portrayed as human beings. For example, there was a clear distinction that you were either “one of the boys” or you were a prostitute or a “mattress” and there was no in between.

“I’ve seen so many aspects of girls. But like you said, there are often no rites of passage; you are either one thing or another. If you serve no purpose, you are not around. You have to serve a purpose. You are either... right? Money. Sex. Or you are their worker”- Stephanie

It was clear to the researcher that it was not desirable to be seen as a woman in these gangs. None of these girls wanted to be seen as a woman, they rather be represented as a man, as a masculine contributor to the gang, someone who was bringing in money and deserved respect [emphasis added].

*“I guess the **male role**. I didn't prostitute or anything like that. I sold drugs. I did a lot of the **male things**, fighting. I would find new marks to take over the drug houses... lots of cleaning up of messes.” – Nancy*

*“See I was kind of portrayed as **one of the guys**... because I could hustle as good as them, I could do crime just as good as them, I was solid, you know, I never talked to the cops, you know, all the rules I abided by to be **one of the boys**... I was cool in the gang”- Lisa*

*“My role in the gang was, I was more... of like a sister and more closer to being **one of the guys** than any of the other girls. Very few girls actually make it to that point, very few. Like, they are all sitting there and they are like "oh we need to talk man shit" whatever right? *laughs*, "all you girls get up" except for me and another girl - we were allowed to stay.” – Stephanie*

*“I was **closer with the guys**, I always hung out with them when I was with them because I had nothing in common with these girls.” – Elisha*

*“I was **selling more than some of their guys**. And I was like... taking over...” – Nicole*

In the end, the role that they took on within the gang was nothing but survival of the fittest. In order to remain safe, protected, high, making money, or whichever it was that hooked them to the gang in the first place, they had a part to play.

“It was survival. It wasn't... I didn't really have a choice at that point... but I guess I could have avoided it”- Nancy

“Survival kicks in and that's that.” – Lisa

Elisha summed up her experience and the experience of other women within the gang lifestyle with one simple sentence: *“Shit, it's pretty hard being a woman in a man's world, and the gang, that's a man's world at its finest.”* Despite this clear role adaption in order to survive and maintain a standing with the rest of the gang, it was intriguing to hear why they bothered to stay. For these women, it was a variation of feeling respected or protected, having access to whatever they wanted- whenever they wanted it and just being a part of something bigger.

“I don't think there are many girl gang members. I just sold a lot of drug to them, gang members and stuff. Like a lot. So because they got from me, they protected me... you know what I mean? So, it was like ... yeah. That's how it all started....” – Sabrina

“The money. And because, for me,, because of my stature, I had the respect right? [...] For me, at my disposal, I had money, I had anything I wanted, I had respect, I had power, for me, it was really different.” – Stephanie

“I brought them lots of money but they also helped me out a lot too. Whenever I needed clothes, or money for a hotel room, or an ounce or whatever, they were always there to back me up.”- Lisa

“I mean at the beginning [...] before watching other people's lives spiral ... before all that bullshit- it seemed like a good time you know? Feeling invincible- feeling like you are part of something bigger.”- Elisha

For each of the women, it came down to the fact that they developed relationships within the gang that were holding them to this lifestyle. Even though they were in survival mode and just trying to make it out alive – there were lasting bonds created amongst the members of the gang. Although not all of the relationships were positive and healthy ones, there was some merit to their attachment to the gang.

iv. The Gang: “They are my Family”

“Every person’s story is different... so like what brings them to that place, what brings them to the gang is all very different. The reasons that they stay are all very different. Some are like, they have no family. That’s all the family they have.” – Stephanie

As described early in the results of this study, the road to gang membership relied heavily on these women feeling a lack of support from their family prior to gang membership and when they were asked about why they stayed in the gang, the topic of family once again resurfaced. This time, instead of the word family being used in a negative context describing hurt, pain and heart break – family was used to describe the support they felt from the gang lifestyle. “In the face of a hostile environment, one characterized by racism and extremes of social, economic and political marginalization’s, the gang thus is both a network of emotional and material support and an important outlet for aggression and resistance” (White, 2009, p. 55-56). Many of the women experienced intergenerational effects of residential schooling, primarily the emotional disconnect with their family. Thus, these women went in search for a familial connection elsewhere. In some other cases, the women had family members involved in the gang already and thus the gang posed as a means to connect with those family members. Regardless, in all of the cases of gang involved women, the Aboriginal gangs presented as a viable source of securing a family. It was their hook for gang involvement. It is what initially drew each of the women into that lifestyle. They were not receiving the support they needed at home so they went in search for it elsewhere.

“It’s like a family that I never knew. I never knew what a sense of family meant until I got into a gang. So it’s where I felt comfortable, it’s where I felt I need to be, and nothing else mattered, because that ... yeah... that’s where I felt I needed to be” – Lisa

“My whole family disowned me at this point. They took care of me, and they introduced me to the life. I didn’t know what else to do. Right? These were the only people; these are the only people that helped me. My family didn’t help me, no one helped me. These were the only people, so that’s all I knew.” – Nancy

Only one of the women felt no attachment and only anger towards their gang. Five of the six gang involved women described intense emotional family connection to their gang. They indicated on multiple occasions throughout the interview that despite the negatives of the

lifestyle, one positive was consistent throughout and that was the bond they had with at least some of the other gang associates.

“They were just my family. It was just a way of life.” – Nancy

“I stayed with that gang and they treated me like family and I felt ... I felt... umm... I felt content, I felt love, I felt belonging, I felt friendship and a sense of relief that other people were going through what I went through and I wasn't alone. And there's no judgement passed. We all had each other's backs. We didn't... you know... the things we were doing, the crimes and the drugs, you don't really reflect on that, you more focus on what you can do with each other to accomplish getting money or getting high right?” – Lisa

“Honestly, I felt safe with them. [...] Like they were a family to me.” – Elisha

“I didn't deal with them for like 2 years and then just happened to like run into a couple of them [...] and then we are all teary eyed, the guys too, and we are all teary eyed sitting there, giving each other hugs and getting fucking drunk and I'm back up into it because I missed them. Because like some of them are like really good fucking people.” – Nicole

There were a lot of stories that the women shared with me about the support they have received from the gang. One of the most touching stories was shared by Nicole. She had ended up in the hospital after a life threatening accident and she told me how the first people to come and see her were gang members. Even she was shocked to see them standing at the door when she woke up in terrible pain with the chance of never walking again. She got tears in her eyes as she described the story:

“Like when I ended up in the hospital the first ... few people that came and seen me were members... you know? And they showed up like... and I'm like, I wasn't expecting it at all and I like came to, I was sleeping and I came to and I just started crying [...] He's like shaking his head, he's like, "Nicole don't you fucking die on me man, I fucking need you" because I am like involved with some of their lives too, like with their kids and stuff, they call me Auntie and everything. He was like at the door, and he's like "don't you fucking die on me" he's like, "I can't have you fucking go man." He's like, "I need you in my fucking life"”

Lisa shares another account of how some of the conversations were deep in nature; they all just had their own way about it:

“I always had moments with the guys... like... sometimes you get high and it's just you two in the house, so ... something will just come up and you just start talking about your life and your experiences. You are not really going to be like “Ohhh I want to change” and all that, the thought is there, you don't know how to

go about it, but you'll talk about why, like why... why you are there, instead of with your kids. Like I would be like, "why aren't you with your kids bro?" and he would be like "oh my woman, my baby mom, is a bitch" you know? And I never really grew up with a Dad... and stuff like that will come out right? And I probably know about a quarter of them deeply. Some... but I mean, more not."

There is no doubt that just because they associated the gang as their family that there are not still difficulties and dysfunction within the family group. In some of the cases the women knew very little about their fellow gang associates, men and women alike. They did not know much about their past, where they were coming from or why they were there – it just was not what they talked about. The gang lifestyle requires all associates or members not to talk about their feelings and to be “hard” (emotionless and tough) and these were traits that the women knew they had to adhere to (Comack et al., 2013, p. 82-83).

“That's not talked about. You just know what you know from the moment you meet and that point only and what goes on within the street lifestyle. You don't know about anything of your heart, your feelings... that's that. You cry? You're slapped. Right? No. Not acceptable, doesn't happen. It just doesn't happen.” – Stephanie

“I never asked. You don't ask those things.” – Nancy

When I challenged some of the women with the statement that they consider these individuals family but know nothing about them, in a few of the cases, the women challenged me back indicating that is the case on some level, but not always. A few of the women described intimate moments they had with others and did indicate that there was some closeness and support among the members.

“Him and I were in a crack house on the West End and we were just lying there, getting high on crack, and we were talking about life. Wouldn't it be cool to be out of this shit and like... you know, stop smoking crack and like be there for our kids... and just change our life?” - Lisa

“To be fair, like, there were some good times too. I did actually have fun hanging with some of these guys, I did actually get to know some of the, usually unexpectedly, and there were real people under there” - Elisha

When this contradiction between really knowing “this family” versus not actually knowing them at all was discussed further, it was clear that their definition of family was different from a purely genetic approach to family and relatives. To them, this was *their family* and what they believed a family gives to you – that’s why they were there. That is what made

them stay. That is why it was (or is) so difficult to leave. It is very complicated and subjective to define “family” and in this case – the definition of family stands as it is presented here.

“Crazy right? But family... family in the sense that they’ll have your back, you’ll always stick together, you are family in that sense. But how many families truly know each other too? Really?” – Lisa

“I’ll stay away and be okay right, and then I will see some of the girls and I’ll like talk to them and stuff and it’s kind of like you miss that kind of connection and like being together). It’s because it’s genuine love. Like on the streets, there is a lot of genuine, fucking, unconditional love with the girl.” – Nicole

Despite the dysfunctional relationships that exist within the gang, it was clear from these interviews that even amongst the violence and criminal activity this notion of family, even after leaving the gang, never falters. The women were clear that parts of the gang lifestyle are unhealthy, destructive, illegal, immoral, and so on and so on, but this aspect, the idea of a family, that part is real and even in their sober lives they carry that with them.

“I didn’t even look at it as gang life per say, but as my family. That was my family, that’s who I was going home too. I knew I wanted to change my life, because I didn’t want to be an addict anymore and I didn’t want to be a prostitute, but I never thought about contemplating getting out of gangs because that was my family. Like I still care for them, and I always will. However, I can’t be a part of that lifestyle anymore, if I want to show my children what a real family looks like.” – Lisa

v. Relationships in the Gang

“Just as relations within families are deeply gendered (given the patriarchal nature of the contemporary family), so too are relations between gang members (because their “doing gender” involves the performance of a hyper-masculinity)” (Comack et al., 2003, p. 61). It was clear that these women adapted the male role when it came to their day-to-day activities within the gang and that they considered the gang a family. However, in order to better understand the social interactions within the gang lifestyle, the women were asked to describe their relationships with other men and women in the gang. It was interesting to also find that their relationships with others within the gang also reflected this masculine mentality and even though they did have supportive relationships not all of the relationships in the gang were healthy. There was still no

hiding that women were on the bottom of the totem pole, regardless of the position or status they held. Even women placed other women in a lower status than themselves. For an organization based on respect and trust it is clear that respect is present in some relationships but it is not consistently held throughout the gang.

Relationships with Male Gang Members

Majority of research completed with male gang members supports the notion that women play a very menial role in the gang and act as nothing more than “old ladies” (wives of gang members), “bitches” (girlfriends of gang members) and “hos” (lowest on the sexual hierarchy) (Comack et al., 2013, p. 85). However, the women in this study provided their perspective on what relationships were like with men in the gang. Although there were accounts of women who did occupy these menial roles and were nothing more than entertainment for the men, it was a lot more complicated than the male perspective. As it has already been discussed women felt that they were “closer with the men” or more like “one of the boys” and this theme continued to be reflected in their accounts of the relationships they shared while within the gang. The women accounted for experiences of trust and companionship with males in the gang. In the case of some of the women, the safety and protection that they were searching for was secured through the males in the gang and because of those relationships, they felt that they were best off to remain with the gang rather than against them or worse off, completely on their own.

“I was closer with the males than they [the other girls] were because the males would use them for their money. The males would invite me to go get high with them and go drink with them, you know? One of the boys, not the other girls, they would for either sex or you know? They had my back... completely. They had my back and I had their back” – Nancy

“This is why the guys that I was with ... they had a few girls. And I didn't care because I had a few chippies on the side too. There was no faithfulness that way with boyfriend/girlfriend. It's a business relationship... but it's with benefits. You know? And like, if anybody messed with me they... he would mess with them you know what I am saying? You have like a main and then the little peons, and if they get beat up, oh well they are on their own. But because I made the most money out of all those girls, I was okay, I was protected that way. And you know... I got respect because I gave it too.” – Lisa

However, it was not always healthy friendships or relationships that these women had with the males in the gang. In many of the interviews after talking about the benefits of their relationships with boys, they also touched on some of the difficulties they faced within the gang around how they were treated.

“One way or another, girls would always get turned on. You can never trust anybody, ever. You know? Eventually you are going to get, your nose broke, or beat up, or robbed or ... you know... eventually.” – Sabrina

“One thing is that you get used to men degrading you. Like, being a woman, no matter what level you are at, men will always try to degrade you and make you less and unless they see you as a sister. But if they see you as a relationship partner, they will try and bring you down and down and down until you feel nothing.” - Nancy

One of the women, upon learning about the study, asked one of her male friends who was in a gang what he thought of the women. It was clear that his perception of women and how the women thought they were being perceived was unfortunately accurate.

“I asked him, “What did you think of women” [he said] “Ah fuck they were disposable, easy come easy go man” and I was like really? Even the ones you were attracted too? And he was like “I couldn’t get attracted to them, to me they were just money, strictly business and I didn’t latch on to any bitch back then.” To him... chicks are disposable, they are easy come, easy go. Fly by-s” – Lisa

There were a variety of accounts and stories where the women described situations where girls are frequently used for money whether it be by selling drugs and the men taking all the money they made or by selling themselves and the men taking all the money and providing drugs in return. The women described a very capitalist system that was the backbone of daily drug economy in the gang and the ones who controlled this system were the men. Often this control was exerted at the expense of the women associated with the gang, despite their level of contribution. Once again the experiences of oppression are extensive in the lives of these women and the control was frequently exhibited through means of structures like capitalism, patriarchy and colonialism (Comack, 1996).

In the case of the six gang-involved women in this study, there was not a lot of indication that they were frequently being “used and abused.” While in search for participants I met with a variety of agencies and workers who have worked with this population and they were quick to contradict and burst the ideal that these women were safe from victimization. When discussing

this research with community workers, many suggested that it is common for these memories to be repressed or ignored or justified for some reason or another and thus making the women truly believe it was a case where they “deserved it” or it was not abuse. One of the women openly indicated that at the time, she did not know the difference and until she began to reflect on it after being out of that lifestyle, that she truly realized it was still abuse.

*“I mean I have been slapped a couple times, but in my eyes I deserved it. I mean, it’s not to say... like... I know, when I call somebody a goof I am looking for a fight right? And like, I would telling him “you’re a goof” *makes a smack noise* whatever, I have taken licks and I have given them so whatever, it’s just the way it is. Now... I don’t deserve to be hit for nothing, even if I do call you a goof, you don’t touch me, now I know right? So I never really... like a lot of girls have horrible experiences, but like I really haven’t but I knew even though I haven’t, I needed something different in my life... I was missing something.” – Lisa*

In some cases, the women even contradicted themselves stating they felt they were never victimized but at another time in the interview told me about experiences they had with violence either from fellow gang members or in defense of them. Regardless of whether they were making light of, ignoring or forgetting the negative experiences they had with men- for some of these women, they expressed how these degrading relationships were detrimental to their already fragile self-esteem and they carried these feelings of worthlessness outside of their gang lifestyle.

“You get used to them having multiple partners, you get used to them doing this and trying to get out of that is SO hard. Like, out of that frame of thinking is still sometimes, today, I think it’s okay, even though it’s been so many years. I still today think that it’s okay for a man to do that.” - Nancy

Relationships with Other Females

What is even more interesting than the relationship of men and women in the gang is the relationship between women and women in that lifestyle. There is very little available research on relationships between women in gangs (particularly in coed gangs) and thus is this an area where some more research should be focused. With a few small exceptions where women actually had lasting relationships with one or two females in the groups, the rest of the discussion around their relationships with other women was fairly negative. Two of the women described

meaningful relationships with another woman who was gang involved. However, it was important to note that they expressed that the women they were friends with were also in somewhat of the same position or stature within the gang as they were, thus making it possible for them to actually be “friends” or feel like “sisters” whether they openly expressed it or not.

“I can't even explain - we were almost like mothers to them too. So if there was a moment when we were like "Fuck, I wish we didn't have to be here" but we knew there was no way out, we would hold onto each other. We never showed that to anybody that we were close or showed each other any kind of support or talking or advice or anything openly.” – Stephanie

In most cases however, the relationships between women were similar to the degrading relationship between men and women. The women openly admitted to not only feeling like the other women were less than they were but that they went along with the boys in degrading them further in order to maintain their status with the men. They criticized other women’s behaviour within the gang as much as the men scrutinized them. Albeit, they may have taken a slightly different spin on the situation, but regardless – in the moment, they shared the same disdain for the other women that the men shared. For example, Lisa explained a situation where it was about doing good business:

*“... I used to hear them cut up girls and say “oh that stupid bitch only brought me 40 bucks- that cheap whore just giving it away” just nasty stuff. I’m like... as a girl... I was like... I was kind of a tomboy though right? But as a girl, I was just thinking oh well... I wonder what they say about me? *laughs* Really though!? I was thinking, well a thousand isn’t enough? *laughs* I’m just as bad, stupid bitch giving it up for 40 bucks. I didn’t agree with that, it lowered it for everybody else.”*

It was fairly clear from the other women as well that they felt they had no connection or responsibility to the other women in the gang. They had themselves to look out for and that was enough.

“I was like one of the boys... right? Whereas, and then I would even, treat the girls crappy too. Like, the boys would.” – Lisa

“With any of the other girls, it was ... they would try to open up to me... and I would hear them, but I'm like... what do you want me to say to you? Like I can't say, oh poor you, I can't because then I'll get shit from them. I can't. I can't even show you more attention than this one because I ... I think that this girl has generally suffered a lot of pain from these... "my bros" ... but I can't show that to

them because I'll get in shit... "Why the fuck you being nice to her?" right? ... "what the fuck?" ... so I can't." – Stephanie

"I mean, there were a lot of girls that were just there to be arm candy or someone who was going to be a lay for one night and then kicked to the curb you know? I didn't really hang out with them or bother to get to know them because I knew they wouldn't be around long. So what was the point? You know? That's sad." – Elisha

They expressed that majority of the other women were jealous of them and their status with the gang, their relationship with the men or the fact that they could make more money. Therefore, there was very little respect or trust among the women. They all expressed how they could only speak for their own experiences, but assumed that even at a lower level in the gang (such as those working on the streets as sex workers) it would likely be the same.

"There is only a few you could trust. Very jealous, always trying to fight me." – Nancy

"The women are fucking cunts. They are like; it's always who is on top, who is the best bitch, who is got more fucking respect, who fucking ... you know?" – Nicole

One of the women discussed how they used their "commonality" with the other women to help them retain their status as well, but not in terms of helping one another but rather using them in order to advance herself – a similar mentality that was described of males.

"Well I would play it up with the girls so that they would come to me for their dope or whatever else, so I would make the more money so I would compete with the boys that way. And the boys kind of hated that, but oh well, because they know I am going to come to them for the bigger stuff anyways." – Lisa

In many cases, the women expressed how they felt it was unfortunate that the relationships were this way and that they treated other women how they did. For the five women who are now out of the gang, throughout the interview they reflected back on some of the relationships, the things they did and saw and expressed feeling sick to their stomach about some of them. Nonetheless, at that point in their lives, it was once again – survival. They felt like they had to do what they had to do to remain safe and respected with the other men in the gang. Despite all the discussion on roles and relationships in the gang, Nicole – who is the only woman still involved with the gang – expresses how she truly feels about her position:

"I say, I'm nobody. I say, I'm fuck all. And I always say that. I'm nobody. I'm nobody. And I never have been anybody. And I say that all the time." – Nicole

Common belief about gangs is that they are based on trust and respect for one another and these girls explained that to some degree this was true, however times have changed and the notion of respect is fading from gang tradition.

Respect and Trust within the Gang

It appears that the gang is founded and held together by respect and trust, but this is only on the surface level. That solidarity is a disguise and underneath it is truly a real life game of survival of the fittest and not just for women. Despite the women explaining that the gang does act as a family and did/does provide them with the security they expect from a family, there is still never a guarantee that you are actually safe from those around you.

“I dealt with it, but I had a lot of... I HAVE a lot of respect for some of them. But some of them I don't. Some of them I think are pieces of shit and honestly, they know nothing about gangs and respect” – Nicole

“There is no respect in the gangs... well there is to a certain level, but a lot of deception, a lot of hate, a lot of anger. You sleep with everything on you because you don't trust. There's only a couple people you could really trust” – Nancy

In the case of one of the gangs, one of the girls describes the bad reputation that they are getting both on the streets and with the law. She stresses that as soon as there is a bad reputation, there is more attention paid to the gang from the police and other law enforcers and attention on the gang makes everyone, men and women alike, paranoid. Paranoia can only cause more distrust and violence within the gang when everyone is on constant alert.

“Like one of you guys would go on one of your trips because you guys are so fucked up on your own product ... I get a beating for it. I was like, you know? Like how about I get fucking fucked up? Like I went on, like I used a lot of different stuff like meth and stuff and I was like, I went on trips about you guys and you don't see me rolling up on you guys and fucking giving you guys beat downs and shit, so why the fuck is it happening to me?” – Nicole

It is back to the idea that they are in fact just another person, a nobody, and in the end they are left to their own devices and moral compass to determine what they can handle and what they cannot.

vi. Normality of Violence & the Moral Struggle

“Violence is a day-to-day reality in many impoverished and racialized spaces” and that violence becomes a normalized function in the day-to-day reality of being a gang member (Comack et al., 2013, p. 26). Throughout the interviews, it was very clear that the women understood that they were victims of and contributors to violence but they described them with such normality as though it was just part of everyday life in the gang. Stories of beatings, rape, threats and abuse of every kind were talked about with such ease. It is very important to note that they did not discuss these issues as if they did not care about them, rather that it was a piece of the lifestyle, a piece of their story and violent behaviour either taken or given out to others was a norm. Upon listening to the experiences of these women within the gang, it became clear that they all had experienced or seen so many forms of violence that they were desensitized and were able to account for stories of extreme hurt and violence without a flinch.

“Like I started selling drugs really young out in East Hastings, which is just scary as fuck because I knew fuck all but I thought I knew it all and I got beat up, lynched, chased with bloody needles from working girls because I'd like “disrespect them” or you know? I was like stupid and I didn't know.” – Nicole

However, for many of the women there was a point where they were finally pushed past their moral boundaries but it took a bit of a journey through the lifestyle before they got there.

Violence in the Gang

“Violence... yeah... for nothing” – Sabrina

Initiation is a complicated topic and one that should be researched further especially because there is little research around initiation for women in gangs. As covered previously, there are a variety of methods of initiation that have been reported for females associated with gangs including being “sexed in” or holding their own in multiple fights (Molidor, 1996; Nimmo, 2001). However, as discussed in Comack et al. (2013), there is evidence that gangs are no longer as aggressive in forcing members to join because they choose individuals that are vulnerable and get their heart in the game so that they are loyal. Recruiters then flash the added benefits of providing basic needs, meeting emotional needs and access to money, alcohol and

drugs and they no longer need to force people to join, people choose to join (p. 80-81). This was reflected in the responses of the women in this study. Only two of the women accounted for an initiation into the gang:

“I got my ass beat. Oh yeah. I was knocked unconscious for three days. What was going through my mind when I woke up? It was oh god help me.” – Nancy

“I got a dirty licking from these boys. And I didn't give a shit.” – Nicole

The remainder of the gang associated women indicated that they had not been initiated into the gang because they knew someone and thus they were respected from the time they got in or they reiterated they could not be initiated because as women, they could not be gang members. In the case of the latter, they chose to continue dabbling in that lifestyle. Either way, there were inconsistencies amongst the women regarding what the initiation process can be like. Even those who defended the fact that women cannot officially be members of the gang could still describe situations they witnessed where other women had to prove themselves to continue to be part of the gang.

“I saw a few girls that had to get gang banged, or you had to make over \$1000 in one night and give them over \$1000 in one night if you wanted their protection otherwise you were beat up and raped or beat and done whatever too and you were thrown on the streets and you weren't allowed back.” – Stephanie

“I mean I was lucky in terms of the fact that I was never forced to do anything, I was never like shit on or beaten or anything like that. Other girls were though.” – Elisha

As discussed in the literature, the initiation – whether it happens or not – is not the end of the violence within this lifestyle and this was also described by the women in this study. As described by Fox (2013), often women are subjected to victimization prior to and during involvement in the gang. The women provided a variety of stories supporting this notion, whereby making mistakes, being the victims of rumors or jealousy, as well as downright paranoia resulted in violent repercussions.

“There was a lot of deception and pointing fingers and so like... for something like one of the females went and said that I was planning to do something with some other people, so umm... the guys believed her and I ended up getting beaten the shit out of me by 2x4's ... for making this plan that didn't happen - she was just jealous” – Nancy

“Yeah like I have had my nose broken by one of them. Yeah... for nothing. Some girls get their hair cut, it's ridiculous you know? Just because they think they're... they can... like those type of guys I just don't ... never go around. Avoid them at all costs! guys would like take their money and you know ... hit them, lots of girls would get hit all the time, they would be so scared not to... so scared not to come back because if they get caught anywhere else they would get beat up and if they come back they get beat up, it's like catch 22.” – Sabrina

“If they ever seen you, you were beat up every time they seen you. So it's like, you come and give us \$1000, we'll give you protection, let you work the streets, take half your money, get you high, fuck you up, mentally... or whatever right? I've seen that happen lots of times yeah.” – Stephanie

“... I seen him like numerous times like give people dirty beatings just because he's paranoid.” – Nicole

There were also frequent accounts of sexual abuse being given as a punishment to those who made mistakes, did not sell enough drugs or unfortunately just got in the way when one of the men were having a bad day or a bad trip from the drugs. For the gangs that these women were associated with, this kind of violence was gender specified and reserved for females only. However, one of the women shared from “word on the street” that some of the less respected rival gangs were using this form of punishment for men as well.

“They are messed on dope and shit. So... they are unpredictable. That's the thing. I mean if I could predict all their behaviours and stuff ... then okay. But because they are always unpredictable... you are always at risk of getting killed ya know? And I have seen people get raped and done in, and I just don't agree with that. I don't know, even when I was addict and I seen it, I didn't per say agree with it, but I had to go along with it. So, I knew that really truly I didn't belong in that lifestyle.” – Lisa

“[Rival gang] is no good. They are like... apparently like notoriously known for like the guys give ass minutes. Like if you fuck up, you get fucked in the ass whether you are a girl or a guy. Like, no... They are like... bad action there.” – Nicole

The behaviour of the rival gangs was not discussed often within the interviews. There were only a few accounts of the role of some of the rival gangs or groups within the city and surrounding areas. There were indications that not only were the women cautious of their fellow gang members but they also needed to be aware of their surroundings and the possible attack from rival gangs. At all times these women needed to be on high alert to defend themselves.

“I didn't leave that neighbourhood. And when I did it was like, really dangerous for me - we had like a vehicle or whatever, we would leave the neighbourhood but we would always stick together.” – Nancy

“I've been rolled up on because I supported them... like by different gangs. And then ended up in hospital because I supported them” – Nicole

Once again, when it came to defending themselves, the women described taking a very masculine approach to surviving the threats posed by their gang or rival gangs. They fought violence with violence.

“I'll go in like fighting whether I am going to take a beating or I'm going to stand out on top. And trust me; I've taken my fair beatings, even me mouthing off sometimes... I don't give a fuck... I'm not scared of anything, like really am not. I have had shot guns down my throat, I've taken dirty beatings from five fucking guys. I've had an axe in my leg from a fucking gang member. Nothing scares me like I am full on, ready to go for like a lot of things. Like I'm in it like a dirty rag.” – Nicole

“This guy tried to rape me and I got out of that situation before he did... but I still had a beef with him so I took care of it and fought him in front of everybody in the bar. And I smashed him out. I knocked him out, whatever. [...] Like no, and I told them all, he did me wrong, he hurt me and he is not allowed to do that... because that's something to me, that no man should ever do to a woman.” – Nancy

Personal Moral Struggle & Drawing a Line

Even though they felt they had to partake in the violence occurring around them, they still had a moral compass that stood its ground when it came to certain situations within the lifestyle.

“I used to feel so bad for people, like even the girl you talked to yesterday, I have seen her get raped and messed up too- and I couldn't do anything about it. Because in that code she had it coming to her. But as a woman to a woman, no she didn't. Nobody does... nobody has that right to abuse you... right?” – Lisa

“[Researcher: How did you feel when you saw someone else get abused?] Scared. But thankful that it wasn't me. But I just felt so sad for that girl... so sad for that girl.” – Stephanie

One of the girls spent quite a bit of time in the interview describing how she conducted business based on her own morals. For example, she described how she refused sale of drugs to any woman who was pregnant or to any clients that came searching for drugs with their kids

either in the car or with them. In her mind, that was inexcusable. She described a battle with her own morals from time to time as sometimes her sister would need her to watch her nieces and nephews and she would still use drugs in the bathroom, behind closed doors. Despite her explanation that she was fully functional when she was high, she knew that the bottom line was that she was an addict and she needed her fix- even if it was somewhat against her cardinal rule. She still strongly believed that children should be kept out of this lifestyle and maintained that there was never any reason to involve them.

“But then, there are some of them that are like... put the kid in the room or have the kid stand here and you teach ... "we are gonna let this kid watch this happen. We are going to tell the kid why this is happening, because Daddy has been a bad... Daddy did this bad, or Mommy did this bad" and that's fucked up. You know? You've traumatized a kid for the rest of their life. They are gonna... you don't know what's going to happen with them now. You just changed their... their... I think, when shit like that happens, you've just changed a child's path-their entire life.” - Nicole

This particular woman is still involved with the gang and admits to being a full supporter with no intentions of changing that in the near future. She even told me that she tells her nieces and nephews that she deals drugs, but just because she does it does not mean they should and tries to teach them more productive behaviour. When I asked her why she had such a strong rule regarding sheltering children from the ins and outs of the lifestyle (especially considering her openness with her own nieces and nephews about it), she described a situation she had with her nephew that has changed her view forever:

“I had a gun at my sister's house. I didn't know it was in because I cleaned everything out and I didn't know it was in a bag of fucking... this big bag of heels that I had... but I didn't know it was in the bottom and I dumped out the shoes and this gun slid across the floor and my nephew, who was 8 at the time, picked it up and he fucking took the safety off, pulled out the fricken gun cartridge, like the magazine, pulled it out and looked at it and put it all back together in the matter of like... 30 seconds. And I started bawling my eyes out and I grabbed the gun from his hand and I was like... and he's looking at me and he's like, "what wrong Auntie?" And he, at 8 years old, he fucking right in front of my eyes, picked up this gun and just knew how to handle it. And that scared the living shit out of me.”

Even though she still has no plans to leave the lifestyle behind, she remains dedicated to protecting her nephews and nieces from the lifestyle and makes that an integral part of how she lives her life in the gang. Although she is the only one who is still gang involved, there was more

than one occasion where the women described situations they were morally against but felt like they were helpless and could not do anything about the situation which resulted in the inability to stop the violence.

“For nothing... it's just ridiculous. I was driving in a car with somebody one day and just everywhere we stopped he would just get out and stab the person we'd go see, like for nothing. And I can't do anything about it you know? What am I supposed to do? Like... If I do anything I am going to get stabbed too.” – Sabrina

“To watch them treat them like garbage and there is nothing I can do. Nothing. What am I supposed to do right? “Hey what the fuck are you doing?” HA good effing luck with that – in the wrong room, I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you, that's for sure. That's too hard to deal with that shit. It's not for me.” – Elisha

When dealing with these moral battles, the women had a choice to make. Their decisions were easy, get out of it or adapt to it. For the one woman who is still gang involved, her strategy was to adapt to the lifestyle and learn how to work within it. She described learning how to enter into a room and within thirty seconds of being there she had to determine whether she should stay or go. In other cases, she just avoided them all together.

“Like when they are on their fucking... using their dope, and they go on their trips. That's the only time I have got to worry about... what I have learned is to fricken scope them out and okay, I can be in the room with them for 30 seconds and know whether it's a good situation to be, if I should get out right away or if I can stay a while.” – Nicole

“I kept my fair distance away from them. Like there are a couple of them that are unpredictable. Three of these guys... I keep my fair distance from because they are unpredictable. They are fucking lethal. They are like, lethal fucking weapons. They... they just dealing with them over the years, they scare the FUCK out of me. You know? So I keep my fair distance and like, I don't show them that I'm scared of them because that would just cause just their attitude in the way they are, that would just cause them ... you know whenever they are around it's... you know... the tough cunt I am when I am out on the streets and that's it, you know?” – Nicole

For some of the women, these situations ignited the spark for the “hook for change” that they were searching for. After struggling with a moral dilemma for some time, a few of the gang associated women experienced a reality check that was big enough to initiate their wanting to leave the gang lifestyle behind.

“So I never really realized I had to get rid of them to achieve those goals until I got my 5 years and the guy I was with, who was top dog in the gang, they call him the chief, and he got severely beaten by our gang... and that’s where it made me realize... wow.... So they are so corrupted by drugs and power and fame that they will take out the big guy. That was my moment when I was like maybe gang life isn’t for me...” – Lisa

“You know, it’s so ridiculous, because I was pushing everyone else away. When it came down to it, the more I hung out with them, like the more they were controlling me, probably because there was more I knew each time. [...] Being controlled and used and like, thrown aside sometimes like you are nothing. I mean, that’s just shitty to be like that or to be treated like that. That’s why I decide no more. If this is what it’s going to be like being around you, I am not doing it anymore. It’s not happening.” – Elisha

For these two women in particular, the moral struggle was the moment they decided to begin making a change. For Elisha, she was able to leave the gang lifestyle behind based on the fact that she no longer could handle watching the violence and the hurt and the pain caused by some of the gang members. For Lisa, the idea came to her through her moral struggle but it still needed a bit more finessing before she could make it her reality. In her particular case as well as for a few of the other girls, once they were ready for the change, prison presented as an opportunity to make that change.

“So I didn’t really, per say, have a bad experience being part of them. So, what it boiled down to for me though, as time went on, and I only had these people in my life and nobody else... it was, I was like, getting into more and more trouble because you know, unfortunately gangs are about addictions and crime and being powerful and like, retaliation with other gangs and like owning the streets right? So with that comes a lot of trouble... and incarcerations and such and so it was affecting my life in that sense, where I was lowering myself and what my morals should be. But, I didn’t know what my morals were at the time until I went to prison and got the five years and I started to learn what my morals and values should look like and how to achieve them.” – Lisa

vii. Gang Involvement & Prison

Five of the women experienced prison and three out of the five women experienced prison more than once. The experience of each of the women varied in terms of the length of time they spent there and their opinions on the experience going in as a “gang associate.” After discussing doing prison time with these women, the conclusion was drawn that prison is truly

what you want to make of it. If the women wanted to go in there and actively participate in the gang lifestyle, they did. If they wanted to remain on the outskirts of the gang involvement, they could. For two of the women who were in and out of prison consistently throughout their life courses, they experienced both of these scenarios.

“No... It depends what YOU want out of prison. If you want to gang bang and get high, you are going to do it in prison, it’s there, it’s available for everybody. If you want to work on yourself, like I did, in my last bit- when I got my five years, I separated from all those people.” – Lisa

All of the women who had spent time in prison accounted for their crimes being related to gang involvement. In majority of the cases, they were convicted of drug related crimes on behalf of the gang and they received lengthy sentences due to their gang associations and compounded charges that were accrued over time. When they were asked how they felt about taking the rap for the gang, they were quick to remind the researcher that it was part of the code, it was how things were done and it is just what you do.

“You get recognition, so you get recognition for being solid, taking the rap even though you know very well that you didn't do shit and then you do your time for your crime... "your" crime. You never hold that same stature that you did before you went to jail, but if you choose to go back into that gang life, they will be like, "this bitch is solid, she fucking took the rap” – Stephanie

Taking the fall was not always taken well by the women either. One of the girls described a situation where she took the fall for one of the guys and in turn he was ungrateful and showed no respect for her which heavily tainted her experience in the penitentiary.

“Yeah, I... I was involved with doing dirt with them and we got busted while we were doing it and I took two falls for two different people and did a year and 9 months and then pen'd it. So basically I got out like sour as fuck and like I retaliated, I turned against him and like I even said to the [gang] boys, like I was like straight up, I fucking took a fall for fucking homey, and he like fucking straight up, like he you know? He turned his back on me. And so I was like I am going to turn on your boy, straight the fuck up, I am going after him- and if you are going to do something about it then do something.” – Nicole

In Nicole’s case, prison had actually made her angrier and more violent because she felt the need to defend herself against the loss of respect she received from the person she took the fall for. It was not uncommon for the women to develop and recognize institutionalization. They

moved from the rules on the street to the rules in the prison and adapted to them and respected them.

“Jail is just as bad, it's just as institutionalizing, it brings you even closer to other people who are like yourself.” – Nancy

“There are lifers, people who want to change and people who don't. Three types of people in the pen, that's it. Lifers, are like, they are the ultimate respect, lifers. Like they fricken run the show in there. You don't disrespect them, they tell you something you fucking listen. None of this gang stuff, not in the woman's jail anyways, not at EIFW, that's not how it rolls there. Maybe a long time ago, but I'm not sure.” – Stephanie

“The moment when you walk in it's called the "fish walk" your very first time. "Oh we got a new fish!" - are doing the "fish walk" which is very new, very first time in the pen or are you doing your "walk of shame" which means you got out on parole and you fucked up and you are coming back.” – Stephanie

For Stephanie in particular, she had a long history of family coming in and out of the institution and described a unique experience working her way through the legal system. From her very first contact with the justice system up until today she is still widely recognized by law regulators. In Stephanie's case, she was protected by her last name. Her name meant something in the gang world and it meant something within the institution so she was known and thus she was safe and protected.

*“My Mom and my sister did time for selling drugs in there and their story of how it was in there and even in talking with some of the old guards because they remembered me because I used to go visit my Mom there... the cycle... we talked about the cycle. Everybody knew who I was, who I rolled with, who my Mom was, who my family was... oh yeah... they knew... The guards, all I could do is say my last name and they are like "[last name]!" and even when I went to remand it was like "[last name]!" hmm... and they were like we know your Mom and they are like "[last name]'s get special privileges around here! I can't even describe, just saying my last name within an institution, because all my family have been in and out, in and out. I don't know, maybe they had some sort of relationship with the guards *laughs*”*

A few of the other girls also commented on life in prison being “not so bad” because the family they had on the streets was also in there and so really, it was just a different version of what was on the streets.

“The minute you go into jail you got family there too, because they are in and out of jails right? Even when I went to jail, a couple times they put money in my account or made sure I had stuff while I was in the institution.” – Lisa

“Some of them sent me money, like, I had the money.” – Nicole

“I was initially already respected, nobody said anything to me, nothing was ever done to me, nobody ever gave me a hard time, some girls get in there- right away and not even an hour they get beat up or their shit gets jacked. Like in the pen, when I got in there I had girls coming up to me, “here, we got this for you! we got some canteen stuff for you, we’ll give you this, here’s a care package” I got love right away... that’s what they call love right? So I didn’t have anything to worry about, but in the same note, I didn’t go rolling up in there “I’m fucking S from [Aboriginal Gang], don’t fuck with me... I’ll tell my boys, you guys will all be fucked up” none of that shit...” – Stephanie

Literature describes prison as a breeding ground for gang recruitment and as an opportune place to learn the business of drug dealing and the rules of the gang lifestyle (Comack et al., 2013, p. 28). Examples of this theory were clearly described by one of the women. Lisa described her opportunities in jail as the chance to do even more gang work or to play the part even more than she did on the street. For some of her time in the penitentiary, it was her chance to recruit new members and continue to retain her status in the gang outside the prison even while being off the streets.

*“I could do more gang-banging in prison. It was kind of funner *laughs* [...] Yeah because more girls means more money for the gang. So initiating people. Like come chill with us man, screw those guys. I was a good manipulator, I knew how to talk to the talk and give them stuff... I guess in jail you could play the part more, you know, because it’s all around you.” – Lisa*

The girls were also asked about leaving prison and whether or not they were going right back to the gang or if that was their opportunity to escape. For a few of the girls that spent quite a bit of time in and out of prison, their perspective on leaving meant that they were headed right back to where they came from, and majority of the time that was the case for most women leaving prison.

“I would get pinched for something, go to jail for a couple years, I knew I was getting out to my people; I knew they would be waiting for me.” – Lisa

“Yeah, they don’t stand outside the jail for you like, “C’mon bitch let’s go!” no... they wait... they sit back and wait. Because some girls go to jail and they get out and they still hang out with them. It’s like 70-80% that the girl is going to go

back. They are like, "they'll come back" and like I said, 80% of the girls do right?" – Stephanie

Sooner or later, for the women who have left the gang lifestyle behind, prison provided them with an opportunity to reflect on their lives or gave them the reality check that they needed to begin the journey out of the gang lifestyle. For one of the girls, she attended prison twice and left the gang lifestyle shortly thereafter. She actually indicated that she liked it in prison, she felt in safe in there.

*"I liked it in there. I liked it in jail. Going to jail changed me a lot. Just because I was clean for so long after jail. I liked it in jail. There was no drugs! Lots of people say there was more drugs in jail than there is on the street, but that's not true *laughs* it's not true, it can't be true. Like, I was there for, I was in jail for like 3 years, twice, and I've only... I didn't see that much. Like I maybe used in jail twice? You know? So if there's that much in there, I would have been using it all the time. Right?" – Sabrina*

Although this statement was contradicted by two of the other girls who indicated that drugs were easily and readily available in the institution, it is difficult to determine whether this discrepancy is due to the institution, the position of the women in the gang and in the prison or their personal choices in pursuing drugs while incarcerated. For the purpose of this research, their access to drugs in prison was not investigated much farther than presented here. It was just noted that regardless, they all accessed drugs at least once while incarcerated and some continued business as usual within the walls of the institution, at least for part of their time incarcerated.

For a few of the other girls who spent more time in and out of the institution, it eventually clicked for them that they needed to change. They looked back on their lives and looked at what they were foreseeing for their future and determined it was time to make a change.

"I didn't know that they were destructive per say until I started looking at myself, my values and my morals, and because at a young age I didn't have those tied to me. So when I started learning them in prison I really started to look at... wow... I am a bad ass... I need to change because my kids have a shitty role model. I need to do something different." – Lisa

"Being in jail is a whole other story. Being in jail is a whole other story. Something clicked in there for me, I think because I seen my family and people I have known come in and out, in and out, in and out. When I actually went, that was my rock bottom. That was my rock bottom. And I'm like, holy fuck, I ain't

fucking doing this ever again. I made the choice to walk away from all of them, the lifestyle, the drugs, everything.” – Stephanie

At this point we have begun to see where women are most likely to begin their transition outside of the gang lifestyle. They have either hit their moral limits or they have had a moment of realization while in the institution. For all of the women who have left this lifestyle behind, it all begins with a thought and then there are some ups and downs in terms of making that thought become a reality. With the right moment happening at the right time in the right mindset, these women experienced their enlightenment and their main “hook for change.”

viii. Leaving the Gang & “Hooks” for Gang Exit

“When I was first contacted by somebody about you to do this, I had thought how am I going to explain all of this to you because there's that avenue. It's so complicated. You can't explain all of it and then you can't even describe some of that excitement, adventure, scariness, sadness, hurt, violence... you can't explain all of it... you just can't because there is so many... there is happiness too right?” – Stephanie

Up until this point we have discussed why these Aboriginal women joined the gang and their “hooks” for gang membership. They were in search of family, love, support, excitement, and adrenaline and when they found it, they realized it was a lot harder to leave than they expected. All the same, for the women who have left the gang lifestyle behind, it was imperative to learn what their “hook for change” was that led them to their current healthier lifestyle. Proctor (2009) indicated a variety of “hooks for change” including a few of the ones indicated by the women in this study. For all of these women, leaving the gang was not a simple task. They did not just wake up, realize they wanted out and then left. All of the women who indicated leaving the gang lifestyle went back and forth between leaving the gang and going back before they fully committed and even though they have fully committed, the process does not fully go without its challenges. Even the one woman, who strongly believes she will never leave the gang, discussed being “over it” and trying to walk away on more than one occasion; she just has not quite reached a point of full commitment yet.

“I'll never be out. Like, I don't think I'll ever be out. Until ... even... I don't know how to explain it. There are so many of them I love even if I'm like, I don't know, it's hard to explain. Like because, I don't have kids, I don't... I can't say like if I'm... like I can't even say I'll always be in it because I don't know. Like, what if I get married and have kids and then... it'll be different. But like as of now? Like, I'm involved and if they ever ask me to help them, like I will. But, I don't ... I don't know. Like if I have a kid or something... like... then I don't know. I think things will be different and I don't know.” - Nicole

The results show that it is not a streamline process and gang exit route can be very unique to the individual in terms of the number of times they go back and forth and how difficult the transition is for them. Two of the girls described a bit of a challenge leaving but in order to make the move they made themselves useless to the gang and in doing so it made it easier for the other gang members to let them go.

“I went back eventually and tried to leave... and then I ended up getting kidnapped and held because I was trying to leave. Eventually they seen that I wasn't even smoking dope, I wasn't doing anything, I wasn't that helpful anymore. I had the other people were in the gangs kept telling them that I didn't want to be there and they needed to let me go.” – Nancy

“If you have any interaction with the cops, you go to jail, and you become known by the cops, you are no good to them. So that's why it was easy for me to leave.” – Stephanie

Hooks for Gang Exit: Wanting a Healthy Lifestyle and to Help Others

Three of the women indicated that part of their reason for leaving the gang and what they have learned from their experiences is that they want to help others like them. In order to help others, they first had to teach themselves to be healthy. For Lisa, it was recognition of how unhealthy the gang lifestyle was and then determining that she no longer wanted that for herself or for her future. She had to identify what she wanted for herself and that it was necessary to walk away from it in order to be the person she wanted to be.

“But it's not the right kind of values you know what I mean? It contradicts with the sobriety life... so ... yeah.... I had to get rid of those people out of my life. I keep them in my heart and everything, however I don't talk to them or associate with them anymore and I don't really agree with the kinds of behaviours they set out with. But if I am teaching all these healthy things for myself, I need to surround myself with healthy people, and unfortunately my “family” my street family, are not healthy. So I had to really get out of that. And... that's what I did.

And it's been 7 years, and now I want to help people... realize that, that you can't... it's just about being healthy you know? I needed something different in my life... I was missing something. That voidance was real family love. It was healthy family love. Not unhealthy. Healthy love. Big difference between healthy love and unhealthy love."

Nancy worked through some of the same demons. She first battled her addictions and in doing so was able to think more clearly about what she wanted out of her life and how she could better others versus continue on the life course she was in.

"It was about a year later [of back and forth with the gang], after I went to treatment actually, after getting all cleaned up, I had slipped and I went back to that neighbourhood and seen them. But it wasn't the same. I immediately ran back home (my half way house). Yeah about a year later I got a call from one of them saying all my debts are cleared and just try to stay out of trouble, don't come back, just do good things for our people." – Nancy

It is because of relationships like the one described above that these women have a difficult time completely cutting ties with their gang family. For them, there are many positive attributes of the gang lifestyle even though eventually the negatives outweigh the positives; it still has its merit and the women still defend their relationships as a huge part of their connection to the gang.

"I am glorifying the part that it's a family... Anything else... I don't glorify any of it. It's all shit. It's all phony, it's fake, and it's unhealthy. That's it." – Lisa

Three of the women are currently working within organizations or through programs that assist Aboriginal people. They all have high goals of who they want to be, how they want to get there and who they want to help. All of these goals and aspirations came from their experiences in the gang and how they felt they could help women in the same situation as them.

"I rather use my brain and help people... I hated seeing these girls abused like that ... I needed to try and do something. I didn't know where to start or how to do it. Now I do." – Lisa

Research around effective counselling techniques for First Nations women includes providing the women with the opportunity to share their story and allowing their personal narrative to become their identity (Stephard et al., 2006, p. 236). This kind of approach appeared to be of value to some of the women in this study who go and do talks with different groups, organizations, schools and with law enforcement agencies and share their stories in hopes of

being able to better inform those who are either faced with this potential life course or those who are trying to assist with helping them. Not all of the girls expressed the desire to share their stories, it was hard enough for them to meet with the researcher for this project, however for three of the women it has been very therapeutic in helping them heal and recover.

“That's my story now and I see these girls that were my friends or the girls that worked on the street or the girls that I did time with that maybe weren't in a gang but were still going in and out and in and out. And I think shit, look where I came from, look what I've done, look where I've been... if I can do it, you can do it. Because now I have my kids back, I have a home, I work, I have a car, I go to school, I'm sober... I have respect. I respect myself. I'm healthy.” – Stephanie

Elisha used her gang experiences to build a stronger foundation to strive for better for herself. She is pursuing her education with the hopes of also getting to work with Aboriginal youth and gang prevention at a young age by providing the supports they are lacking that she was fortunate enough to have.

“Had I not been in search of someone outside of my parents to actually fully immerse me into their life and care about me and protect me... well I wouldn't have found that route and I wouldn't have been on that path. So thinking like I deserve the best in life is the key, and then having a support system that knows I can do it and pushes me to it- that'll change everything. Now, I have that. Now, I feel like I can be whatever I want to be, and I will. Yeah, I mean, I wasn't on my own completely. [...] There's no way I would have made that decision if I had no one to fall back on to. There's no way.”

The women recognized the power and control the gang had over them and that is one of the things they wanted to teach others to understand. When discussing helping others with Lisa, she described the most difficult part of the gang is that there is always someone else who they can replace you with and when it comes down to it, gangs are all about the numbers. That power and that control is what she wanted to use her experiences to stop.

“So the reason why I want to help people is because I want to minimize their numbers so they don't have that power anymore...” – Lisa

Hooks for Gang Exit: Taking Care of their Kids

Another one of the hooks for change identified by the women was the need and desire to get their kids back from Child and Family Services and to finally be the parents they want to be for their kids. It appears that the women had a lot of success in expressing the desire to spend more time with their kids and the gang allowing them to do so. A few of the women indicated that when they expressed the want to get their kids back, that the gang was more forgiving to them wanting to walk away.

“I isolated and focused on my own time and they respected that, because I used my children. I was like listen man, this is all fine and dandy but I need to start focusing on my kids. And with women, they will always understand the kid aspect, so that was a way for me to separate from them. But inside, I was like I need to get away from these people, but I can’t tell them that, because that will offend them right? So I just used my children as my focus and it has been working for me ever since.” – Lisa

“I’m like, “Bros, bros, I’m done. I’m spending time with my kids, my kids need me... like I want to be with them” and they were like, “I respect that” ... They said that to me!!! I fucking just about died.” – Stephanie

When Sabrina was asked why she left the gang her answer was simple, it was for absolutely no other reason than for her daughter.

“Well I did my second Pen and then, I got out and did my whole parole and then I just started smoking crack again. It’s really hard to quit and then when I had her I just stopped. I just don’t talk to any of them anymore. The day I found I was pregnant, I just ... yeah. I moved and I never told anybody where I lived.” – Sabrina

Some previous research indicates that Aboriginal women found that successful care of themselves and healthy parenting was part of the vision for “turning around” the intergenerational impact of residential schools (Smith, Varcoe, & Edwards, 2005, p. 41). It was clear from the First Nations mothers in this study that they too saw their chance to break the cycle through their parenting and how they raised their children. It was a key component to a healthy lifestyle and a healthy future for themselves and their children.

Hooks for Gang Exit: Spirituality & Culture

*"Religion is for people who are afraid of going to hell.
Spirituality is for those who have already been there." - Vine Deloria, Sioux (n.d.)*

There is no doubt that one of the major driving forces for gang exit as well as for supporting the women with their decisions to leave the gang relied heavily on their connection to the Creator. After the women described their experiences with the gang it was not a surprise that turning to their cultural celebrations and reconnecting with their spirituality brought them the inner peace and strength they needed to leave the only family they had behind. For one of the women in particular, her story of getting to this point was touching and emotional.

Nancy had been in a fight after defending herself from a man who tried to rape her. She was not going to stand for being treated that way and fought him and anyone who got in her way. In the mix of the fight, she ended up injuring herself and explained what happened as she stumbled out of the bar after leaving the scene. She told the story as though she was in the moment, half the time not even looking at me but looking into the distance - reliving the moment step by step as she retold it.

*"Two homeless people, that, about a week prior I had made fun of... *tearing up*... for being homeless and like collecting bottles and stuff, had come up to me and offered me help. I had totally cut them up for being who they were and surviving on their own for probably decisions that they had no control over to get themselves there. And I was making fun of them because they couldn't do anything thuggish to help themselves... right? They were not hurting anybody. And here I was trying to fight and broke my foot and they were offering to help me." – Nancy*

*"In that moment, the Creator spoke to me, clear as day, when they were offering me help, telling me that if I didn't leave I was either going to kill someone or someone was going to kill me and it was going to happen soon. Like a straight message from God, like I have never heard before in my life, like I NEVER heard before in my life. And that feeling would not leave me. I think that was my rock bottom. Yeah it was that moment. That was definitely... changed everything. *wipes the tears from her face* I like, people probably won't believe it, but I swear to God, like God spoke to me, at that moment. And like, I wasn't high... well... I might have been high *laughs* but it doesn't matter. It was that clarity." – Nancy*

One of the women Nicole shared her most recent experience with the work of the Creator. A story that made her reconsider how she has been living her life. She described being in a truck, flipped upside down in a river. Slowly the truck was sinking and the driver had abandoned her in the back of the truck and saved himself. She described how she called and yelled for help yet no one came to help her and felt that in this moment her life was over until a miracle happened:

"I was this point... I was at the side like, a passenger was coming by and he had seen light in the river and this guy was tinnnnny, like tinnnnny. Maybe like 90 pounds. He like came out into the river, cut me out of the fucking truck and like somehow swam like me back to like where the rocks were and I don't know how he got me up, like we slipped back into the river three times but he got me up out of the river where just my feet were in the river. And he's like, "I'm sorry, this is all I can do" and then he went in his vehicle, I remember, all I remember, is a red vehicle and he like took everything possible out of there and put it on me to keep me warm. Yeah, like this guy was a fucking angel. He was an angel. Like all I remember, I kept saying thank you, thank you, thank you. And like when the police showed up, he talked to them for a second and then all the sudden he was gone. The police officer that I talked to, I asked him, I was like did you happen to talk to the guy that pulled me out of the river, and he's like, "you know, nobody got his name, he just basically said he seen lights, he told us that he helped you, and he said he yelled at the person who was on the side and he was gone" – Nicole

"... this is the way I take it: I take life and I have been taking life way too fucking fast and like, the Creator took my legs from me to tell me that I need to re-learn to walk again because I am taking life way too fast. I need to slow the fuck down and re-evaluate. That's honestly, I think, that's what the Creator is telling me. It's the reason why there's nothing wrong with my brain, absolutely nothing wrong with me even after every surgery." – Nicole

Nancy and Nicole were not alone in their unique and spiritual experiences. The other women also believed that the Creator was involved in keeping them alive for bigger and better things. For some of the women, they were just thankful to the Creator for watching over them and protecting them or for providing them with the opportunity to reflect on their life choices and how they need to adjust their future.

"... I should have died a few times, and I am still here so the Creator has a plan for me... so I wouldn't really change anything" – Lisa

"I thank the Creator all the time that I wasn't in way over my head. I could have gotten caught with the guys or arrested while they were doing something illegal or fucking stupid. That would have completely ruined everything for me, how

fucking stupid would that have been for me right? Like way to go you idiot, your life is over, you've disappointed your true friends and family for what? To hang out with some losers who have no care in the world for anyone but themselves practically? No thanks." – Elisha

It came as no surprise that connecting to a spiritual guide was one of the ways or reasons that these women were able to leave the gang lifestyle. Many programs both within the institutions and in the community are faith-based and that is due to the high amount of offenders that find religion or spirituality in their desire or journey out of crime (Proctor, 2009).

"Like for some girls, like for me... because I am First Nations, cultural sweats, smudging, those things, that's what drew me. For other girls, it might be church, I know lots of them that it's church or whatever that saves them, it's that faith. Either way, it's spiritual." – Stephanie

For these women, the connection to the Creator was the most important thing they could have to leave the gang and to keep moving forward with their life. However, the spirituality came with many other important aspects of their lives and that was reuniting themselves with their culture and heritage. During the transition from their gang lifestyle into their current lives, their cultural connection (particularly to Elders) was a cornerstone to their support network and success. Two of the women in particular, described moments they had with Elders either in the half-way house or in the institution that provided them with the knowledge, strength and support needed to continue on the more difficult, but healthier path. These quotes reflect Stephanie's experience with the elders:

"There was a lady, she was the elder in the institution and we became so close that when I went to the halfway house she stuck beside me and I literally put my head in her lap and cried because I'm like "I want to go, they are calling me and if I don't go... what happens if I don't go" and she's like, "No, just tell them" and I did." – Stephanie

When the women who have left the gang discussed their current lives, all of them mentioned their increased passion and participation within cultural events. Two of the women who speak regularly about their experiences will always smudge prior to their discussion in order to bless the room and keep everyone's mind open to the story they are about to tell. Another one of the women actively participate in sweats and bring her children with her as a means to spend time together as family. Regardless of how they participate in their cultural world, they are all

more connected to the Creator and to their cultural background and each of them are thankful for that experience and for being able to have that connection to something other than the gang.

“You know what saved me? Culture saved me. For me, culture saved me. Having that elder take me under her wing and show me that there was another way... that there was hope... that there was spirit... that there was a creator... that there was something out there better out there for me and inside me, is the only thing that saved me, I'm telling you.” – Stephanie

ix. Life after the Gang

Now that five of the women are completely out of the gang they did discuss some of the challenges of leaving, the effects of being out, who they keep in touch with and how they got out of the gang and stayed out. There is always that notion that “once you are in, you can’t get out” but these five women who have left have proven that is not the case. However, just because they left does not mean that it has been easy.

“Like with the guys, they are like strict about like... if you want to leave, you are fucking leaving by the end of this knife you know? It's not ... but with the girls, they are lenient, but even though, sometimes with the guys, they have had kids and stuff and they are like, "yo, I really need to help my baby Mama" and they are like, "Okay, we understand" and they let them go. They still got a beating but they let them go like no stabbings and no you know? But like if you try and like turn on them and leave or, then you get stabbed. But like, with girls... it's like... it's been like, pretty lenient with girls, but I can't say for other gangs.” – Nicole

Difficulties Leaving the Gang

For a lot of the women, they did not know how to leave, what to do, who to turn to, or if they were even capable of leaving this lifestyle behind due to the fear that there would be repercussions on themselves or their families. In most cases they do not have anywhere else to go beside the gang.

“I didn't know any way out. I didn't know you could be out. And I didn't know that... I didn't know that they were destructive per say until I started looking at myself, my values and my morals, and because at a young age I didn't have those tied to me.” – Lisa

If they leave, they are also leaving those strong emotional bonds they had created with some of the gang members and if they did not feel that their life was all that bad in the gang, it was even harder to walk away.

“I have walked away from them many times. I have. I’ve like told them, you know I am sick and tired of your guys’ bullshit. Fucking love, peace and bannock grease, I’m out. Like you know? [But then] I miss them.” – Nicole

It is also often overlooked that not only are they leaving their support system but in majority of the cases, they also have addictions to deal with it. Imagine leaving the only home you know, going to absolutely nobody, having absolutely nothing and on top of all of that, trying not to give into the addiction you have been feeding for the last ‘x’ number of years. It cannot be an easy battle and these women confirmed that it is not.

“Was it easy? Fuck no. There’s no way. I bet... like a lot of the girls you are talking to actually had it worse, had a way more difficult time on the day-to-day and trying to get the hell out of it. But I mean, I know for sure that I am better off away from all that. It wasn’t for me. I wanted better for myself.” – Elisha

“It’s not an easy road, it’s not. It’s a struggle.” - Stephanie

The women had to focus on an inner strength or remain connected to their hook for change that got them out of the gang in order to remain out. Sabrina described her difficulties battling the addiction side. For her, leaving was not that hard. She got pregnant and took off. However, what tied her to the gang lifestyle was her drug use. She knew that if it was not for wanting to be a good mother for her daughter, there was a lot smaller chance that she would have stayed sober; it was just too easy to slide back in.

“If it wasn’t for her, I don’t know if... you know... I’d still be clean. It would be so easy to go back into it. But I have her, so there is no way I am going to go with anybody right, you know what I mean? It would be so easy to just trail off.” – Sabrina

A few of the women also described their difficulties in getting help as they were trying to leave the gang. One of the women was working through her parole at the time she decided she wanted to leave the lifestyle and she indicated that getting through parole on its own was hard enough, especially with the label “gang member.” In her experience, it did not matter who she

was, what she had done, or how she had improved herself – she was still, and always will be, a gang member according to the law.

“But I'm telling you, parole was hard. Like you go up in front of the parole board, and they didn't care that I did all the programming, that I changed my life, that I had the support of the warden, I had the support of the elders... all they were concentrated on was: are you going back to the gang? That's all they talked about was gang, and how I was with the gang, who I was to the gang, what I did, how I was charged, what am I going to do when they come knocking at my door, that's all they talked about.” – Stephanie

Even once they got out of the institution there was nowhere specifically for them to go. A lot of the programs were male specific or they felt that they did not belong there and would not go because no one understands what *they* had been through.

“Yeah, I had to totally make it myself. And I needed a lot of help, like I needed A LOT of help to change my life. I mean, because I had so many different areas to work in. There's no... no... there's no support for women who want to leave the gangs. That's why I need to start an organization.” – Lisa

Despite the struggle to make the decision to leave and the difficulties they encountered trying to leave, they also had to deal with the after effects of being associated with a gang for as long as they were. Much like majority of the population who has been within the criminal justice system, they face harsh realities when they are attempting to get their lives back on track, these women are no different. They also had financial repercussions, broken relationships and blurred lines between the two worlds they had been living in.

*“I have a big fat student loan I have to pay off before I can get another one! I am only paying \$100 a month right now, because I am on AISH. It won't get paid off like that *laughs* because they charge me \$35 a month for paying \$100 a month...” – Sabrina*

“...I was using so much fucking dope that... and I was like, the lack of sleep- I didn't realize like, I was so deep and heavy into the fucking the game, and the fucking the dope, that it was all just one world. Whereas before, I had separated it to like, these are my friends and they don't see this side of me. It just all became one fucking, one world. And people seen like ugly parts of me, like you know?” – Nicole

Not to mention amongst all those effects of the gang lifestyle, they also had their own personal demons they had to battle. This relates back to the literature on healing of trauma and how there is an important component to truly changing your life and the implications of your

history (Bombay et al., 2014; Quinn, 2014). For example, the women described their own emotional and mental barriers that they had to overcome, especially when times were difficult and they felt that they did not have the skills to cope with these situations. One experience in particular that stood out was one of the women was trying to get clean and was working, going to school and her boyfriend at the time convinced her to get a car even though she was happy working and paying all the bills she already had. He said he would help her with the payments if she needed it and would be there for support. Not long after, he killed himself. She described that her happy world had collapsed immediately and she was back on the streets doing drugs and abandoned work and school because she just did not know how to cope with the unfortunate twists and turns of real life. That was not the only case where the girls suffered from personal struggles following their time in the gang.

“I was so young, you don't know. The things I know now, and then what you know then, you just don't know. I think back and I'm like my life would have been different. But I can't think like that.” – Stephanie

“For first couple years, I was really really lonely. Like really lonely. Like I would write, because I knew a few of them that were in jail, so I wrote them letters to let them know that I was doing really good and I thanked them for all the help they gave me and for letting me go and this and that.” – Nancy

Keeping in Touch & Staying out of the Gang

As described by Nancy above, some of the relationships they made within the gang lasted beyond their gang membership. Some of the individuals acted as a support system while in the gang and others remained to be that solid support outside the gang, especially for some of the girls who knew each other and supported each other throughout their healthy lifestyle.

“Yeah, some of them have gotten cleaned up too, and changed their lives and I see them. Some people I am close to... some people I'll just like wave... and some people I won't even smile at. Because I don't want to be brought back into that life and I know they are not... not at the point that I am at.” – Nancy

Similar to the description above by Nancy, many of the girls recognized that with the exception of a very few select group of people that they remained in contact with, they were

better off to cut ties and stay away from as many of the individuals from their old lifestyle as possible.

“... I know they keep tabs on me... I know they do. For sure. They want to know if... I mean, I think the minute I were to fall they would be right there to catch me... oh yeah. If I went back, started using again, they would be right there to catch me, oh yeah, guaranteed. They'd be... "Come on home baby!!" They would. But they don't pursue it. They don't pursue it. It's not a thought in my head.” – Stephanie

“When I decided to get out of there, it was like fuck this- I need to be cut off from all of it. There was no way I would be able to actually leave behind a lifestyle that I didn't want to be part of if I still had one foot in the door type thing you know what I mean?” – Elisha

Remaining away from their old friends and family members from the gang was just one of the many ways that these women tried to stay on their new healthy life course. They focused their attention on recovery, on finishing their high school diploma, on getting a higher education or on reconnecting with the healthy relationships in their lives. For all of the women who had kids, getting back their children from Child and Family Services was their primary concern. A few of the women had their first child legally adopted outside of the system or their family members and have since reconnected with them and were quick to boast about their successes. For those children, the women recognized they are better off where they are. That child of theirs had established themselves in a healthy environment and now these women had to focus on making it right for the rest of their children. It was interesting to hear their take on how they wanted to make things different for their kids and how they were going to attempt to “stop the cycle.”

x. Intergenerational Effects & Stopping the Cycle

“I think because within the gangs, the percentage of First Nations is more, it is total residential school affects. All of it. For sure.” – Stephanie

As discussed by Giordano (2010) the intergenerational transmission of passing a lifestyle down through generations was apparent in this study as many of the women had family members who were involved with criminal activity, were addicts and/or were gang members and associates as well. Symptoms from trauma (violent behaviour, substance abuse etc.), “should not be viewed as ‘signs of personal weakness or mental illness’; rather ‘the feelings and behaviours

that come from traumatization are the natural and predictable reactions of normal people... to abnormal experiences” (Comack et al., 2013, p. 38). Two of the women were very in touch with how their lives were affected by their parents and their histories with residential schools. Previous research indicates that the understanding and recognition of the impact of residential schools on the poor health and social conditions (poverty, addictions, and violence) within Aboriginal populations is imperative for healing (Smith, Varcoe & Edwards, 2005, p. 41). For both of them, they openly described their parents suffering and addictions and how they could only model what they knew and that was survival on the streets. For these girls, they were running from a family that did not know how to love, were never taught how to support one another and how to properly parent and role model for your children. For them, this was a very big realization and a daily hurdle they had to overcome with raising their own children.

“A lot of it stems from residential schools. You can see that they [her parents] don't know how to love... they don't know what love really is. Like you know? There is a lot of abuse. [...] You think you know what love is... you think you know what family is... but you don't.” – Nancy

“[On my reserve] I lived with my aunt who... she's more like my mother now because even my mother now still very much in addiction, same thing with my Dad. They are 60 years old, higher than kites all the time... can't break the cycle. Too much abuse. Too much guilt. Too much grief from residential school, from pain, and just don't know how to deal with it. Don't know how to deal with it. So, I have an aunt who managed to survive all of that and do it soberly - so she's more like my Mom.” – Stephanie

The women recognized that their behaviour and experiences within the gang fuelled this cycle and it was just another reason to leave that lifestyle behind. By acting in the way they did in the gang, in allowing other children to see this lifestyle for what it is, it shapes their knowledge and perception of what they want to do and be when they grow up. Once again, Nicole commented on why it was so important to her that kids be kept out of any business that she conducted for the gang. When kids are forced to be involved in the wrong-doings of their parents it can be detrimental to how they view their own futures:

“You've changed their life from everything being good to what Mom and Dad have taught them to... you just brought this kid into the gang world and to the dark side of life and you know? For all you know, that kid is going to fucking grow up and his life goal is to fucking get that person that did whatever. You know, you don't know.” – Nicole

Although the other women did not specifically mention residential schools and their histories with them, they did recognize that they needed to do something different when raising their children because this was their chance to stop the cycle and to change the life course of their children.

Beating the Odds & Being a Better Role Model

The women involved with this study recognized that they had an uphill battle to climb. Not only was it difficult to get out of the gang lifestyle but living real life, sober and healthy, was also very difficult. They have histories and battles to overcome beyond their own choices they have made in their life.

“It's intergenerational. And I didn't learn all that until I became close with the Elder in jail. And she's like, from whoever in the family was the first person to ever go to residential school- it'll take 7 generations for all the affects and all the abuse and everything for it to actually go away. 7 generations. I don't know about my great grandma, but I know my Mom and my dad were... so I don't know. I'm second generation residential school product you know? So where does that leave me? My Mom and Dad are 60 year olds still in addiction? But I'm supposed to stop the cycle? How do I do this? There was so many things that were never taught to me that I am only learning now that I am trying to teach different to my kids.” – Stephanie

It was important to these women that their kids learned the qualities of a “real family” and when they say “real” they mean a healthy family. Some of the women were very open with the children in their lives about their experiences, others chose not to reveal too much too soon, but planned to when the timing was right. They felt that their experiences could help their own kids to understand what skipping school and doing drugs can do to your future and why they were over protective and disciplined them.

“She [her daughter] knew about my life, she's known about some of my life, but she doesn't know about the gangs, she doesn't know anything about that, she just knows drugs, street life, jail. She knows I have experienced that, but I had to open up to her a little bit about my life, some stories about how it started for me for drugs. I didn't really, she still doesn't know about gangs, like she knows what gangs are, but she doesn't know that I was like in there doing the thing, where I was, what I did- she doesn't know any of that. I am just not ready to give her that part. I have given her little stories and she's like "Wow Mom, I didn't know that you went through that" and I'm like, now do you understand why I say the things that I say to you and do the things that I do and teach you what I teach you so that

you don't go there." I'm like you don't want to be sleeping on the streets, you do not want to end up in a dumpster, and you do not want to end up somebody's girl and can't leave." – Stephanie

To many kids, the gang appears to be very glamorous which could act as one of the biggest contenders of preventative gang programming (Nimmo, 2001, p.11). At the beginning, many of the women fell victim to buying into the glamourized gang life and idolized the lifestyle of money, drugs and power. As first appearances the gang can appear innocent and as “hanging out” but it can quickly escalate to addiction, violence and a not-so-glamorous lifestyle. Nicole had a slightly different tactic when it came to deterring her nephew from the lifestyle.

*“Two years before that he was like, "I want to be a drug dealer like you" and blah blah and I'm like, no you don't. And he's like, "well why not? You make lots of money and this and that and like you have nice clothes and a nice car and this and that" and blah blah blah and I was like well... buddy, to be a fucking drug dealer, I said you have to finish school... you gotta go to college, you gotta go to University... I said the two things that I have to do is Math and fricken Science. And he's like, "I hate math and science!" and I'm like, I know! But you gotta finish and he's like, "well maybe I will just be a Veterinarian" and I'm like, Yeah... *laughs* and my sister's like, the way you explain that, it was so weird, she's like, "but thank you?"” – Nicole*

One of the major goals of these women has been to focus on their children and “break the cycle.” When asked how they were going to do that, their plan focused on their ability to be a better role model for their children and focus their needs and their attention on healthy things in life.

“I need to change because my kids have a shitty role model. I need to do something different. Because I wasn't aware... I didn't know about values and morals, what was right and wrong as a child... really? All I ever knew was be bad, get attention. So... being in a gang, I am being bad and getting attention. It worked for me, at the time, right?” – Lisa

*“Yeah even though I enjoy and respect it, I wouldn't want it for them. No, I absolutely wouldn't. Nope. But I am twisted in the head. There's something wrong with me *laughs* I don't know. But I wouldn't ever, ever, want it for any of my nieces and nephews.” - Nicole*

These women did not describe healthy role models in their past and attributed a lot of their life choices to modelling after the only thing they knew. Much as has already been established, there are so many broader implications (racism and class discrimination) placed on the families of these First Nations women and the women may have not knowingly recognized it

but they addressed the fact that it was not their individual parents fault. They did not blame their family for their choices, they actively made their choice to join the gang, but they recognized that they were running from an unhealthy environment and that their parents or guardians did not help or support them to go a different direction.

“Like I said, my Mom, me, my sisters, it's a cycle. And the elder said, "Stephanie, you are going to stop the cycle" and that was what she said to me right from when I was small and like, "you are going to be the one" I never knew what it meant till these last couple years.” – Stephanie

A lot of the women have been actively involved in getting their children into sports or hobbies to keep them busy and to give them a healthy way to meet people and socialize. All of these women began their gang lifestyle by running away from home and looking for a place to “hang out” and looking for someone to spend time with, so they felt as though if they could provide those healthy places and people into their lives it would make a difference.

“So I have been doing a lot of things like: I spend time with her, not money. I take her to sweats, not to the mall. I spend time with her. We sit at the table instead of going to McDonald's. I make a meal, we sit at the table, and we eat. We are doing counselling. We spend time together as a family, I give her attention and I try to give her what she needs. [...] I've gotten them involved with sports and programs and stuff. Keep them busy.” – Stephanie

The goals that these women have for their children are ones that have shown success for young girls like Ashley who had a similar upbringing as the women in this study but chose a different route. She accredits a lot of her choices to having the positive role model in her life.

“Yeah I would definitely say my Mother because she... like my Dad was an alcoholic and a drug addict and she moved us out of the reserve and away from him for a while. So yeah, definitely her. And then he came back into our lives and when he cleaned up they both stressed the importance of education. But I would say my Mom was the major part of that, more than my Dad... and then you know, just seeing also family members who were alcoholics or drug addicts, seeing their life and where they have gone and ended up like- wanting to avoid that, wanting to be more than that has really helped me.” – Ashley

She had a very similar upbringing to a lot of the women in this study, but she did not experience the same life course due to the support system of her mother, a focus on education, the fear of turning out like relatives of hers that were alcoholic and drug addicts and a passion for something that kept her busy. She was competitively involved in sports which gave her a goal to

work to and a healthy social network to be a part of. Even when asked if she partied with them, she said they had fun without having to do drugs or drink – they all had the common goal of getting up early and winning their next hockey game. She said that made all the difference. While some of her cousins were out drinking and skipping school, she was practicing with her hockey team and focusing on getting good grades. She was not interested in that lifestyle; she had a passion to follow.

“The majority of kids in hockey are not just the bad kids you know, they are good kids- I hung around with good people when I was growing up and again if my Mom knew we were hanging out with bad people she would give us shit for it. We would get in big trouble for it. So I think... just that sense of wanting to do good in my parents eyes was a major deterrent for me. It was a major divide between what you see between people who go the gang route and people who don't. So I think for me that is what it was.” – Ashley

Despite all their “lived experience” on the streets and all they have overcome, they are still parents just like anyone else and panic mode still sets in upon the regular “teenage milestones” that a lot of teens will experience. For example:

“I remember what was going on for me when I was 15, I was already on the streets, I wasn't at school, I was already doing drugs, I was bad. Like, I was... not bad, I was just troubled right? And right now, she's in high school, she's an honors student that type of thing. She's starting to try and follow these "cool kids" and she experimented with drugs and I'm like "AHHH! It's happening!" I'm like freaking out right? But I like to think that she will make smarter choices than me, but, it's so hard because she's my only teenager right now. I'm kind of just going with the flow right now.” – Stephanie

xi. 15 Year Old Me

Near the end of the first interview in the study, the women discussed the “15 year old girl” that was getting wrapped up in the world of the gang. To follow up with her comment she was asked, “If you could go back to 15 year old you and tell her something, anything, what would it be?” This question was not part of the initial interview guide but once it was asked, it felt like the perfect way to end every interview. It seemed as though the women who had left the gang had spent quite a bit of time reflecting on their experiences as part of their journey to a

healthy life style. However, this question was still the “big question” and all of them let out a huge sigh and paused for brief reflection before answering.

*“I would say... go home and find somewhere else to call home because this is no dream life. If anything it will give you nightmares the rest of your life *tearing up*. The things you see, the things you go through, and the things you feel, never leave you. No matter how much you try to let them go, they never leave you”- Nancy*

“Oh wow... I would say... Don't be stupid. I can't necessarily say that it's all a bad thing- it has made me the person I am today and without the struggle and the pain I don't think I would be as strong as I am today. But, that girl should know that she was loved- even if it didn't feel like it and instead of running from the pain- forgive the person who caused it and fight back, be better than that. I ended up doing that anyways, just took the bumpy road to get there.” – Elisha

“Oh my gosh... don't do it... right? You know... I think that the initial, when we were first apprehended me, my brother, and my niece - we were the last kids that my grandparents raised before they died and when we all got apprehended and I think the fact that they got to go back and I didn't was the first sign. I made peace with it... it was too much for them... maybe...” – Stephanie

*“Oh my god... I wouldn't have hung around with the people I did. Like it was just one person I started hanging around with that just came to my school and that was it. If I never hung around with her, who knows where I would be today.. I don't have any regrets. I just... if I ... *laughs* if I would have done it differently that's where it would have went differently. It's not what you think it is *laughs*, it's not cool and fun you know? It just really isn't.” – Sabrina*

“Oh fuck. Yeah that's a big question because of everything that happened, that was going on in my life. I wouldn't know how to really tell... Yeah, like all I did, I remember as like a little girl all I did was pray about the situation I was in. I would pray and be like help the person that's hurting me you know? Like so, I honestly don't know. [Would you change anything?] I don't think so because I make my choice on my own. There's... something's I regret you know? But I don't... everything I've done I've learned from so, you know? I regret and I have given my condolences and my sorries to some people but like other than that I don't, I really ... I don't know how to explain it. I'm like grateful for something's and just really aware and I don't know. I don't know how to explain it. I don't.” – Nicole

“I think that, I don't really regret anything and I think that I'd leave everything as it is in my life because it made me who I am today and it makes me able to help other people.” – Lisa

As illustrated above, not all the women were filled with regret. They knew they were running for a reason and they could not deny that they would do it again because of the hurt they

were experiencing in their homes prior to the gang. However, as it has been discussed, if they could go back and change some of their decisions and make that young girl feel different about herself and her life – they would. Many of them have worked through that notion as part of their healing process and determined it was their path and they took it and survived it for a reason and now they want to use that experience to better the lives of their own children and to help other women that need the support.

“But I mean, if I was to come across a 15 year old that was in that situation, and I am the outside person looking in and helping them, I would say, I would like teach them about, I would just tell them... do you know what you are getting yourself into? Do you know what your boundaries will be? Just respect them and talk to them? The choice is ultimately theirs, but just give them that information. This is my experience and this is what happened to me, and if you can, learn from me. If you choose not to that’s fine too. You can only help people that want to help themselves right?” – Lisa

xii. “Ideal” Programming for Women Associated with Gangs

“When you are pulling a woman from her family, into your gang family, you are pulling her away from people that really depend on her. So I mean.... I think for me, it starts with women. Because women bind the family together... like it should be the woman and a man, but if there is no man a woman can hold it down on her own. The women have the back bone and the strength and they give life, they are life givers.”
– Lisa

A recent paper by Totten (2009) discussed what works and what does not work in terms of programming for youth intervention programs. He mentioned that incarceration and curriculum-based prevention programs were among some of the models that do not work whereas focusing more on the target youth population (12-20 years old) with positive skills building and connecting them with their culture was more effective. Some research in the United States also highlights enhancing children and parental instructional services, community based policing and providing sports, recreational, social and educational outlets as successful preventative and intervention programs (Vigil, 2010, Chapter 3). Once again, this research focuses on “youth” as a general population of both young males and young females. Although the goal of this research is not to belittle the experiences of male gang members by any means, it is seeking to highlight that women experience the abuse, violence, addictions and strain on

relationships as much, if not more, than their male counterparts and thus deserve the attention and support when trying to leave this lifestyle. To date, there is very little support for women who are leaving the gang lifestyle, not to mention supports that target Aboriginal women, including access to Elders and cultural practices. Many of these women have come full circle in realizing what happened on their “Road to Gang Membership” hugely impacted the rest of their life course. It becomes another part of the on-going cycle of the impact the gang lifestyle has on a family.

“Because, when you are pulling a woman into a gang you are taking her away from her children 90% of the time, those girls have children. So you are taking the Mom away from their children, which then the children have to go into foster homes, then they may be abused in that life and whatever else, and then they get out and guess what? They want to be like Mom and become gang members, or like Dad, because women can’t be gang members, but, they want You are role modelling these little ones right?” – Lisa

“And want to know the fucking dumbest part of it? I mean so many of these people are there because they were shit on as a kid – they were abused sexually or mentally or whatever, there were addictions problems in their home or they had some other tragedy that led them to where they are now. And really... what are they doing now? The same shit that led them there. It’s kind of a vicious cycle right, you don’t learn right. What was I doing? Drinking, standing by while other people got hurt the way I was, watching tragedy all the time? That’s the same reason I ran away to this shit. It’s really just a... a mess.” – Elisha

As Elisha has indicated, running away to the gang lifestyle seems like it will save you from the life you were running from when it in fact just becomes a different form of that life. In the cases of some of these women, they felt that the gang was still healthier for them than their home life, especially at the time they were running away. This is an area where gang prevention resources should be focused on youth and family supports. All of the women indicated that the most crucial age for their decisions for gang involvement happened between 12-15 years old.

Even for Ashley, the one woman who did not pursue the gang life even though the opportunity was available- indicated that it is important to tie in culture, spirituality and background with programming. Now that she currently works with youth in the crucial ages identified in this project, she sees that cultural awareness can make a difference in the life paths of youth.

“Definitely I think looking into their history even if it's going as far back as you can. I believe that a lot of Aboriginal issues stem from the Residential Schools, and there are tons and tons- like my own family, my Grandmother was in Residential Schools. So I think if you can go back and look into their history and see how it affected how their parents raised them/how their parents didn't raise them kind of thing. And I think including cultural intensive support, like getting them involved with sweats, getting them involved in pow wows, getting them back in touch with their roots and stuff- I mean I work with youth, and I think there isn't enough programs like that, and I think they would really benefit from knowing where they come from.” – Ashley

Ashley describes many of her friends and cousins were already down this path while she was turning away from it. Majority of the women in this study were already drinking, doing drugs, on the street and connected with gangs by the age of 15. By their early 20's they were fully involved and associated with the Aboriginal gangs. In fact, many of the women had already been associated with “gateway gangs” (i.e. Hells Angels, African American Gangs, Asian gangs) prior to connecting with the Aboriginal gangs. There is merit to addressing the appeal of the gang with youth at that young age to dispel any of the glamorous views they hold and most importantly, this has to be done by someone who truly knows what it is like to be in that position.

“How do you talk to somebody if they can't relate. If they haven't ever been there and don't even have A CLUE what it's like. Like counsellors will be like “I know what it's like” Oh do you really? You've been a prostitute? You've been a gang member? You've lost your kids? You have been through all this? You've been a crack head? You've been a junkie? “Well no” then you don't know, you have no idea.”- Lisa

A few of the women experienced their opportunity to leave the gang lifestyle through prison. That is where they had access to all the resources they needed, access to a support system such as an Elder, and they could create the time away from their street life to focus on what they wanted. Although not all of the women felt this way about the institution, nor did they all do time in the institution, there are enough Aboriginal women associated with the gangs that have or will do time, and thus they expressed that intervention within the institution would be the best place to access the women that are heavily involved in the lifestyle and the criminal justice system.

“I think that if they really wanted to change their life, and I think for girls getting out of prison would be the starting part... get to talk to them at the halfway houses and stuff where it’s discreet. Discretion has to be KEY, and trust. You know? And so, and I, personally would only want to talk to... like for me, to get out of the gang mentality, I needed to talk to an ex-gang member, but unfortunately all that was out there at the time was a male, so I talked to him for a couple years he totally helped me with my gang mentality, how to get it put away... you know? You always have that street smart... per say.... But you ... I’m teaching myself good behaviours now, for the past 7 years right? So... for me, I would have only been able to talk to someone who has actually been in the gang and gotten out” - Lisa

The women all discussed needing not only someone to relate to who had actually been through what they had been through, but also an ongoing healthy support system. In a few of the cases, the women described attending current organizations or agencies for bus tickets or assistance and no one even approached them or talked to them. In one organization, one of the women was handed a pamphlet on addictions and they got their bus tickets and left. She expressed that had someone actually asked her about herself, her experiences, her story and how they could help, maybe she would have took it more seriously.

*“What made me stay? Well I guess... I had no other options. I didn't even know about AA or treatment centre or none of that. I had no idea. I remember my girlfriend bringing me to [Organization] to go get bus tickets and we picked up some information on, you know, quitting drugs or whatever, and we were like "think this will work?" UHH... NO! *laughs* If someone would have sat me down and talked to me that would have made a huge difference because I was sober that day that I went there. But reading a pamphlet, I am like, this is not going to happen.” – Nancy*

In some of the discussion around “ideal programming” the women also mentioned that when they are thinking about leaving the lifestyle behind, sometimes a safe a place to just go and think would have helped them clear their head.

“A small office that I could take refuge in! Like a safe haven. People that are not all homeless. Boyle Street or something you know? It's really rugged to go there. You know, I am not saying that it's not a good place, it is a really good place, but I wouldn't go there when I was in that lifestyle. No way. I was too good for that. Right? But if there was a place just for women... to go and have a coffee... to learn about thing you know? At first it would be a safe haven, somewhere I could go and just breathe.” – Nancy

If these “refuge” places could have people on hand to talk to them about different programs, have available support networks for them to meet with and truly provide the women with a space they felt safe in – it would appear to be a much more viable option than the resources that are currently available for them. In a few cases, most of the women did not even know about programs such as “Alcoholic Anonymous” or “AA”. Some of them even joked about having a “Gangs Anonymous” or “GA” program for them where they could go and meet and talk in a safe environment about their experiences in the gang as a woman.

“More communication... more knowing what things are... I didn't know. I mean how could I not know about AA? Because it's prominent in the sober life... but it's not prominent in the gang life. It's not there. That would have helped me. But I didn't have any communication with any agencies.” – Nancy

*“Just, maybe kind of like AA but... they should have like Gang A? *laughs* like gangs anonymous or something? But there is probably a lot of people that would be scared to go to that, there would probably be... there could be other... well I don't know.” – Sabrina*

It was very clear that for all of these women, the very first step to getting out of the gang lifestyle was to deal with their addiction first and then to work on the rest of themselves. Again, support throughout this process remained a constant for all of the women. No support and no follow up resulted in them returning to old habits.

“These girls are addicted to drugs, there has to be some kind of... sure there is AA, detox, there is jail. But there has to be some kind of connection with them, within that. And sure there is.. Like when I went to remand there was never no follow up. There was never no follow up. Remember when I said, I went in and I got out on bail and I ran for four years? It's because all those people that said they were going to help me, never did, because they never followed up. So when I got out of jail, I'm like phoning these people that said they wanted to get me out of the gang, they wanted to save my life... and for a small brief moment, I wanted to save my own life, but they weren't there. So... what else do I know? There has to be follow up. That's it.” – Stephanie

Once these women were able to work on their addictions and learn how drugs contributed to their choices in the gang lifestyle they were able to think more clearly about their goals to be healthier but they still needed more support than addictions recovery. Although it was not discussed explicitly by the women themselves, they indicated a need for support to deal with the

abuse they had endured as well. Some of the women were more open and able to talk about it, some others still kept it very repressed. In many of the stories, the abuse they faced as children was indicative of them beginning to run away and drink alcohol and do drugs to deal with the pain. Their experiences as they moved through the gang even heightened this in some cases where there was indication of abuse through the gang members or rival gangs. As described by Comack (1996) the centrality of abuse in women's lives is a very strong indicator of their pathways into and out of the criminal lifestyle. As many of these women are also facing the intergenerational effects of trauma from the residential schools, there is an importance in dealing with those factors as well. Research has indicated that individual therapy sessions were helpful for victims of past residential school trauma (Quinn, 2007). When properly organized and culturally relevant, these sessions helped to negotiate a higher self-esteem, and provided opportunities not only to attempt to heal but to learn how to heal. Opportunities such as these would likely resonate with the women involved in this study and serve as a healthy starting point for their journey out of the gang.

Beyond facing their addictions and abuse histories within gang intervention and prevention programming, all of the women once again turned to their spiritual and cultural background and discussed the necessity for the program to involve some sort of ongoing connection to a higher power and the option to be involved in cultural expression. "For many Aboriginal peoples, healing means addressing approaches to wellness that draw on culture for inspiration and means of expression" (Quinn, 2007, p. 77).

*"So that's my advice... Try to find something that you believe in, because it saved me. That's all I can say. There's a few girls that I talked to that, that is what brought them out- girls that were within the gang, that were just the money makers, the street walkers - it was spirituality, or faith, creator or god, church or whatever that saved them. So any kind of program that involved that, besides like, "OKAY, let's open this book..." *laughs* because programming didn't help me... no. There's all these kinds of stuff right... but if you don't make some kind of spiritual connection, you might as well just not waste your time." – Stephanie*

They described this ability to connect to a higher power as the gateway to being able to work on themselves and forgive themselves, forgive others, and learn about whom they are and who they want to be.

“For a while I felt like, fuck, this is all I deserve, so that’s all I can do about it. That’s not healthy. That’s not the way to think. So like instilling that confidence in women who have, like, not always been taught how to have healthy thinking... like that’s super important I think... and from an early age” – Elisha

All of the women mentioned not being able to do this without at least some support. Much like a sponsor in an Alcoholic Anonymous group or other programs, these women needed a support to fall back on when the times got tough. Whether they reconnected with a family member, a healthy friendship from their past, their kids or another ex-gang member, they all found someone who was sensitive and accepting to what they were going through and recognized that it was a huge and difficult change for them.

“There’s no... no... there’s no support for women who want to leave the gangs. There is support for their addictions and such, which you should start out with, is their addictions I believe, because then everything else will come together. But really, when you ask someone to leave their family, wow, that’s pretty hard, and to not have any support to talk about that or meet with someone who has done it. Because you really don’t think at the time that it’s possible, because you are really led to believe by those gang members, once you are with us you can never leave. So you get pretty scared right, thinking of the idea. You feel stuck. You feel like you have to stay loyal... and... that’s just the way it is. So thinking of leaving sometimes isn’t an option because they don’t know it could be done. Because there is that belief out there that once you are in you are in...” - Lisa

At the time she was leaving the gang, Lisa had to rely only on ex-male gang members for support because that was all she had access to. Her personal goal is to provide an environment for women to go to that they can meet and talk with other women who have done it. If young girls and other gang involved women had access to others who have been fully immersed in the gang lifestyle and have been able to leave it, she strongly believes that would help a lot more women overcome the barriers to leaving the gang. She wants women to be able to see that they are stronger than they think they are and with the proper supports they can make the right decision to live a healthier life. As it has been illustrated throughout this paper, it is not an easy road for these women and despite all of the difficulties they encounter prior to the gang and during gang association, leaving the gang is still the hardest part.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

“We are creatures of context: our identities are formed in the context of history, family, community, gender, culture, and so on” (Green, 2007, p. 160). The goal of this research was to answer three questions: 1) Which experiences do Aboriginal female gang associates identify as reasons for gang membership? 2) Which experiences or “hooks for change” do Aboriginal female gang associates identify as reasons for gang-exit? And 3) Were there community supports that provided prevention or intervention support for female gang membership or what would those ideal supports look like?

The Aboriginal women that shared their stories for this project were able to help enlighten the field of gang research with the lens of a female First Nations woman. From their stories we have learned that women often seek the gang lifestyle to satisfy their need for love, support, and family. It is clear that “the pathways into gang life are gendered” (Totten, 2009, p. 89). The gendered pathway into gangs, as well as through and out of gangs, was also echoed in the results of this study.

i. Pathways into, through and out of the Gang

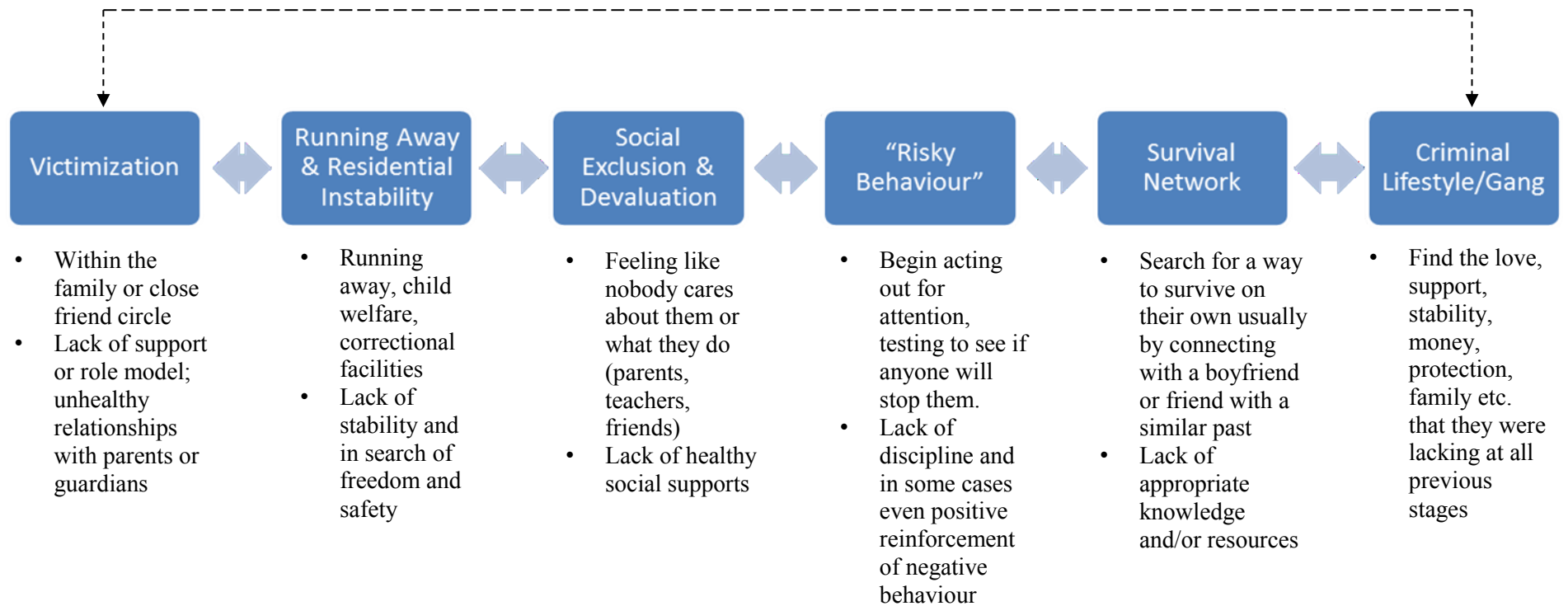
Gang-involved women have unique and special risks that are often a function of the centrality of abuse within these women’s lives (Comack, 1996; Totten, 2012). This is one example of how the women described a gendered pathway into the gang lifestyle. In this study, all of the women had been abused prior to their gang entry and it was not uncommon for them to use alcohol and drugs as a way to gain acceptance and deal with the pain of their pasts. Once they get into the gang lifestyle, selling drugs becomes an easy way to feed their habits as well as an easy way to make a lot of money in a short time. Although there is not always a cut and dry “gang entry process,” these are some of the factors that the gang involved women in this study had in common. Some research indicates that the family situation of women, school factors, influence of peers, and individual factors all play a role in the decision to join a gang (Miller, 2004). This was illustrated with the women in this study. Although they did not all actively choose to *join* a gang or could pin-point an exact moment of gang entry – each of the women did describe instances of family dysfunction, disinterest or lack of support with school, and the

negative influence of their peers or boyfriends. For the women involved with this study, this chain of events occurred throughout their life course as depicted in Figure 4. Although this is a simplistic pictorial representation of a life course of the gang involved women in this study, it is one way of interpreting the stories of the women and establishing a connection amongst main events in the early years with their gang associations.

All of the women who were gang involved experienced some form of abuse at early ages which led to running away and truancy in school. In most cases, the women experienced some form of social exclusion or devaluation. They either felt like they weren't fitting in, felt like nobody cared about them or nobody took the time and effort to stop them. One woman described a teacher looking her square in the face saying she will never amount to anything so why is she even trying. For that particular woman, that was when she lost all interest in school because if no one believed in her at home and no one believed in her at school, what was the point?

During this time, the women indicated "risky behaviours" such as drinking, drugs, and casual sex as their means to cope with the life course they were navigating. Comack (1996) describes these behaviours as frequent to the coping process mostly because they are behaviours that can be controlled. The women in the study described little concern on behalf of their families or guardians in regards to their behaviours, in some cases, the families enabled the drinking, drugs or for those with teen pregnancies, a lack of responsibility for caring for their children. For example, one of the women described when she dropped her daughter off with her parents saying she was going to go party and her parents basically saying "go ahead" and taking the child on her behalf. From their drug and alcohol use they often begin to associate with a social network that partakes in the same behaviours. With an unhealthy social network being the main source of peer pressure often the criminality around getting money for drugs or alcohol, theft, violence and other criminal activity follows. For the young First Nations women in this study, they were introduced to a man through this social network who then introduced them to the gang. When they initially found the gang, they felt as though they found all of the pieces they were missing throughout their life path so far. They thought they found love, support, protection, a means to get whatever they needed, whenever they wanted it. They thought they were free. However, many of the women found out that life in the gang was not all it appeared to be at the start. From there, the women described entering into survival mode where they were required to "do gender" in a way that helped them survive in the gang.

Figure 4: Example of the life course path of an Aboriginal female gang associate (derived from the stories of the women in this study).



As for finding “hooks for change” and gang exit, the women did note some of the aforementioned “hooks” in the literature, such as connecting with spirituality, having future aspirations to embody an “ex-deviant” identity and to help others with their story. For the women in this study their hooks for gang exit included: wanting a healthier lifestyle so that they could in turn help others, reconnecting with their children, and connecting or reconnecting with their spirituality and culture. It was clear from their discussions that these “hooks” were not only important when they were trying to leave the gang but they also played a pivotal role in their day-to-day functioning following life in a gang.

One important note in this research that is often ignored when focusing on research based on male participants is the different focuses that women have when they leave the gang. According to the women in this study, when it came time to leave the gang life behind things like money, jobs and staying clean are all important. However, what was the most important to the majority of women was getting their kids back, being a better role model for them, and making up for lost time. From speaking with the women that had children, having a job, making money and having a place to live were all focused around one thing and that was getting and keeping their children. Even the one woman who was adamant that she would never leave the gang indicated that it could be a different story if she ever had children. This is one topic that could be explored further and in more detail, especially with regard to the impact children have on leaving the gang lifestyle behind and whether or not it has a significant effect based on the gender of the participant. It is also significant to note that there is a lot of research that indicates a “ride or die” membership with gangs. In the case of this research, for women at least, it appeared that it was not always as difficult as it seems to leave the gang life behind. In many of the cases in this study, the women were able to leave the gang behind simply because they were *women*- had they been a man; the same excuses for gang exit (such as wanting their kids back) would not have been as effective. However, it appeared true that leaving the gang did not go without its difficulties. As discussed by Totten & Totten (2012), even after exiting the gang – it is difficult to leave behind the lifestyle (p.199).

Although this research has confirmed some of the current research in the field, it has also provided another perspective on some of the original research that is now being revisited, for example, the level of involvement of females in the gang. Contrary to the popular belief that

women only act in minimal roles within the gang, this research describes First Nation females' experiences and roles with the gang. It was clear from the accounts of the women in this project, that they do a lot more than the small, menial jobs that are often depicted in research with male gang members. The women in this study did indicate that women do play the role of holding drugs and weapons or act as distractions or pawns but it appears that over time this role has shifted and women are more frequently involved in drug dealing and violent behaviours such as fighting. One of the women even described how different things were at the beginning of her time with the gang and towards the end – it was a whole different environment and although men were still the only official “patched” gang members, it was the women who did all the work and ran the show. Most interestingly, they were not treated as men but acted like them. In this particular research, it is clear that women could adopt a masculine persona that would help them to navigate their place within the gang. As described by Totten (2012), the gang “provides a social space to negotiate gender differently” and that is clearly what the women in this study had done to survive (p. 85). The concept of survival was a clear thread through the gang lives of these young women. They all indicated a point of no return and from that point, survival kicks in until they hit an absolute rock bottom and finally *make the decision* to make a change.

ii. Intersectionality & the Role of Gender in the Gang Lifestyle

In the research presented here, some of the women were able to critically assess their own lives and how the power structures of colonialism, family, poverty and the criminal justice system influenced their social locations. As the research began, it was unclear as to whether or not the women involved in this study would think critically about their place in society and what influenced their journey. However, it did become clear during the interviews that for some of the women who had left the gang, they had reflected on how their parents were survivors of residential schooling and how that impacted their ability to care and nurture them as children, which in turn lead them down the path to the gang. Although the women did not place blame on colonization or the residential school system as the only reason they travelled down the path of gang membership – many of the women recognized that it was a huge factor in the day-to-day lives of many First Nations women that impacts their knowledge of healthy family relationships.

Since many of the women ran from their unhealthy family lives into the gang, some of the women were able to reflect on this as an imperative power structure that has influenced their navigation through their life course.

For all of the gang-involved women in this study, they turned to the gangs that understood their situation the most, and that was the Aboriginal gangs. This concept, discussed by Comack et al. (2013), is the effort of collective resistance against the effects of colonization (p. 73). Thus, the gender, class and race discrimination that resulted from colonization were also present in the gangs. Following their association with the gangs the women experienced how their gender forced them to work underneath those in power which was the male gang members. Some of the women learned to navigate this “patriarchal capitalist” system, other women have not been so lucky. This is reflected in the results of this study as many of the women were able to capitalize on both gender roles. They were able to use their sexuality when it benefited them or their fellow gang members but more importantly, they adapted the masculine roles for day-to-day survival in the gang. For example, one woman described her experiences as a prostitute in the early years of her gang involvement as a choice she made in order to get money for the drugs she needed. However, once she was in the gang, she established herself as not only someone who brought in just as much money as the boys through dealing drugs but as someone who could handle being “one of them.” In this particular research, it is clear that women could adopt a masculine persona that would help them to navigate their place within the gang. This is evidence that “there has been both continuity and change in young women’s participation in gangs” (Miller, 2004, p. 97).

iii. Implications for Programming

Not only do women involved with gangs have to actively decide they no longer want to pursue this lifestyle, they must also be dedicated to adjusting to a new and different lifestyle. These women need to learn appropriate coping skills and abilities to function within an everyday healthy lifestyle and have access to the resources they need to overcome the barriers of childhood abuse, victimization and a criminal lifestyle. Research out of the United States indicates the key steps for programming include the utilization of dedicated time: start with the home, continue within the schools, and educate and engage law enforcement (Vigil, 2010,

Chapter 4). The family appears to play a key role in the road to gang membership for these women and addressing the root causes of family dysfunction would be an important piece of gang prevention and intergenerational intervention programs.

Although there was no goal of using this one study to create a solve-all program, one of the research questions included learning what kind of programming could be useful to this population and whether or not they had access to the resources they need. From the interviews, it was clear that these women did not find what they were looking for when they were trying to leave the gang but they were lucky enough to be able to do it using other routes such as through the support of counsellors in the institutions, an elder, or a male ex-gang member. However, many of them expressed that there was a need for a place for women and that they had wished there was a place for them when they were trying to get out.

If we could finally acknowledge the human face of gang-involved young people, we should find it easier to develop truly effective strategies for preventing gang involvement, for supporting the exit from gangs, and for implementing effective criminal justice system responses (Totten & Totten, 2012).

Programming should be focused on addressing the specific needs of women by helping them with their addictions, providing them with a support network to better understand their past experiences and build their self-esteem, provide them access to what they need to get their children back and provide a healthy living environment for them and connect them to whatever cultural or spiritual guide that they relate to. These services also need to be provided for youth as well as incorporated in a viable transition into adult support for continuing care. Having a “wrap-around” approach where services are available at a drop in level, at a program level, and on individual and family-focused bases, would increase the ability of the program to cater to different women at different stages of gang membership.

Often these components can be found in a variety of different organizations that are either not specific to women or not specific to the needs of women who have been involved with gangs. Through speaking with community workers and multiple community based agencies, there is a stigma attached to the label of gang member in terms of their inclusion in a program as it increases the risk for violent or dangerous behavior. Thus, there are often a lot of programs that turn women away specifically because they have the reputation or “gang member” label on their

record. As this study has revealed, the label of “gang member” is complicated for many women associated with gangs. Upon gang exit, it becomes a significant barrier to leaving behind their criminal and gang involved past.

Research is beginning to see the merit in developing ex-deviant identities for programming purposes. “If the screening process is carefully crafted, with parents, teachers, and police involved in the process, along with other members of the community, then many caring and informed individuals can be identified to help speed up the maturing-out process in gang—infested neighborhoods” (Vigil, 2010, p. 86). Through this research it has been shown that having someone who knows what you are going through will be a much more credible source of support through the eyes of these women. At the time where these women were faced with the decision to leave the gang life behind, none of them felt as though they had a mentor that truly understood their experiences. One of the women was able to connect with an ex-gang member who was male and that was her mentor who supported her as she struggled with leaving the gang life behind. However, she indicated that she wished there was a woman she could have connected with that was aware of what she went through, understood it, and knew how she was feeling now because she had been there herself. This is one of the women who would like to use her past for the betterment of other young women’s future by developing a space where having that person to connect with is readily available when a gang involved woman is in the process of choosing to leave the gang behind.

Resources and supports should also include access to the women who want to use their experiences to mentor and support others. The females who want to develop the “ex-deviant identity” and want to support, counsel or mentor other women and share their experiences need a place to do so (Proctor, 2009). If this space is not provided, those experiences cannot be shared and other women cannot benefit from them. As of right now, there is no space for women to go or a space for a women who want to provide support through their “ex-deviant identity” can share their experiences with the women who need it most.

Due to the complex and dynamic nature of gang membership for females, an ideal program would be one designed specifically to continually research the impact that gangs are having on these women and provide proactive and reactive responses to the current trends within the gang lifestyle. A key component of this type of work would also have to include evaluation regarding what is working for the women as effective means of gang intervention and/or

prevention and what is not working (including the funding to do so). This would be the most holistic approach to not only the creation of a program but the success maintenance of a program that is delivering proactive and accurate services to the clientele that need it the most. As Lisa mentioned in her interview:

“You need both the text book people and the people who have actually lived through it. You can’t do it without both of them.”

iv. Directions for Further Research

This research was an opportunity to shine light on female gang membership by providing more perspectives on what life in a gang is truly like for a woman. There has been a lack of attention paid to women in gang research and more importantly here in Canada, attention paid to Aboriginal women and their experiences with gang entry, the gang lifestyle, and exiting the gang. Key questions arising from this research that merit more research and discussion are: 1) the female adaptation of the male hyper-masculine role in gangs, 2) the role and impact of children and gender of the gang member/associate in gang exit, and 3) further inquiry into the impact that culturally specific family-based counselling and programs have on gang intervention and prevention, particularly for young Aboriginal women. At this point in time, not enough research has been dedicated to the female experience and how we can help prevent their pathway into the gang. Even a few of the women themselves that are now working with the Aboriginal population expressed a need to hear the voices of women:

“One of my old professors was a prof that teaches Aboriginal gang classes and I’ve read so much and I have critiqued it, like this is so wrong, this is so not the way it is” – Nancy

“Gang activity is expected to increase along with the growing Aboriginal population, especially if the systemic discrimination, social and economic problems faced by urban Aboriginal youth and adults are not addressed” and female Aboriginal gang members are no exception to these circumstances (NWAC, 2007). I believe that this research is part of a growing number of studies that have opened the door for further research within this field. It is clear that

some of these women *want* to talk about their experiences and recognize that they live a different pathway than their male counterparts. They need to be treated as their own group to learn from and be recognized as women who have fought relentless battles to get from where they were to where they are- whether that is as an ex-gang associate or still currently involved with the gang. They do have insight into their story, into their pathway to the gang and their stories should continue to be heard and be used to better inform the programming that is available for them.

The issue of gang intervention and prevention programming is not an easy one to tackle and it requires ongoing research. To date, many programs exclude women because of their status as a gang member, however if there is no room for them in those programs, and no programs specifically for them... how are they to ever seek support to avoid or leave the gang? This research is not enough to determine a perfect organization or program but it does indicate that there is a need for a place for these women to deal with their pasts and to help support them in their futures. Existent programs or organizations need to find a way to include this population that is being missed and find a way to make resources accessible to the female gang population.

With a lot more time and more resources I would like to continue to find other ways to talk to more women. I strongly believe there is a lot more to learn and access through existing agencies could prove a viable resource for future researchers and provide more support for designing effective and relevant programs. Since this type of research is ongoing and the lifestyles of women on the street are always changing, it would be ideal for a researcher to work directly with a program that sees women who are involved with the gang lifestyle. If I had access to a specific program at the inception of the research I may have been more inclined to approach one program and work with them to complete the research. They would be able to provide me with access to channels and contacts that would aid in the completion of the research while the results could help shape the program. More importantly, I could become a normal part of the environment; I would become a familiar face with the women I intended to speak to and truly build a trusting relationship and an ongoing rapport and conversation rather than trying to capture a single interview. It would make it easier to approach individuals who are going through the process instead of trying to build the sample based on reliance of third party involvement. I would also capitalize on the use of female correctional facilities where there is the potential for an increased number of possible candidates for this research.

“At the present time, First Nations leadership, and Canadian society in general, pay too little attention to First Nations women’s concerns and needs” (Shepard et al., 2006, p. 233). The goal was to explore questions about gang entry, gang exit and programming, but overall the research sought to create an awareness that female Aboriginal women who come in contact with gangs have a very unique life course and that all women deserve to be treated differently from their male counterparts, especially when it comes to designing and implementing intervention and prevention programming. The increasingly involved role of women within the gang lifestyle alters their abilities to leave the gang and also impacts the effect the gang has on them into their future. This is precisely why women deserve to be recognized as having their own story and unique path to gang membership. This research was a way to provide a platform for the voice of Aboriginal women involved with gangs with hopes of providing a voice to those that have never had one or for those who have been silenced through many channels in their life course. Hopefully this research can provide heightened awareness to the experiences of First Nations women with gangs in Alberta. Moving forward, my hopes are that this research ignites interest in those researching within this field to continue to listen to the stories of these Aboriginal women and for government and policy makers to use these stories when considering program development and resources for the prevention and intervention of women participating in gangs in Alberta.

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Appendix A: Consent Form

Title of Project: Aboriginal Female Gang Membership and the "Hooks" for Gang Exit		
Principal Investigator(s): Jasmine Brazil Telephone Number: 780-868-2426 Supervisor: Dr. Jana Grekul Telephone Number: 780-492-0477		
	Yes	No
Do you understand that you have been asked to be in a research study to investigate the experiences of gang involved women? This includes their decisions to join and leave the gang, as well as their experiences with available programing.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you read (or has it been read to you) and been given a copy of the Information Sheet?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in taking part in this research study?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you understand that you are free to withdraw or end the interview at any time, without a reason and without affecting you in any way?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you understand that you must inform the researcher at the end of the interview if you wish to permanently withdraw from the study?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Has the issue of confidentiality been explained to you, and do you understand who will have access to the record of your interview?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you understand it will take approximately 60 minutes?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are you aware that you will not gain any privileges, or receive preferred treatment, as a result of your participation in this study?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are you clear that it is extremely important that you do not share with the researcher any information regarding criminal activities you have participated in which remain unknown to/unaccounted for by authorities. If any of these criminal activities are discussed with the researcher, she must inform the authorities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Who explained this study to you? _____		

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

I agree to take part in this study:

Yes

No

I agree to this interview being audio recorded:

Yes

No

Signature of Research Subject:

Printed Name:

Date:

Signature of Investigator or Designate:

Appendix B: Information Sheet

Aboriginal Female Gang Membership and the "Hooks" for Gang Exit

Goals of the Research: This research aims to understand gang membership from the perspective of Aboriginal adult females and explore what they feel are important factors and life-course events that influence their gang involvement. This research will also explore how the current programs in the community affect their decisions to remain in or leave the gang. Participants will be asked questions about their life experiences and the choices they have made. I aim to conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews (approximately 60 minutes in length) with 10 Aboriginal women who have been associated with a gang. The intent of the interviews will be for the women to tell me their stories about joining the gang, leaving the gang and the processes involved. I am also interested in talking with Aboriginal women who have *not* associated with a gang and hear their experiences & decisions in not choosing to become a gang member.

Procedure: The project will involve the use of semi-structured interviews to explore the issues described above. The sample will include gang and ex-gang members who volunteer to participate. Aboriginal females who have had no contact with gangs are also invited to participate to tell their stories about why they have not become part of the gang. Each interview will be audio-recorded with permission from the participant. In addition, the interviewer may jot down some notes. Should a participant decide not to permit audio-recording, the interviewer will only take notes during the interview. Interviews should last approximately 60 minutes. Following the completion of the interview, the recordings and interview notes will be typed out and summarized for the final thesis document.

Guarantees to Participants: Permission from individuals (in the form of a consent form) will be obtained prior to participation, at which point a detailed explanation of the procedure, right to consent, right to terminate the interview at any time, and guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality will be explicitly explained and reviewed. All participants will be provided with a copy of this information sheet.

Confidentiality: The researcher will not use any real names throughout the creation of a final paper or any further materials following this researcher. Each participant will be assigned a “fake name” following transcription of the interview and no real names will ever be used on any written document or in any communication beyond initial meeting and interview with the participant. The only individuals who will have access to the interview transcripts will be the researcher herself and her supervisor, Dr. Jana Grekul. All information will remain locked and/or password protected at all times throughout the research and following completion of the research.

Risks & Benefits: The researcher will take all possible steps to make sure that the participant is not at risk. The interviews will take place in a comfortable, safe and familiar area (i.e. a community organization known to the participant). If at any time the participant does not feel safe, or feels they need to leave or end the interview they are able to do so. Participation in this study will not affect your attendance at this program nor is this research related to or funded by any community program. No information about your participation will be shared with any program staff or any other participants. Although there is no payment for participation in this research project, you will assist the researcher in understanding Aboriginal women's choices about whether or not to be involved with a gang. The story of the participant will provide another perspective on the issue of gang membership and teach others about their experiences.

Rights to Withdrawal: The participant is to provide their own consent to participate in this research. This is done through signing the provided consent form and returning it to the researcher. If at any time throughout the interview the participant feels they no longer want to continue and/or would like to remove their participation from the study, they can inform the interviewer with no consequence to them. The decision to withdraw from the study must be made prior to the participant leaving the interview. This will be done so that the participant only has to be in contact with the researcher once and no identifying information will need to be attached to the interview transcript.

Important note: All participants will be reminded it is extremely important that they are not to share with the researcher any information regarding criminal activities they have participated in which remain unknown to/unaccounted for by authorities. If any of these criminal activities are discussed with the researcher, she must inform the authorities.

It is important that you understand your participation in this research and should you have any question or concerns, please do not hesitate to ask the researcher at any time throughout the research process.

Researcher Contact Information:

Jasmine Brazil, Graduate Student in Sociology, University of Alberta

Email: jbrazil@ualberta.ca Phone: 780-868-2426

Supervisor: Dr. Jana Grekul, Professor of Sociology, University of Alberta

Email: jana.grekul@ualberta.ca Phone: 780-492-0477

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Appendix C: Interview Guide

Introductions, tell a little bit about me and my project: Consent form

Tell me about you...

- 1) What is your age?
- 2) Are you from the Edmonton area?
 - a. Where did you grow up? In Alberta? In Edmonton?
 - b. Did you ever reside on reserve or on settlement?
- 3) How do you self-identify?
- 4) What was the last level of education you completed?
 - a. If less than high school diploma/GED, why did you stop attending?
- 5) Are you employed?
 - a. How many times have you been unemployed? For how long?
- 6) What was your childhood like?
 - a. Who was your primary caregiver growing up?
 - b. Who did you live with?
 - c. Did you have any siblings?
 - d. Any trouble in school? With the police?
 - e. Did any of your family get into trouble in school? With police?
 - f. What kind of friends did you hang out with, what did you do for fun?
 - g. Do you have any children of your own?
- 7) Have you ever been incarcerated?
 - a. This research isn't concerned so much with why you were incarcerated, but approximately how much time have you spent in jail or prison?
- 8) Have you ever been gang affiliated?
 - a. What is your extent of involvement?
 - b. Did you know anyone else who was gang involved yet? Family or friends?

IF NEVER GANG AFFILIATED...

- What made you decide to avoid joining a gang? Why did you decide to stay out of the gang lifestyle?
- Was there a lot of pressure (and from who) to join the gang?

IF GANG AFFILIATED...

- How old were you when you started becoming involved with or interacting with the gang?
 - Where were you first exposed to the gang? On the street? Through your family/friends? In prison?
 - Did you feel you had a choice?
 - Did you feel there were any alternatives at the time?
 - What was your gang initiation rite of passage?

- What was your role in the gang? How involved were you?

- What were relationships like in the gang?
 - What were your relationships like with other males in the gang?
 - What about other females in the gang?

- What made you stay in the gang?

- Did you leave the gang?
 - If yes, what made you decide to leave?
 - How did you come to this decision?
 - What did you have to do to separate yourself from that lifestyle?
 - If no, why do you feel that you don't want to or can't leave the gang?

IF PREVIOUSLY INCARCERATED at some point in their past

- *Did the gang lifestyle affect you while you were in prison?*
 - *How do you feel that it affects your life outside of the prison?*

- *When you left the institution, what role did the gang lifestyle play in going back to the community?*
 - *Do you feel that it is/was a support network or does it cause you more problems?*
 - *Do you think you can have a gang-free lifestyle after prison?*

- *What resources, programs, support systems would be most beneficial for you when leaving the institution and going back into the community?*

ALL PARTICIPANTS:

- What would an ideal program with supports look like to you?
 - What would help you most to choose to leave behind the gang lifestyle?
 - (If they don't want to leave the gang), why do you feel that the gang is the best place for you?

