The unheard voices: An exploration of the engagement and disengagement experiences of

black ex-youth gang members

by

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Abstract

Youth gangs and the criminal activities they engage in remain a major problem in Canada. Recent media and law enforcement reports suggest that some black youth have been involved with gangs. However, experiences of black ex-youth gang members in Canada have received relatively limited scholarly engagements. Based on data from semi-structured in-depth interviews with 16 black ex-youth gang members, this study investigates why black youth join gangs, why some desist from gangs and how they construe their experiences with the Canadian criminal justice system.

Discursive accounts of participants suggest that black youth gang involvement results from a reciprocal relationship between individual and socio-structural factors. Specifically, some black youth join gangs due to adverse experiences at home, school, communities, influences of deviant peers, and their quests for money, respect, status and friendship. The study demonstrates that black youth gang membership tends to be temporary, and some black youth gang members desist because of actual or threat of violence (to self, family members or gang members), disillusionment, fear of incarceration, police harassment, committed relationships, advice from influential others and religious awakening.

The study reports three key findings on black youth gang members' experiences with the criminal justice system. First, the interactions between black youth gang members and police are mostly marked by physical and verbal abuse, harassment and disrespect with few encounters characterised by fairness and respect. Also, interactions between black youth gang members and police are shaped by gender and race. Second, black youth gang members who come into contact with youth courts are mostly released to surety and on multiple vague bail conditions that lead to their further entrenchment in the system. Some black youth gang members are also unlawfully detained prior to trial due to perceived racial biases in the criminal justice system. Despite perceived racialized treatment of black youth gang members, my

findings suggest that sentences imposed on them tend to be proportional and have meaningful consequences. Third, black youth gang inmates experience segregation, physical and verbal abuse by correctional officers. Additionally, they report inadequate access to medical care, rehabilitative programs and food. The implications of the study's findings for theory, practice, policy and future research are analysed.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Anthony Mpiani. The research of this project received ethics approval from the University of Alberta Ethics Board, Project Name: "Exploring the experiences of black ex-youth gang members in Edmonton," No. Pro00076250_AME1, December 12, 2017-November 8, 2018 (Renewals: October 29, 2018 and October 17, 2019).

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the black ex-youth gang members who participated in the study. I

am eternally grateful to them for sharing their experiences with me.

Acknowledgement

A popular Swahili proverb says "Where there are many, nothing goes wrong". I have come to appreciate the meaning of this proverb throughout this study. Although I wrote this thesis independently, a lot of people ensured that nothing really went wrong. These individuals deserve special mention.

I thank Dr. Temitope B. Oriola, my supervisor, for his support, commitment and guidance in the entire process. Dr. Oriola has not only been my supervisor but a mentor. He provided a supervision atmosphere where I could work on my own but made sure I did the right thing. I am deeply grateful for that.

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<center>**Chapter one: Introduction**</center>

1.1 Background to the study

Youth are an important asset to society (Cunningham et al., 2008). However, scholarly literature demonstrates that youth can also pose risk to, and be at risk in their societies (Reppucci et al., 2002). Extant studies indicate involvement of youth in gangs in contexts such as the US and Australia (see Decker & Pyrooz, 2015; Covey, 2010). The term gang is highly contested. Consequently, researchers have not been able to arrive at a consensus on what it is. This definitional dilemma centres on issues of gang membership or size (Klein, 1971); goal (Miller, 1981); leadership (Spergel, 1990; Johnstone, 1981); organisational structure (Short, 1990); and the intensity of criminal activities performed by a gang (Curry & Decker, 2003). Franzese, Covey and Menard (2006) argue that the lack of agreement on what a gang is impacts how scholars and policy makers perceive and tackle the gang problem. For conceptual clarity, I adopt Eurogang Network's definition of a youth gang. According to the Eurogang Network researchers, a youth gang is "any durable street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity" (Klein & Maxson, 2006). Even though some concerns or questions have been raised regarding the conceptualisation and validity of the Eurogang definition (see for example, Aldridge, Medina-Ariz & Ralphs, 2011), I employ it because it provides a consistent framework for identifying, measuring and characterising youth gangs (Wood & Alleyne, 2010; Matsuda, Esbensen & Carson, 2012).

Youth gangs appear to be a global problem. Some studies have documented the existence and activities of youth gangs in continents such as North, Central and South America (Pyrooz, Fox & Decker, 2010; Seelke, 2016), Europe (Gatti et al., 2011), Australia (White & Mason, 2006), Asia (Pyrooz & Decker, 2013) and Africa (Covey, 2010). For example, a recent study that utilised data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth estimated that there were 1,059,000 youth gang members in the US in 2010 (Pyrooz & Sweeten, 2015). Information on

the socio-demographic characteristic of these youth gang members showed that they were disproportionately males, black, Hispanic and were from single-parent homes and families with low socioeconomic status (ibid).

In the UK, the 2011 *Ending Gang and Youth Violence* report indicated that around two to seven percent of youth (whose ages range from 10 to 19) were involved in gangs (HM Government, 2011). Statistics from the Metropolitan Police Service further demonstrated that youth gang members were responsible for 48 percent of all shootings and 22 percent of grave violence committed in London in 2011 (ibid).

Youth gangs and the criminal activities they engage in are a major problem in Canada (Mellor et al., 2005). However, official statistics on Canadian youth gangs are almost non-existent (Wortley & Tanner, 2008). The 2002 Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs which was conducted by the Solicitor General and involved more than 264 police agencies across the nation, identified 434 youth gangs with a total of 7017 gang members (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2003). Of the total number, 42 youth gangs comprising 668 members were found in Alberta (ibid). While these figures offer insights into the number of youth street gangs in Canada, it must be pointed out that they are based on law enforcement's definition of a gang. It is possible that the number of youth street gang members in these contexts are much higher as the study only talks about those known to police. Evidence from other studies suggest that the youth gang problem has intensified since 2002. In 2007, the number of youth gangs in Canada was reported to have increased by about 80% (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2008 cited in Paula, Elias & Xue, 2009). Although youth gangs exist across Canada, their numbers, membership and the level of intensity of their activities vary from one province to the other (Totten & Dunn, 2012). Recent media reports suggest that youth gangs are a problem in Edmonton (Roth, 2012). However, the exact number of these gangs is not known.

Mellor et al. (2005) conceptualize and broadly categorise Canadian youth gangs into five groups (type A to E). These include type A gangs which are primarily interest-based and members do not carry out criminal activities; type B gangs which are spontaneous in nature and members are situationally motivated to carry out criminal activities; type C gangs which are formed based on a specific temporary purpose; type D gangs which are made up of hard-core members who aim to make profit through criminal activities; and type E gangs which are well-structured and organised, severe in their criminal activities and also aim to make economic gains.

The existing literature points out that some youth in Canada are gang-involved due to individual/behavioural and structural factors (Grekul & LaBoucane, 2007; Grekul & Sinclair, 2012; Totten & Totten, 2012). Grekul and Sinclair (2012), for example, argue that some Aboriginal youth join gangs in order to acquire self-esteem and obtain a new identity. Rossiter and Rossiter (2009) identify poverty and poor educational opportunities as factors that push some youth into gangs. The literature also discusses the impacts of family breakdown, violence in the home and the lack of sense of belonging on youth gang involvement (Ngo et al., 2017). Research on experiences of youth gang members shows that they abuse drugs, live in poor conditions, and are often physically abused by their fellow and rival gang members (Chettleburgh, 2007; Curry & Decker, 2003; Totten & Totten, 2012).

Although the literature on youth gangs in the Canadian context has contributed to our understanding of the phenomenon, a critical analysis of these studies reveals some major limitations. First, studies on youth gangs are few and provincially-based. In Alberta, research on youth gangs has almost exclusively focused on Indigenous youth gangs. However, recent media reports suggest that some black youth in Edmonton are involved with gangs. Available estimates indicate that between 2005 and 2010, 29 Somali-Canadian youth were killed in gang and drug-related incidents in Alberta (Aulakh, 2010). In 2011, three Somali-Canadians were

killed in Edmonton in connection with gangs (Humphreys, 2011). Despite the involvement of black youth in gangs, there is paucity of studies on why these youth join or disengage from gangs. The nearly exclusive focus of existing literature on Indigenous youth hampers broader understanding of the factors that shape involvement of youth from other backgrounds with gangs.

Second, there has been relatively scant scholarly engagements with the experiences of black youth gang members with the Canadian criminal justice system. For example, Ngo et al.'s (2017) study which involved some gang-involved immigrant youth (including blacks) shows that they perceived unfairness and bias in the Canadian criminal justice system. The study participants particularly indicated that race had impacts on their interactions with law enforcement. While their study offers insights into youth gang members' experiences with the criminal justice system, its findings may not generally represent the experiences of black youth gang members as participants from other ethnic minority backgrounds were included in the study. Therefore, a study that specifically investigates the experiences of black youth gang members with the Canadian criminal justice system is needed to bridge the gap in the Canadian literature.

This study fills the empirical void by exploring the engagement and disengagement experiences of some black former youth gang members in Edmonton. It offers an in-depth exploration and analysis of the factors that shape black youth involvement in and disengagement from gangs, and their experiences with the criminal justice system. The study is part of a larger study on "Engaging communities in the age of policing visibility". The wider study is a community-engaged participatory action research involving the Africa Centre, Edmonton

1.2 Research questions

The study investigates the following research questions:

- Why do some black youth in Edmonton join gangs?

- What factors account for gang desistance among black youth in Edmonton?

- What are the experiences of black former youth gang members with the Canadian criminal justice system?

- What are the practices and policy implications of the aforementioned?

1.3 Significance of the study

Youth gangs and their activities have been afforded significant research scrutiny. The existing literature has dealt with definitional issues (Esbensen et al., 2001; Decker, 1991), risks and protective factors for youth gang involvement (Estrada et al., 2018), motivations for youth gang desistance (Carson, Peterson & Esbensen, 2013; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011), the process of youth gang desistance (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002), consequences associated with youth gang involvement (Gilman, Hill & Hawkins, 2014), and the relationship between youth gang membership and delinquency (Gordon et al., 2014). Several empirical studies have also employed different approaches to explore the subjective experiences of youth gang members with the criminal justice system (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Durán, 2009; Novich & Hunt, 2017).

While these studies have contributed to our understanding of the youth gang phenomenon generally and youth gang members' experiences specifically, the majority have been conducted in the US and UK. Thus, relatively little is known about experiences of youth gang members in Canada. The few available studies on youth gang members have been provincially-based (Wortley & Tanner, 2008). For instance, Wortley and Tanner's (2008) study that explains ethnic differences in gang activity among Canadian youth was conducted in Toronto. Similarly, Dunbar's (2018) research that also explores perspectives of justice-involved youth on gang desistance was carried out in Ottawa. While much is known about experiences of youth gang members in provinces such as Ontario, little is known in the case of

youth gang members in Alberta. A few studies that have explored ex-gang members' experiences have mainly concentrated on adults and prison gang members (see for example, Chalas & Grekul, 2017). Black youth gang involvement has been reported by the media and the Edmonton Police service (Pratt, 2011; Roth, 2012). However, to the best of my knowledge, no research has investigated the experiences of black youth who have been gang-involved in Edmonton.

Although some lessons could be learned from studies conducted in other cities, it is dangerous to assume that youth gang members are similar and their experiences are the same everywhere. White (2008) has underscored the importance of *context* (including socio-historical roots, race and culture) in understanding youth gang members' experiences. Given this background, it is important to explore the experiences of black ex-youth gang members in Edmonton.

The present study thus focuses on investigating the experiences of some black former youth gang members in Edmonton. The narratives offered by study participants regarding why they joined gangs, why they desisted from gangs and their experiences with the criminal justice system have implications for policy and practice. For example, participants' accounts highlight areas that need to be focussed on in developing prevention and intervention programs for gang-involved youth and those at risk of joining gangs. In addition, insights provided by study participants add to the race-criminal justice literature. Participants' narratives particularly demonstrate the extent to which race shapes interactions between minority youth and criminal justice actors—police, law courts and correction officers. Therefore, programs aimed at improving relations between minority groups and criminal justice actors can draw on the study's findings. Moreover, participants' accounts highlight some of the challenges they went through as children from immigrant families. Hence the study's results could be of great

importance to organisations that work towards promoting social integration and multiculturalism.

1.4 Scope and limitations of the study

This study specifically explores the experiences of black youth who have been involved with gangs. Its findings are based on self-reported data from a racially homogenous sample (that is, black ex-gang members) in a medium-size geographical location (Edmonton) in Canada. Given this context, the study has some methodological limitations.

First, some self-accounts or experiences related by study participants could rarely be independently verified and were taken at face value. While these accounts offer insights into the subjective experiences of study participants, it is possible that they might have been affected by exaggeration (representing their experiences as significantly greater than they were), attribution (ascribing positive outcomes to one's agency but assigning negative outcomes to external forces), and selective memory (remembering only what one deems convenient and deliberately forgetting what is deemed inconvenient) (Althubaiti, 2016; Donaldson & Grant-Vallone, 2002).

Second, considering the fact that all the study participants are black youth, it may be difficult to make generalizations from their experiences to former youth gang members from other racial backgrounds. Nonetheless, the experiences shared by study participants are generally comparable to those reported in a number of similar investigations of the experiences of non-black ex-youth gang members (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Hagedorn 1988; Short & Strodtbeck 1974; Durán, 2008).

Third, although the study's sample size (N=16) is enough to explore the lived experiences of young black persons who have been involved with gangs (Bernard, 2013), it is not representative in terms of gender. While young men constitute 81.2% of the study sample, only 18.8% are young women. The study participants linked me up with five black young women

who had been gang-involved. However, three of the five young women showed interest and participated in the study. Although the number of female participants is relatively small, the inclusion of their voices is important for several reasons. For example, it helps to interrogate and compare women's pathway to gangs and their experiences with the criminal justice system with those of their males.

1.5 Organisation of the study

The study is organised into six chapters. Chapter one has provided background to the study. It has also discussed the significance, scope and limitations of the study. In chapter two, I review some key literature on youth street gangs. Given the study's focus on black former youth gang members, I explore the history of youth gangs in Canada and highlight the paucity of research on black youth gangs. Drawing on information from media reports and other publications, I explore the activities of some black youth gangs in the Canadian context. Scholarly literature on why some youth join gangs, why they desist from gangs and youth gang members' experiences with the criminal justices is also reviewed.

In chapter three, I provide a theoretical framework for the study. Specifically, I review some key theories (such as critical race theory, cultural conflict theory, differential association theory, etc.) and demonstrate their relevance in examining the experiences of black ex-youth gang members. Here, I argue that employing an eclectic mix of theories is appropriate in understanding why some black youth become gang-involved, why they desist from gangs and how the criminal justice agents interact with them during gang-involvement.

The fourth chapter provides an in-depth description of the study's methodology. I recount the research approach adopted by the study, selection of study participants, interview procedure, data transcription and analysis. Also, I discuss some ethical issues considered during the study. I conclude the chapter by reflecting on my position as a researcher and discussing the validity of the study.

In chapters five and six, I present and analyse the findings of the study. While chapter five focuses on study participants' experiences from joining to exiting gangs, chapter six analyses their experiences with the Canadian criminal justice system. I draw on the study's theoretical framework and other relevant literature to discuss the main findings of the study in both chapters.

In chapter seven, I conclude with a review of the main findings. I show how insights gained from the study can be employed to inform policy and practice. The implication of the study's findings for future research is also discussed.

Chapter two: Literature review

2.1 Youth gangs in Canada

Historically, gangs first emerged in Canada when pirates attacked a fishing boat off the Grand Banks in Newfoundland (Totten & Totten, 2012). However, criminal youth activities gained grounds after World War II when the integration of war veterans and youth were not prioritized. The emergence of gangs in Canada is partly attributed to poverty and racism proliferating under conditions of social inequality (Totten & Totten, 2012). Although Winnipeg's Dew Drop gang has been identified as one of the first gangs in Canada, youth gang activities were first reported in Surrey and Vancouver in 1975 and 1979 respectively (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2003).

Today, youth gangs are entrenched in Canada and their existence is a major concern to the public and law enforcement agencies (Mellor et al., 2005). As indicated earlier, a number of surveys have identified youth gangs in Canada. The 2002 Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs points out that there is an uneven distribution of youth gangs among the provinces. For example, while 216 youth gangs were identified in Ontario, Nova Scotia reported 37 youth gangs (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2003). Furthermore, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and British Columbia were identified as the "youth gang hubs" of Canada. The unequal distribution of youth gangs across provinces may be due to the fluidity of gang members. Gang members migrate to provinces where there are high prospects for their activities. Also, the differences in population size across provinces may be a factor.

2.2 Demographics of Canadian youth gangs

The 2002 Canadian Survey on Youth Gangs reveals that the majority of youth gang members are males (94%) and fall within the age range of 16 to 18 years and about half of all youth gang members are under 18 years. This suggests that an estimated 6% of youth gang members are females. There are relatively few female gang members in Canada and most of

them are assumed to perform auxiliary roles in male gangs (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009). The rate of young women's involvement in gangs is approximately 10 times lower in Canada than the US (Dunbar, 2017). Although women's participation in gangs remains low, research shows that the number of female gang members has been increasing (Totten, 2008). Dunbar (2017) argues that female participation in gangs appears low because of limited attention of law enforcement on female gangs and focus of scholars on male gang activities.

The results of the 2016 Population Census indicate that black people constitute 3.5% of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2019). While black people constitute a small proportion of the Canadian population, black youth are disproportionately involved with gangs (National Crime Prevention Centre, 2007; Khenti, 2013). A body of race-crime literature suggests that the rates of involvement in criminality is much higher for Blacks than Whites (Morenoff, 2005; Sampson & Lauritsen, 1997). However, other studies argue that Blacks are often overrepresented in official crime statistics (Owusu-Bempah & Wortley, 2014; Spohn, 2014; Hetey & Eberhardt, 2018). Owusu-Bempah and Wortley (2014), for example, observe that in Canada, Aboriginal and black Canadians are overrepresented in official crime statistics because of racial bias within the criminal justice system. Their argument is consistent with the differential selection hypothesis which posits that the deployment of efforts of law enforcement agencies against racial minorities account for black people's overrepresentation in the criminal justice system (Piquero & Brame, 2008).

2.3 Activities of black youth gangs in Canada: An overview

There is paucity of detailed systematic studies on black youth gangs in Canada. However, information from multiple sources (such as books, peer-reviewed articles and media reports) suggest that black youth gangs have existed and continue to exist in Canada (Chettleburg, 2007; Barker, 2015; Fast, 2017). These gangs have included (but are not limited to) the Master Bs, Bo-Gars, Crack Down Posse, Ace Crew, Galloway Boys, Jamaican Shower Posse, Mad Cowz,

African Mafia, West End Jamaicans, North End Jamaicans, and Somali gangs. Most of these gangs operate in major cities such as Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, Winnipeg and Edmonton.

Barker (2015) has noted that the Master Bs was Montreal's first black gang. Formed in the 1980s by Jean Beauvoir, the Master Bs (predominantly made up of immigrant Haitians) aimed to protect its members against the racist skinhead and neo- Nazi gangs in Montreal. However, the group later became a street gang and spread throughout Northern Montreal (Barker, 2015). During the same period (that is, in the 1980s), the Bo-Gars, another Haitian gang, was formed in Montreal. The Bo-Gars began as a school fight club where a team of young boys would change sides each day and fight each other. Initially, Bo-Gars was not a criminal group. It, however, became a street gang when its members started acting as soldiers for the Master Bs gang. The Bo-Gars gang is believed to have originated from the Bloods in Montreal (Totten & Totten (2012).

The activities of the Master Bs and Bo-Gars were challenged by the Crack Down Posse, a gang based in the Haitian neighbourhoods in West Montreal (Barker, 2015). As of 2004, there were 10 major street gangs in Montreal (Ha, 2004). Of these, the Bo-Gars and Crack Down Posse were the largest gangs. They recruited youth as young as 10 and 12 as their members. While members of the Crack Down Posse refer to themselves as the 'Blues' because they usually wear blue on their headbands, clothes or as decorations in their cars, the Bo-Gars are called the 'Reds' because their signature color is red.

Similarly, in 1990, the Ace Crew gang was formed in Ottawa (Chettleburgh, 2007). It "established its territory, created its hand signs, graffiti, chose colors and went about the business of pushing drugs" (ibid: 53). Yet, the Ottawa Police became aware of the existence of the Ace Crew in July 1994 during its investigation of a shooting incident in the city's Vincent Massey Park (Chettleburgh, 2007). The Ace Crew membership largely consisted of Jamaican youth whose ages ranged from 18 to 25 years. The group had both male and female members.

While the male gangsters acted as warriors, the female members served as sex providers and dope sellers (Sherring, 2015). In his description of how the Ace Crew gang initiated its members especially females, Chettleburgh (2007:54) writes:

> An everyday Bic lighter would be purchased. A gang member would flick it on and then turn the lighter horizontally for a minute or so, to allow the flame to heat the steel hood on top of the lighter. Then several gang members would forcefully hold down the left arm of the girl initiate and press the top of the lighter against the back of her hand until the skin was severely burned. The result was a distinctive rounded A, the sign of the Crew.

In Winnipeg, black youth gang activities also became rampant after the formation of the Mad Cowz in early 2000 (Fast, 2017). Many of the group's members were from East African countries such as Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan. While Mad Cowz was often recognized as a gang mainly made up of newcomer refugee youth, some of its members were blacks born in Canada (Fast, 2017). In 2004, Sirak Okbazion, an Eritrean and a member of the Mad Cowz, was fatally shot by a rival gang member (Turner, 2013). In the aftermath of Sirak's death, some members of the Mad Cowz were upset over the perceived lack of retaliation for his murder from the gang's leadership. This led to a split within the group and the African Mafia was subsequently formed in 2005 (Fast, 2017). In the same year, feud ensued between the Mad Cowz and African Mafia over the drug trade in Winnipeg's West End neighborhood as the two factions competed for territory. The reckless shootings between the two groups led to the tragic and accidental killing of Phil Haiart, a 17 year-old innocent bystander (Turner, 2010).

The African Mafia gained 'unwanted' recognition from the police following the killing of Phil Haiart. Consequently, its members moved to other areas in Winnipeg and formed new gangs such as All 'Bout Money and Da Pitbull Army (ibid). In 2014, the Winnipeg police acknowledged the existence of the African Mafia gang and indicated that it had approximately 85 members and associates across Canada (Chura, 2014). At first, the African Mafia members publicly identified themselves by wearing clothes with the gang's moniker. However, in order

to evade police surveillance, harassment and arrest, the splinter groups do not do so anymore. Despite police efforts to sweep gangs from the streets of Winnipeg, the Africa Mafia is still active and its members are believed to have spread across Alberta (Turner, 2010).

As in the other cities, the activities of black youth gangs have also been reported in Edmonton. For example, a 2007 report by the gang unit of the Edmonton Police Service (EPS) indicates that there were 10 active street gangs in the city (Henton, 2011). These included gangs such as the North End Jamaicans, West End Jamaicans and Somali gangs. While some of these black gangs operate in specific territories (as their names suggest) and have well-organized structures, others are loosely organized and highly mobile. The EPS has observed that Somali gangs are transient and work a circuit across Canada (Pratt, 2011). They operate in places such as Toronto, Ottawa, Edmonton, Calgary and Fort McMurray. Unlike other street gangs, Somali gangs do not establish group identities. Rather, they keep low profile and are mainly driven by making-money through the sale of drugs. Although the exact number of Somali gang members in Canada is unknown, police estimate suggests they are dealing with about 2000 Somali gang associates across Canada (Pratt, 2011).

Generally, the findings of gang investigations and projects in Canada show that black gang members engage in different forms of criminal activities. These include street-level drug trafficking, sex trade, robberies, assaults, killings, and fraud (Chettleburg, 2007). In 2009, for example, the Toronto Police Service (through Project Corral) found that the Jamaican Shower Posse imported drugs into the Greater Toronto Area from Jamaica, United States, Dominican Republic and Panama for its members and other gangs to sell on the street (Vallis, 2010). Likewise, a drug-related raid by the Winnipeg police in 2014 found six ounces of crack cocaine, three ounces of marijuana, and 14 rocks of crack cocaine at Regent Avenue West residence of four suspected members of the African Mafia (Chura, 2014). As noted by Barker (2015), gangs operate a drug-dealing system called "dial-a-doper" where customers phone their dealers at

predetermined numbers and dealers send their associates to deliver drugs to them. While some of the proceeds from drug sales and other criminal activities are used to support the lavish lifestyles of gang members, some are also invested into legitimate businesses (Criminal Intelligence Service Canada, 2006).

In 2004, the Montreal police also arrested and charged two brothers who were associated with the Crack Down Posse for running a prostitution ring (Ha, 2004). Police wiretaps indicated that within a period of two months, they made 166 phone calls to youth protection centres to lure 'troubled' girls into prostitution (ibid).

In addition to prostitution, some black youth gang members physically assault and kill rival gang members, their own members and innocent people. In 1995, some Ace Crew members nabbed a female member of the group together with her cousin, and his friend from their home in Ottawa and sent them to a Banner Road apartment. There, the female associate was physically and sexually assaulted by her gang members. However, Sylvain Leduc, her 17-year old cousin was tortured and beaten to death by Ace Crew members (Sherring, 2015). On February 19, 2004, a Mad Cow member identified as Yassin "Ace" Ibrahim, was also charged by the Winnipeg Police Service for stabbing Curt "Snoop" Duhard (Jewell, 2013).

2.4 Who, where and how youth gangs recruit

Recruitment is a vital but difficult task for any organisation as prospective recruits often possess characteristics which may result in mistaken selection. In order to avoid the problem of misguided selection and reduce the risk of infiltration, gangs restrict recruitment to individuals who have connections with active gang members (Densley, 2012). More importantly, they take into account where, who and how to recruit (Gambetta, 2009). Gang recruitments usually take place in local settings where people are familiar with each other and can check themselves out in the course of their daily interactions (Gambetta, 2009). Places

from which youth gangs recruit include schools, correctional institutions, amongst others (Mellor et al., 2005).

Gang recruiters look for certain qualities in prospective recruits to ascertain whether they can perform the basic duties of gang members. Violence is a salient feature of gangs (Densley, 2012). Accordingly, gang recruiters are often keen to recruit individuals with established reputation for 'disciplined' (moderated) violence because those noted for 'undisciplined violence' typically attract too much attention from law enforcement (Gambetta, 2009). It has also been documented that youth gang members engage in criminal activities which form an integral part of their group identity (Klein & Maxson, 2006). To maintain their group identities, gang recruiters look for criminal potentials that they can harness to their advantage. Thus, gangs regularly target youth who have propensities for disciplined violence. The criminal potentials of recruits are mostly inferred from their past criminal records (Ouellette & Wood 1998).

Some youth gangs recruit new members through techniques such as seduction (promise of money, sex and glamour), subterfuge (deception), and coercion (Carlie, 2002). Other youth gangs also recruit through sponsorships (Mellor et al., 2005). Prospective recruits obtain these sponsorships from friends and family members who are active gang members. Densley (2012) has noted that recruitment into gangs can either be a single event or a gradual and lengthy process. Moreover, gang membership could be a family tradition. Some gang members bless their children into gangs. In the US, some parents who are involved with Bloods bless their children (those who are a year old) into the gang by giving them nicknames such as "Blood drops" or "stains" and teach them how to fold fingers into gang signs (Belenkaya, 2008).

2.5 Interrelated factors that contribute to youth gang involvement

Why youth join gangs is a complex issue and has been one of the major themes in the gang literature since the early 1900s (Alleyne & Wood, 2010; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen,

1955; Densley, 2018; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Thornberry et al., 2003; Klein, 1971; Rizzo, 2003; Taylor, 2013). The existing scholarly literature offers several explanations as to why some youth become gang-involved. Basically, these explanations can be categorised into two groups—individual/behavioural and structural accounts. At the individual level, factors such as emotional and behavioural problems (such as aggression, delinquency, etc.) are identified as causes of youth involvement in gangs (O'Brien et al., 2013; Wyrick & Howell, 2004). Thus, the behavioural account considers youth gang involvement as a pathological problem. Contrary to the behavioural view, structural accounts indicate that factors such as poverty, lack of educational opportunities, joblessness, and dysfunctional family structures influence some youth to join and remain in gangs (Esbensen et al., 1993; Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2007). For instance, research into the nexus between family structure and youth gang involvement suggest that although gang members can come from all family types and sizes (Hagedorn, 1991; Smith & Bradshaw, 2005), most gang members come from families with single-parents (Young et al., 2014), history of gang involvement (Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991), substance abuse issues, and poor parental-child attachment (National Crime Prevention Centre, 2007). Based on the structural factors that predispose at-risk youth to gang involvement, some scholars claim that the quest for wealth, power, identity, security, excitement, friendship, protection, belonging, and acceptance motivate some youth to join gangs (Caputo 1999; Chatterjee, 2006; Trump, 2002; Cureton, 2002; Wortley & Tanner, 2008). Prior research, for example, shows that youth gangs often promise prospective recruits material and social gains (Cooper, 2009; Esbensen, 2000). As a result, gangs appeal to youth from lower-status income and dysfunctional families. This argument appears to suggest that individuals who join gangs make rational choices aimed at improving their lives. However, Fagan (1990) contends that an individual's decision to join a gang may not be calculated or planned as demonstrated by the literature. Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson (2007) have emphasized that a gang can be a source

of punishment, pain, and sorrow. There is also a body of research on intergenerational gang membership (Augustyn et al., 2017; Totten, 2010). In their quantitative study that draws on developmental and life-course perspective and intergenerational interactional theory to examine the connection between parent-child gang membership, Augustyn et al. (2017) find that sex of parents and children and the level of contact between the former and the latter play a role in intergenerational gang membership (when factors such as age and race are controlled). Specifically, they note that daughters of gang-involved mothers are more likely to become involved with gangs because of sex and not the level of contact between them. They, however, indicate that sex and the level of contact between gang-involved fathers and their sons have significant impact on intergenerational gang membership (Augustyn et al., 2017).

From the foregoing, it is evident that interrelated individual and structural factors account for youth involvement in gangs. While both accounts are well-explored in other contexts (such as the US), the literature on why some black youth join gangs in Canada is relatively scant. To reiterate, the few extant studies have primarily focused on Indigenous youth. In their study of Aboriginal youth gangs in Canada, Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson (2007) report that some youth are gang-involved because of financial gains and status enhancement. Although Aboriginal youth involvement with gangs is high compared to other visible minority or racialized groups, black youth involvement in gangs (as demonstrated earlier) cannot be underestimated or overlooked. Systematic research is needed to unearth the reasons why some black youth in Canada join gangs.

2.6 Experiences of youth gang members

Studies on the experiences of gang members reveal that there are risks and dangers associated with being gang-involved (Curry & Decker, 2003; Totten & Totten, 2012). Totten and Totten (2012) observe that some gang-involved youth withdraw from society and resort to drugs and alcohol; they are mostly unemployed; and consequently live in abject poverty.

However, media reports indicate that there are some youth gang members (especially gang leaders) who make huge sums of money from criminal activities and are rich (Ferraiuolo, 2014). Research also indicates that some gang members (especially females) are homeless and trade sex for places to stay. Some female gang members are also sexually assaulted by men in their gangs (Totten & Totten, 2012). In their exploration of young women's experiences of gang-related violence in England, Medina, Ralphs and Aldridge (2012) report that most of the female gangsters they interviewed were sexually assaulted or raped by men in their gangs. However, the women rarely disclosed any victimisation they experienced to law enforcement agencies due to fear of reprisals (ibid). This may also be due to their mistrust of law enforcement. Although some youth gang members experience physical abuses during exit, others leave without any abuses. O'Neill's (2010) study on Mara Salvatrucha or MS-13 (a transnational circuit gang) indicates that members of this gang can exit without any abuse(s) through conversion to the Pentecostal faith. Brotherton and Barrios (2004) have also documented that members of the Almighty Latin Kings and Queens Nation (ALKQN) sign exit documents when leaving.

Also, most field studies in the US report that most youth gang members have been physically abused by the police, and surveys of gang members consistently find that they are arrested more often than their non-gang peers (Curry & Decker, 2003). In Novich and Hunt's (2017) study which explored the experiences and perceptions of ethnic minority youth gang members in San Francisco, respondents reported various forms of abuse such as beating, slamming, shoving and choking by the police. Respondents also related stories of verbal abuse (being sworn at and spoken to in a disrespectful manner) and police use of excessive force against them. In particular, those who had been arrested before reported that they were tightly handcuffed. Similarly, in Colorado and Utah, Duran (2009) finds that 34% of the Mexican-American gang members he studied had been beaten or punched one or more times by the

police. In Canada, immigrants who engage in gang activities are often arrested, prosecuted and deported (Totten & Totten, 2012). Youth gang members, as noted by Schmidt and O`Reilly (2007), encounter the police regularly because they spend a greater part of their time hanging out with fellow gang members.

Generally, police response to youth gangs has been twofold: to garner information for intelligence purposes and to engage in suppressive actions against gangs (Curry & Decker, 2003). These interactions can either be friendly and non-antagonistic or hostile and aggressive based on police assignment and the activities of gang members. Studies show that gang members establish rapport with officers in circumstances where the police create special units to deal with gangs (Schmidt & O`Reilly, 2007). This notwithstanding, gang members usually "report antagonistic relationships with police officers" (Curry & Decker (2003: 151).

The experiences of gang members regarding prosecution and sentencing have received some scholarly attention. In criminal prosecution, defendants' characteristics such as race/ethnicity, appearance and employment status may have a bias effect on the decision of prosecutors in the absence of concrete or compelling evidence (Abwender & Hough, 2001; Mitchell et al., 2005; Reskin & Visher, 1986). Additionally, some studies have demonstrated that a defendant's gang membership status can have an effect on his/her prosecution as gangs are often perceived by the public as a threat to society (Eisen et al., 2013; Miethe & McCorkle, 1997). Thus, the label "gang member" invokes a stereotypical image and creates a master status that override other traits possessed by accused gang members. This consequently shapes how prosecutors and jurors treat gang members in courtrooms. Eisen et al. (2013) used a 35-minute simulated video-tape to test how jurors' knowledge of an accused person's gang membership or association shape their verdicts. Their study participants (315 undergraduate psychology students) who acted as jurors were grouped into three. While the first group was not provided with any background information about the accused person, the second and third groups were

told that the accused person was affiliated to a gang and was a hard-core gang member respectively. In the end, 43.8% of participants in the group that had no knowledge of the accused person's gang affiliation found him guilty. However, 62.5% of their participants who were informed that the accused person was a hard-core gang member found him guilty. Thus, the mock jurors' knowledge of the defendant's gang membership negatively influenced their verdicts of the case. As a result, the authors concluded that gang members are more likely to be found guilty than non-gang members in criminal prosecutions. Contrary to this finding, accounts of other studies suggest that in most gang-related cases, offenders are often treated leniently in both charging and sentencing decisions or completely have their cases dismissed because they are frequently arrested based on less compelling evidence (Miethe & McCorkle, 1997).

2.7 Motivations, methods and consequences for gang desistance

Gang desistance is an understudied area in gang research (Berger et al., 2017; Carson, Peterson & Esbensen, 2013). This is partly due to the difficulty in operationalizing the exact stages at which gang members truly desist from gang-related crimes (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Youth gang membership tends to be temporary and typically averages two years or less (Thornberry et al., 1993). Youth who enter the gang trajectory leave at different ages. While youth's entry into gangs peaks between ages 15 and 19, they typically quit between the ages of 20 and 29 (Dong, Gibson & Krohn, 2015).

There are several factors that may pull and push gang members out of their groups. Some gang researchers who have drawn on life-course framework in their works argue that life-turning events such as maturation, marriage, parenthood and employment provide impetus for gang desistance (Fleisher & Krienert, 2004; Hastings, Dunbar & Bania, 2011; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Chalas & Grekul, 2017). For example, Fleisher and Krienert (2004) have documented that most female youth gang members exit their gangs when they become pregnant

and assume responsibilities as mothers. Likewise, in their examination of the association between fatherhood and desistance among young male gang members, Moloney et al. (2009) find that fatherhood marked a turning point in the lives of their study participants. Thus, most of their respondents reported that they left gangs when they became fathers. Insights from these studies lend credence to the claim that most gang-involved youth exit their groups when they mature and begin to assume familial and other responsibilities (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011).

In addition to these pull (external) factors, some gang-involved youth are pushed out of their groups by traumatic experiences such as vicarious victimization by law enforcement agencies, rival gangs members and fellow gang members (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002), disillusionment and fear of incarceration (Berger et al., 2017; Giordano et al., 2002). In their exploratory study of the process of desistance among core ex-gang members, Berger et al. (2017) found that 90.6% of the male respondents mentioned the fear of incarceration as the reason for exiting their gangs. The same study also finds that the religious and cultural beliefs of participants, to some extent, shaped their decisions to leave their gangs. In particular, core ex-gang members who were from religious homes cited religious awakening or their desires to reconnect to God as the reason for desistance. Although motivations for desistance may be the same for male and female gang members, research suggests that some differences exist along gender lines. While male gang members mostly disengage from gangs because of violent victimisations, fear of incarceration and disillusionment, female gangsters do same due to conventional social bonds such as committed relationships, parenthood and family responsibilities (Berger et al., 2017).

Much of the existing literature suggest that gang desistance can either occur abruptly (knifing off) or gradually (drifting away) (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Scholars who perceive gang desistance as a process argue that gang members go through some stages before they assume 'ex' or 'former' statuses. Ebaugh (1988), for example, notes that

there are four stages involved in becoming an ex-gang member – *first doubts*, *seeking alternatives*, *turning points* and *creating an ex-role*. Gang members experience first doubts when they interrogate their commitment to their roles. First doubts are triggered by events which could either be negative or positive. Prospective desisters weigh the costs and benefits associated with their roles before they decide. At the second stage they evaluate alternative roles. The turning point stage expedites role exit and they finally create an ex-role by accepting the identity associated with being ex-gang members (ibid).

Prior research has also established that gang desistance may be associated with some consequences. This is because gang members may be still perceived by those outside their gangs as being gang-involved (Decker, Pyrooz & Moule Jr., 2014). Scholarly literature suggests that the sustained identification as a gang member contributes to police harassment of ex-gang members (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). In addition, ex-gang members may experience threats from their rival and fellow gang members after leaving (Carson & Vicchio, 2015). It has been documented that some gang members take their gangs as surrogate families as they provide them with material and emotional support (Samenow, 2011). Consequently, gang members who desist may experience a deep sense of emptiness and loss as they part ways with their "family members".

Overall, this chapter has situated the study in context by reviewing some key literature on youth gang involvement, desistance and gang members' experiences with criminal justice actors. Based on the review, I suggest the need for a thorough investigation of why some black youth become gang-involved, why they disengage from gangs and how black youth gang members relate with agents of the Canadian criminal justice system. In the next chapter, I present the theoretical framework of the study.

Chapter three: Theoretical framework

Theoretical approach to research is significant as it offers a framework that guides research regarding problem identification and formulation, variable selection and rationales, and strategies of research design and analysis (Merton, 1968). Thus, a theoretical framework provides a grounding base and structure which help researchers define how they philosophically, epistemologically, methodologically and analytically approach their studies (Grant & Osanloo, 2014).

The present study is grounded in critical race, cultural conflict, differential association, subculture, social control, and strain theories. These theories offer different perspectives which facilitate a holistic and nuanced analysis of the subject under consideration—experiences of black former youth gang members. In the following sections, concise summaries of the theories and the relevant perspectives they provide to the study are presented.

3.1 Critical race theory

Critical race theory (CRT) began as a movement in law in the 1970s with the early writings of Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, Mari Matsuda, Kimberle Crenshaw, amongst others (Donnor & Ladson-Billings, 2018). Traditionally, CRT builds on the insights of critical legal studies and radical feminism. It fundamentally challenges liberalists' claim of objectivity, neutrality, and colour-blindness of the law by arguing that these principles actually normalize and perpetuate racism by ignoring the structural inequalities that permeate social institutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In other words, critical race theorists hold that racism exists and it shapes racialized people's experiences with the law. Racism, as argued by Hier and Bolaria (2007), is an ideological phenomenon which originates from material struggle. Through racism, ideologies are (re)produced in the context of material relations of superiority and inferiority where one racialized group represents itself as more positive than the other (Miles & Brown, 2003). Racism involves a negative signification whereby cultural and/or biological

human characteristics are attributed to a real or perceived ancestral population on the basis of somatic, physical or socio-cultural features (Hier & Bolaria, 2007).

Critical race theorists hold some key propositions about racism. First, they maintain that racism is ordinary, not aberrational (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). It is an experiential reality of people of colour and visible minority groups (Dei, 2007) and the ordinariness of racism makes it difficult to cure (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Second, race is a social construct. It is neither inherent nor fixed and does not correspond to biological or genetic reality (Hier & Bolaria, 2007). Instead, race is a category that society invents, manipulates and retires when expedient. Racial ideas, as Carter (2007) tells us, are discursively constructed to produce particular sorts of objects, particular modes of understanding and particular forms of subjectivity.

CRT draws on *intersectionality* to explore how social characteristics (such as race, gender, class, ethnicity and sexuality) simultaneously intersect to determine the social realities of people (Donnor & Ladson-Billing, 2018). Studies conducted in different countries (including Canada) show how people's race, gender, class, among others, shape their experiences with social institutions (Chan & Chunn, 2014; Tanovich, 2006, 2011).

Although Canada has an international reputation for being a multicultural country, evidence from several studies suggest that it is not racism-free (see for example, Mensah, 2010; Wortley & Owusu-Bempah, 2012). The symbolism of colour and race is still prevalent in both the sacred and secular domains of Canadian society (Mensah, 2010). Boyko's (1995) work which examines the evolution of racism in Canada literally compares the phenomenon to a ladder. At the very bottom of this "racists' ladder" is stereotype, followed in ascending order by prejudice, discrimination, attempts at racial purification and genocide. Descriptively, he maintains that the ladder is white and it is propped against a wall of emotions (such as suspicion, fear, pride and hatred) without which it would fall. Several historical and contemporary factors have and continue to work together to accentuate the denigration of

blacks in Canada. These factors include (but are not limited to) the legacy of black slavery with its associated dehumanisation (Mensah, 2010).

The foregoing suggests that race is an important social factor in understanding the experiences of racialized groups (including blacks) in the Canadian society. Race shapes reception and settlement of recent immigrants in Canada (Reitz et al., 2009). Among visible minority immigrants in Canada, black people seem to face the greatest problems of integration (Reitz, 2009). Dei (2008), for example, states that although there are caring and dedicated teachers in Canada′s education system, some black youth disengage from schooling or drop out because some teachers label and stigmatize them. The effect of this labelling and stigmatization is compounded by the fact that there are not sufficient anti-racist support measures in schools to help black students to deal with such problems (Dei, 2008).

Canada's labour force has become diverse over the years (Mahboubi, 2017). Nonetheless, contradictory accounts exist on the earnings of visible minority and non-visible minority Canadians. For example, while some research shows that earnings of visible minority graduates do not differ significantly from those of other graduates (see Maximova & Krahn, 2005), other studies reveal that visible minorities struggle to achieve parity in the labour market (see for example, Lightman & Gingrich, 2018). According to the 2016 Census, visible minorities earned 81.2% of what non-visible minorities earned in 2015. Although immigrants have higher average levels of education than Canadian-born workers, they are twice as likely to earn low incomes (Lightman & Gingrich, 2018). In 2017, new visible minority immigrants (aged 25 to 54) with university degrees earned 70% of the income earned by their Canadian-born counterparts (Yssaad & Fields, 2018). Empirical studies into the race-income disparity problem suggest that racialized visible minorities tend to have higher unemployment rate and are over-represented in low-wage jobs (Procyk, 2014). In particular, visible minority immigrants tend to be disproportionately represented in low-wage jobs due to language barrier, non-recognition

of some foreign education by Canadian employers and lack of Canadian work experience (Mahboubi, 2017). As a result, the poverty rate for racial minorities has always been higher than the rest of the Canadian population. For instance, the results of the 2006 Census showed that the overall poverty rate in Canada was 11%. However, while racialized minorities had a poverty rate of 22%, the non-racialized community had 9% (National Council of Welfare, 2012).

While some studies suggest that racism accounts for income disparities between racialized and non-racialized people, other scholars contend that that is not often the case in the Canadian labour market. DeSilva & Dougherty (1996), for example, argue that the earning disparities between racialized and non-racialized groups could be attributed to the differences in the quality of seemingly identical educational qualifications acquired by members of both groups.

Although Canada has placed a ban on the collection, analysis and distribution of race-based data on crime, scholarly literature on the experiences of visible minority groups with the Canadian criminal justice system shows that some bias or unfairness exists (Chan & Chunn, 2014; Owusu-Bempah & Wortley, 2014; Wortley & Owusu-Bempah, 2012). This perception is backed by available data that suggest that some racial minority groups especially aboriginals and blacks are overrepresented in official crime statistics in Canada. Recent estimates suggest that blacks represent 3.5% of the Canadian population but constitute 8.6% percent of the total incarcerated population (Office of Correctional Investigator, 2017). Put differently, black representation in federal corrections system is three times greater than their representation in the general Canadian population. The overrepresentation of blacks in crime statistics arguably results from the discriminatory manner in which they are treated by the Canadian criminal justice system. James' (1998) study which examined racial profiling in Ontario through in-depth interviews with over 50 black youth from six cities found that most of them were often

being stopped, questioned and searched by the police. Also, his study participants commonly held the belief that their skin-colour (not their acts) usually attracted police's attention. Wortley and Tanner (2003) have documented that factors (such as age and social class) which protect whites (especially males) from police contact do not work in the case of black people. For example, while whites with high incomes and education are less likely to be stopped and searched by the police, blacks with high incomes and education are more likely to be stopped and searched by the police (Wortley & Tanner, 2003). In the US for example, Tim Scott, senator for South Carolina, reports that he was pulled over seven times in a year by the police. He explains that "but the vast majority of the time, I was pulled over for nothing more than driving a new car in the wrong neighbourhood or some other reason just as trivial" (Barrett, 2016; np). Although black men are often the target of racial profiling, black women are not exempt from racial profiling as the case of Stacy Bonds illustrates (Chan and Chunn, 2014). In the morning (5:38am) of 6th September 2008, Stacy Bonds, an African-Canadian was walking home from a party when she was stopped and questioned by some officers of the Ottawa police. In return, Stacy asked the officers why she was stopped and searched. This infuriated the officers and they arrested her. Eventually, she was strip-searched by male and female officers and detained half-naked for three hours (Tanovich, 2011). Stacy was also charged for assaulting police officers. However, a video footage which captured her search at a cell block and was submitted as an exhibit in court proved otherwise. After watching the video several times, the trial judge stayed the case against Stacy and concluded that she was treated with indignity (ibid).

Besides being profiled racially, other studies demonstrate that the Canadian police is biased in the use of force against blacks (Owusu-Bempah & Wortley, 2014; Wortley, 2006). A recent study which explored the lived experiences of 1504 black individuals across the Greater Toronto Area found that one in every four participants reported that they had had the experience

of police using force against them (The Black Experience Project, 2017). In addition to the use of force by the police against blacks, findings of other studies show that blacks are not fairly treated during pre-trial detention (Kellough & Wortley, 2002). Kellough and Wortley´s (2002) research which examined 1800 criminal cases that appeared before two Toronto bail courts in 1994 revealed that 36 percent of accused blacks were detained before trial compared to 23 percent of accused persons from other racial backgrounds.

Although relatively little is known about racial disparities in sentencing in Canada (Wortley & Owusu-Bempah, 2012), findings from some studies indicate that racialized groups are treated differently by the Canadian criminal justice system. In his historical study of black defendants in Ontario´s criminal courts, Walker (2010) found that accused blacks were more likely to be penalized for their crimes and the experiences of black Canadians in the criminal courts reflected the unequal power relations that emerged out of colonialism. Research in the American context shows that offenders' and/or victims' race plays an important role in prosecutorial decision-making and sentencing (Spohn, 2015). Racial minority offenders (especially Blacks and Hispanics) often receive harsher punishments for crimes compared to their non-minority peers (Spohn, 2015). Demographic characteristics of victims (such as gender, employment status and education) and court caseload pressure work in concert with race to shape sentencing decisions in America (Ulmer & Johnson, 2004).

Taking cognizance of the fact that racism exists across Canada and shapes the daily experiences of black people (as evidenced in the context provided above), the present study employs CRT to ascertain the extent to which factors such race, social class and gender influence black youth's involvement with gangs and their experiences with the Canadian criminal justice system.

3.2 Cultural conflict theory

Cultural conflict theory explores the intricate intersection between immigration and culture (the shared norms, values and beliefs of a group of people) and how that causes crime. Although most immigrants arrive in their host country with no intention of engaging in criminality, they may carry and maintain cultural practices that come into conflict with the laws of their host country (Wortley, 2008). For example, between 1880 and 1920, a number of people (24 million) migrated from Europe to US. These immigrants entered US with their cultural norms. Consequently, they were subject to differential treatment by law enforcement due to cultural conflict (Henderson, 2009).

The cultural conflict theory conceptualises culture conflict as conflict of *conduct norms* (Sellin, 1938). Conduct norms are society-specific. Therefore, an action that may be seen as a violation in one society may not be regarded in another society. Culture conflict occurs when the dominant culture sets the standard of acceptable behaviour and individuals whose actions or behaviours do not conform to the set standards are considered as criminals (Henderson, 2009). Culture conflict can manifest itself in several ways including parent-child relationships. The cultural conflict problem is mostly experienced by first-generation children of immigrants as they are usually "caught between old-world communal practices of their parents and the norms of an often hostile (host) society" (Adamson, 2000:276).

Decker, van Gemert & Pyrooz (2009) note that conflict between immigrant youths' culture and that of their host society can lead to their engagement in criminal behaviour. However, they posit that immigrants' culture (in and of itself) may not influence their involvement in criminality. Rather, existing structural conditions in the host country may act as catalysts for immigrants' involvement in criminality. For instance, youth from racial or ethnic minority backgrounds are often exposed to multiple marginalities (such as racism, residential segregation, employment discrimination, etc.) which put them in low socio-

economic positions, affect their sense of identity and sometimes result in their criminal group membership (Vigil, 1988). In the US, Pinderhughes' (1997) research on ethnic and racial tensions in New York City in the late 1980s and 1990s shows that first-generation ethnic Whites (Albanians) and African-American youth formed gangs (such as the Albanian Boys and the Avenue T Boys) to ensure respect for their minority groups and defend their neighbourhoods from outsiders as they were looked down upon by the city's culture.

Most people immigrate with cultural norms and values. It is possible that black youth who have immigrated to Canada, and those born to immigrant parents may share cultural norms and values that conform to or contravene those of the mainstream Canadian society. Cultural conflict theory is included in this study to examine the extent to which (if any) the cultural values and norms of black former youth gang members conflicted with those of the Canadian society and how that shaped their engagement in gangs.

3.3 Differential association theory

Differential association theory is credited to Edwin Sutherland who explored the processes through which individuals become involved in delinquent or criminal activities (Boasiakoh & Andoh, 2010). Differential association theory postulates that criminal behaviour is learned and not inherited; and that the individual learns criminal behaviour by interacting with others (Sutherland, 1949; Sutherland & Cressey, 1978). Thus, criminal behaviour is most efficiently learned when nurtured in a group of like-minded individuals. This learning involves the acquisition of "(a) techniques of committing the crime, which are sometimes very complicated, sometimes very simple, and (b) the specific direction of motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes" (Sutherland, 1947:6). The principal proposition underlying differential association theory is that individuals can be socialized into criminal behaviour just as they can be socialized into good behaviour. Accordingly, it focuses on the roles that peers, families and other social institutions play in initiating an individual into criminality.

Differential association theory has been applied in various ways to account for the social causes of criminal behaviour (Boasiakoh & Andoh, 2010; Church II, Wharton & Taylor, 2009; Giordano & Rockwell, 2000; Hawdon, 2012; Morris & Higgins, 2009). In the US, for example, Giordano and Rockwell's longitudinal study which tested the applicability of differential association theory among 127 and 210 female young offenders in 1982 and 1995 respectively, found that most of their respondents learned to become delinquents (such as drug addicts, prostitutes, etc.) through frequent associations with family members and romantic partners who repeatedly exposed them to delinquent behaviours (Giordano and Rockwell, 2000). Also, the findings of Boasiako and Andoh's (2010) explorative study of inmates at the Ghana Borstal Institute showed that most inmates learned delinquent behaviours from friends they hung out with. Thus, association with delinquent peers is one of the predictors of delinquency among youth (Church II, Wharton & Taylor, 2009). Furthermore, Hawdon (2012) has documented that some individuals learn how to commit different crimes through online communications with hate groups. This presupposes that the learning of criminal behaviour can occur without a physical contact between the learner and the socialising agent.

Differential association theory is germane to this study because it helps in exploring the micro and meso factors that push some black youth into joining gangs. It is particularly useful in investigating whether peers and family members of the study participants played any roles or contributed to their involvement with gangs.

3.4 Subculture theory

Subculture theory argues that youth from families with lower socio-economic status develop a delinquent culture which is often contrary to the dominant culture (Cohen, 1965). Subculture is defined as:

> A system of beliefs and values generated in a process of communicative interaction among youth similarly circumstanced by virtue of their positions in the social structure, and as constituting a solution to problems of

adjustment to which the established culture provided no satisfactory solutions (Cohen & Short, 1958: 20).

The above definition suggests that subcultures emerge when youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds struggle to achieve success and status enhancement. Generally, subcultures are often "non-utilitarian, malicious and negativistic" (Cohen 1955: 25 cited in Nwalozie, 2015:4) to society and are only employed by frustrated youth as "hit-back mechanisms" (Macdonald, 2001: 33).

Cohen's subculture theory has been built upon by a number of scholars. Miller (1958), for example, draws on subculture theory in developing his concept of "focal concerns". He states that members in a subculture usually have focal concerns. These include smartness, trouble, toughness, excitement and autonomy. These focal concerns constitute the value system to which members of the subculture subscribe. For Miller, street youth commit crimes because of their desires to achieve ends, status or fulfil conditions which are valued in their subcultural milieu (ibid). Drawing on Cohen and Miller's ideas, Cloward and Ohlin (1960) also argue that lower-class youth commonly face challenges in obtaining lawful access to the means for attaining their life goals. Consequently, they experience disappointments and engage in delinquent behaviours.

Several studies have examined the link between socioeconomic status and delinquent behaviour (Agnew, Matthews & Bucher, 2008; Kitchen, 2006; Schnepel, 2014; Weatherburn & Schnepel, 2015). In his estimation of the impact of employment opportunities on recidivism among 1.7 million offenders released from a California prison between 1993 and 2008, Schnepel (2014) observes that increases in employment opportunities (especially construction and manufacturing jobs) at the time of release are associated with significant reductions in recidivism. Kitchen's (2006) study of offenders in Ottawa and Saskatoon further reveals that youth who engage in serious offences such as assault, robbery and homicide often come from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.

The subculture theory is employed in this study to examine the extent to which the quest for success, autonomy, excitement and status predisposes some black youth to gangs. In other words, subculture theory provides a framework for exploring socio-economic factors that shape black youth gang involvement.

3.5 Social control theory

Social control theory examines why some individuals do not engage in delinquent behaviour. It asserts that some individuals engage in delinquent acts when their bonds to society are weakened or broken (Hirschi, 1969). Social bond consists of four elements: attachment to others, commitment to individual activities, involvement in conventional activities, and belief in the rules of society (ibid).

Attachment refers to the affection that characterizes relationships between people (Kubrin, Stucky & Krohn, 2009). Hirschi (1969) maintains that bonds established in close relationships with conventional others act as deterrent to crime because individuals take their relationships into account before they commit crimes. Some empirical studies on the nexus between attachment to others and criminality show that youth who are poorly attached to their parents and conventional peers are often associated with delinquent behaviours (Hoeve et al., 2012; Salvatore & Taniguchi, 2012)

Individuals' commitment to their activities or goals, as Hirschi (1969) further states, constrains them from engaging in delinquent behaviours because they will not do anything that will obstruct the attainment of their goals. Practical tests of the social control theory in several countries have shown that youth who are often committed to conventional activities such as education and employment are less likely to commit crimes because they would not want to jeopardize their quest for achievement (Cusick, Havlicek & Courtney, 2012; Özbay & Özcan, 2006). Involvement in conventional activities primarily represents the time dimension of commitment. Hirschi (1969) argues that adolescents who are not involved in conventional

activities (such as schooling, working, etc.) are free and likely to engage in delinquent behaviours. For example, Fosse's (2015) study which examined the values and beliefs of some *disconnected* black youth (those who were neither in school nor at work) found that they were likely to engage in delinquent behaviours such as drug abuse.

Concerning individuals' beliefs in rules of society, Kubrin, Stucky and Krohn (2009) maintain that people behave the way they do because of their beliefs in the laws that govern their behaviours. Those who have strong beliefs in the moral validity of the laws set by authorities they are attached to are less likely to violate those laws (Hirschi, 1969). Conversely, those who do not believe in the laws that govern them are more likely to violate them (ibid). In Hong Kong, Chui and Chan's (2012) research finds that students who had strong beliefs in their legal system were less likely to engage in criminal activities. The reverse was the case for those who did not believe in the legal system.

Social control theory emphasizes that the elements of social bond are interrelated and when one or more is broken, the individual is freed from constraints and will likely commit a crime. Unlike the theories in the preceding sections that mainly interrogate why youth engage in delinquent activities, social control theory is employed in this study to investigate whether the black youth's attachment to their family members, peers, education, and jobs could have prevented them from joining gangs.

3.6 Strain theory

Strain theory argues that people commit crimes because of strains (Merton 1968). It states that societies promote goals for their citizens and norms for their behaviour in trying to achieve those goals. However, the social structure sometimes prevents many from becoming economically successful. This results in strains. Strains come from a variety of sources including unemployment or joblessness. Individuals respond to strains in a number of ways.

Merton (1968) describes five individual adaptations to strain based on the acceptance or rejection of the goal of economic success and social legitimate means to achieve this goal. These adaptations categorize individuals into conformists (those who adopt culturally acceptable goals and conventional means to succeed), innovators (those who retain focus on goals but do not employ conventional means to achieve goals), ritualists (individuals who follow the socially acceptable means but reject the goal of success), retreatists (those who reject both the goal of success and the socially acceptable means to achieve it) and rebels (those who reject both the socially acceptable goal of success and means of achieving it but seek to replace them with new goals and means). For Merton, crime is commonly linked to innovation. That is, individuals who maintain focus on economic success but do not have access to socially/culturally acceptable means to achieve it are more likely to engage in delinquent behaviours.

Merton's strain theory has been criticised for its near exclusive focus on economically-induced strains. Agnew (2006), for example, argues that strain can come from sources other than economic failure. Thus, there are non-economic strains that may be criminogenic. Agnew's general strain theory identifies several kinds of non-economic strains including the presentation of negative stimuli (for example, getting teased at school), the loss of positive stimuli (getting dumped by a romantic partner), physical and verbal abuse, parental rejection and poor school performance. Strains from these stimuli are likely to cause negative affective states such as anger, fear, frustration and depression which can lead to crime commission (Kubrin, Stucky & Krohn, 2009). Agnew (2001) claims that a strain will likely produce crime when it is seen as unjust (resulting from an intentional violation of rights or norms); if it is high in magnitude; when it is low in social control (such as parental rejection); and if it creates incentives for criminal response. To adapt to strain, individuals may use coping strategies that are cognitive, emotional or behavioural (Moon & Morash, 2017). Those who lack non-

delinquent coping strategies and have strong dispositions to engage in deviance are more likely than others to alleviate strains through delinquent behaviours (Agnew, 1992).

Broidy and Agnew (1997) propose that the general strain theory might explain gender differences in both the etiology and the level of delinquency. They draw on existing research rooted in the traditions of general strain theory, feminist criminology and social-psychology to argue that gender differences exist in types of strains experienced, emotional reactions to strains, conditioning factors that moderate the effects of strain and the levels and types of delinquencies. Moon and Morash (2017) have noted that while men highly value material success and are more likely to experience financial strains, women experience more interpersonal strains due to their concern with maintaining durable relationships with significant others.

Regarding individuals' responses to strains, Broidy and Agnew (1997) contend that men are more likely to respond to strain with delinquent behaviour than women because the societal notion of femininity (which usually portrays women as conformists) limits their opportunities to break laws/rules. Some studies that have tested the general strain theory have found significant gender differences in strains and negative emotions, and in their effects on delinquency (Kaufman, 2009; Mazerolle, 1998; Piquero & Sealock, 2004).

The strain theory assists in examining how social, economic and non-economic factors influenced the involvement of the black youth with gangs. In particular, it helps in finding answers to questions such as: Did the study participants suffer any strains prior to becoming gang-involved? If so, what were the sources of their strains? Were strains experienced by male participants different from those of their female counterparts? To what extent did strains contribute to their involvement with gangs?

This chapter has outlined a theoretical lens from which the study's findings are analysed and discussed. The next chapter captures how the study was conducted—methodology.

Chapter four: Methodology

In this chapter, I explicate the research approach I adopted: how I selected study participants, how I garnered, transcribed and analysed data. Also, I highlight some ethical considerations. I conclude the chapter by reflecting on my position in the research and the steps I took to ensure validity of the study.

4.1 Research design

It is vital that the choice of research design shows decisions about the priorities given to a range of dimensions of the research process (Bryman, 2008). I chose a qualitative research approach in collecting and analysing data for this study. Central to qualitative research is its epistemological stance—its fundamental commitment to interrogating subjectivity, intentional action, and experiences embedded in real life contexts (Marecek, 2003; 56-57). My choice of qualitative approach was thus informed by the importance I attached to understanding study participants' behaviours and the meanings of those behaviours in their specific social contexts.

4.2 Study participants and recruitment process

The study participants are black youth who had been involved with gangs. *Black* and *youth* are highly contested terms which are usually defined in context. In this study, *black youth* is conceptualised or defined as young people between the ages of 12 and 17 who are of African descent. Specifically, the eligibility criteria for the study included that the participant (1) identifies as black (2) is between the ages of 12 and 17 and (3) self-identifies as an ex-gang member. The study's sample is unique in two respects. First, participants were selected based on self-admission. Second, they all had ceased criminal activities and severed ties with gang members and associates.

Access to hard-to-reach populations is often challenging in research (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997). Hard-to-reach is a term used to describe sub-groups of a population that are difficult to involve in research due to their socioeconomic circumstances, physical or geographical

locations (Shaghaghi, Bhopal & Sheikh, 2011). Black ex-youth gang members constitute part of hard-to-reach populations because they conceal their identities in order to avoid confrontations with former gang members, rival gang members and law enforcement. Pawelz (2018) suggests that research that involves hard-to-reach populations can employ a successive approach which integrates the logic of snowball and purposive sampling methods. Successive approach to sampling involves two main steps. First, individuals and organisations that live and work with hard-to-reach populations are identified, mapped and contacted for recruitment assistance. Second, members of the hard-to-reach populations who are suggested by these individuals and organisations are then contacted directly (Pawelz, 2018).

In order to overcome the hurdle of accessing study participants, I adopted a successive sampling approach. I reached out to some individuals and organisations in Edmonton that work with my population of interest (black ex-youth gang members) through emails, phone calls and in-person meetings. These individuals and organisations included some police officers at the Youth Services Section of the Edmonton Police Service (EPS), the Africa Centre (AC), Edmonton Young Offenders Centre (EYOC) and Sinkunia Community Development Organisation (SCDO). I contacted these individuals and organisations because I hoped they could help me access my target population. The AC and SCDO responded to my emails and phone calls and gave me opportunities to meet with them. However, the EYOC and the police officers responded but indicated that they could not assist me with the study. In my first meetings with the AC and SCDO staff members, I introduced myself and provided them with a summary of the study. I regularly met with some staff members of the AC and SCDO. This helped me to build a relationship of trust with them. They provided me with some contacts of potential study participants. Initially, I aimed to interview 20-25 black ex-youth gang members. I was hopeful that I could recruit all study participants with the help of AC and SCDO. However, upon advertisement of the study (through posters and some staff members), only

seven people (three from AC and four from SCDO) expressed interest to participate in the study. So, I contacted them for interviews.

The number of participants obtained through the advertisements was far less than what I had anticipated. Therefore, I employed a snowball or chain referral sampling to search for additional participants. Snowball sampling relies on referrals from initially sampled participants to other persons believed to have the characteristics of interest (Johnson, 2005). This method is ideal for studies that focus on sensitive issues, possibly concerning a socially less visible population, and thus require the knowledge of insiders to locate study participants (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). I asked each of the original seven participants if they could suggest other black former youth gang members who might be interested to participate in the study. Five out of the seven suggested a potential participant each. Fortunately, I obtained four additional interviews from the leads they provided. The four participants were also asked if they could put me in touch with other potential participants. Of the four participants, two successfully linked me up with two other participants who I interviewed. The two participants suggested four other potential participants but three agreed to participate in the study.

In all, 16 black ex-youth gang members comprising 13 males and three females were interviewed. Although opinions regarding an ideal sample size for a qualitative study vary among scholars, it is suggested that "10-20 knowledgeable people are enough to uncover and understand the core categories in any well-defined study of lived experiences" (Bernard, 2013:175).

4.3 Interview procedure

I garnered data through semi-structured in-depth interviews. Semi-structured interviews often involve a series of open-ended questions based on topics researchers explore (Maxwell, 2013). Semi-structured interviews provide a great deal of versatility which enables researchers to gather considerable and often multidimensional streams of data (Galletta, 2012). It allows

for reciprocity between researchers and study participants, and creates a space for researchers to probe into participants' responses for clarification, meaning-making and critical reflection (Whiting, 2008).

The postmodernist paradigm of knowledge production posits that social reality or versions of reality are constructed, manufactured, negotiated, and deployed in social interaction through the instrumentality and functionality of language (Potter & Wetherell, 2001; Willig, 2008). It is thus important that the choice of language for a study within this paradigm take into account the researcher as well as participants' comprehension of the chosen language. All the interviews were conducted in the English language.

I met each participant in-person once after initial conversations via telephone calls and emails. This gave me an opportunity to explain the purpose of the study to prospective participants and provide them with assent and consent forms for a good understanding of the study. As mentioned earlier, 16 interviews were conducted. Thirteen interviews were face-to-face and three were done through telephone calls (as interviewees were not available for face-to-face interviews). Most of the face-to-face interviews took place at public/open places such as coffee shops, restaurants and recreational centres in Edmonton. Other interviews were conducted at private venues that were suggested and approved by both study participants and the researcher. The venues for the interviews helped ensure the privacy of participants.

During interviews, I expressed gratitude to participants for their involvement in the study and emphasised some ethical issues. Participants were reminded that participation and/or answering questions in the study was voluntary; that interviews would be audio-recorded upon their consent; and that they could withdraw from the study at any point in time if they so desired. However, they had two weeks after the interview to withdraw their data. I also assured them of utmost confidentiality and anonymity. For example, participants were assured that data collected from them would be used for only academic purpose(s) and no identifiers would be

used to link them to their data. They were accordingly given pseudonyms. I ensured that all the participants had endorsed the assent and consent forms given to them and they were provided with copies for their records. I sought parental consent of four participants. While 15 participants agreed that I could tape-record their voices, one stated that he did not want his voice audio-recorded. I complied and wrote his responses on sheets of paper.

During interviews, I tried as much as possible to make respondents feel relaxed by beginning with questions such as: How is your day? How do you find today's weather? Also, I suggested to participants that they could just wink and smile if I asked anything they did not want to talk about. The 'nervous-relieving' introductory questions were then followed by the actual interview questions. These questions broadly explored why the participants became involved with gangs, why they left their gangs and the experiences they had with the Canadian criminal justice system. I actively listened to their narratives, asked for clarification when and where necessary, and also placed on hold some unclear issues in their narratives to which I later invited them for elaboration and critical reflection.

I took notes during and after each interview. These notes captured concise descriptions of the interview settings, duration, interviewees' non-verbal communications/gestures, and my impressions and thoughts on data from each interview. On average, an interview lasted for an hour and five minutes. Although participants were not financially compensated for their time, each person was given $20 as transportation reimbursement. The relevant demographic characteristics of the study participants are summarized in the table below:

Table 1. Relevant demographic characteristics of respondents

Participant	Gender	Age	Education	Life snapshot	Age of gang-involvement	Desistance age	Year(s)/months of gang-involvement
Talia	Female	16	Grade 10	Talia is a Somali-Canadian. She migrated with her parents to Canada at age four. She is single, jobless and lives with her parents.	14	15	1
Striker	Male	17	Grade eight	Striker is a Somali-Canadian. He was born in Toronto and spent most of his formative/childhood years at Regent Park. However, he and his parents moved to Edmonton when he was 11 years.	15	16	1
Bembe	Male	16	Grade seven	Bembe is a Sudanese-Canadian. He was born in Edmonton. His parents are refugees from Sudan.	12	14	2

Ali	Male	17	Grade seven	Ali hails from Sudan. He is in Canada as a refugee. He came to Canada with his parents. He lives with his friend.	14	15	1
Mike	Male	15	Grade eight	Mike is a Jamaican-Canadian. He and his parents moved from Montreal to Edmonton in 2010.	12	13	1
Notorious	Male	17	Grade 12	Notorious is a Somali-Canadian. He was born and bred in Edmonton. His parents came to Canada as refugees.	14	15	1
Marcus	Male	17	Grade nine	He is a Ghanaian and permanent resident in Canada. Marcus joined his father who migrated to Canada for purposes of education and work in 2014. He lives with his father. He loves hip-pop music	14	16	2

				and hopes to come out with his own album.			
Erica	Female	16	Grade six	Erica is an Eritrean-Canadian. She was born in Winnipeg. Her parents migrated with her to Edmonton when she was seven years.	13	15	2
Bright	Male	17	Grade 12	A Sudanese-Canadian. He is Lizzy´s ex-boyfriend but now engaged to another lady with whom he lives.	14	15	1
Daniel	Male	16	Grade seven	He is a Somali-Canadian. He was born in Edmonton. He loves to play basketball.	13	15	2
Omar	Male	15	Grade 10	He is an Eritrean-Canadian. He spent the greater part of his childhood years with his parents. But he finally ended up in foster care due to disagreement between him and his father.	12	13	1
Lizzy	Female	17	Grade eight	Lizzy is a Sudanese refugee. She has been in Canada for about 10	14	15	1

				years. She is from a single-parent home.			
Chilemba	Male	15	Grade six	Chilemba is a Kenyan-Canadian. He was born in Edmonton. He lives with his parents.	12	13	1
Sam	Male	16	Grade seven	Sam is a Tanzanian-Canadian. He is Marcus' friend. He volunteers with organisations that educate youth on gangs.	14	16	2
Don	Male	17	Grade nine	An Eritrean-Canadian. He migrated with his parents to Canada. He is single, lives with his parents and loves rap music.	15	16	1
Jeff	Male	15	Grade eight	Jeff is a Somali-Canadian. He lives with his parents. He enjoys playing basketball.	13	14	1

As evident in the above table, study participants are of Somali, Sudanese, Eritrean, Jamaican, Ghanaian, Kenyan and Tanzanian origins. Specifically, the sample consisted five Somali-Canadians, four Sudanese-Canadians, three Eritrean-Canadians, one Jamaican-Canadian, one Ghanaian, one Kenyan-Canadian and one Tanzanian-Canadian. The ages of participants range from 15 to 17 years. The average age of participants is 16.1 years. While the ages at which they became gang-involved vary from 12 to 15 years, their desistance ages are between 13 and 16 years. On average, the ages of gang involvement and desistance among participants are 13.4 and 14.7 years respectively. Most of the participants were involved with gangs for a year. The majority of them had not completed high school. While most of them (12) had dropped out of school, four were still in school.

4.4 Data transcription

An important first step in data analysis is transcription, which involves "a close observation of data through repeated careful listening" (Bailey, 2008:129). Magnusson and Marecek (2015) also argue that data transcription is an interpretive process. Thus, data transcription and analysis require interpretation and representation to make a written text readable and meaningful. Each interview was transcribed right after its completion. This enabled me to recall what happened during the interviews and complement participants' spoken words with gestures I jotted down in my field notebook. In transcribing the data, I carefully and repeatedly listened to the recorded interviews by paying attention to metaphors, repeated expressions and phrases that were relevant to the study.

I printed out the transcribed data, read it several times, and created some categories based on the themes that emerged from the interviews. That is, a thematic approach was adopted in coding the data. This approach helped me to identify, analyse and report patterns within the data and shed light on identified areas of interest in the study (Probst, 2015). For example, in coding data on why participants joined gangs, I created codes such as "family-related issues,

"school-related issues", "association with deviant peers", "neighbourhood factors", "money" "respect or status" and "belonging". These codes were broadly categorised into "socio-structural causes" and "individual motivations". Separate files were created for each category and participants' responses (codes) were grouped under them. In line with the iterative process of qualitative data analysis, I wrote preliminary analytical notes and interpretations on each category. Occasionally, I compared my field notes to the transcribed data where information was perceived to be unclear.

4.5 Data analysis

I discursively analysed data for the study. Discourse analysis is concerned with the social and historical 'situatedness' of a constructed text (Parker & Burman, 1993). The signature feature of discourse analysis is its flexibility and reflexivity, where the contextual experiences of researchers and participants shape and direct data interpretation and analysis (Adjei, 2013). I focussed on participants' 'talk-as-action' (Edwards, 1997). The expression talk-as-action refers to the idea that people always do more with their talk than communicating information (Edwards, 1997). As argued by Magnusson and Marecek (2015), *talk* puts across an information that is communicated to a listener *in a certain way* and presents the speaker *in a particular light*. They further maintain that people's utterances (words and phrases) do not have fixed meanings. Rather, they are fully understood if placed in a rhetorical context. For Billig (1996), the rhetorical context is primarily social and could either be the immediate interpersonal context or the broader sociocultural and political settings within which actors in a conversation operate. The rhetorical context thus shapes what people say and how they say it as they draw on the network of possible meanings available in their interpretive community to understand events, other people and themselves (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015). In interpreting the data, I paid particular attention to what participants did with their talk (actions) and how

the experiences they shared with me were shaped by their immediate and broader historical, socio-cultural and institutional contexts.

4.6 Researcher's positionality and reflexivity

The identities and status researchers carry or bear may have influence on their activities (Muhammad et al., 2015). Researchers must therefore critically reflect on how their positions may influence the reliability and validity of their studies (Kerstetter, 2012). While reflexivity is considered a valuable tool for enhancing the rigor and validity of a qualitative study (Glesne, 2014; Gringeri, Barusch & Cambron, 2013; Longhofer & Floersch, 2012), some novice and seasoned researchers often feel uncomfortable, threatened, and even resistant to interrogate their positions and experiences in the research process (Hsiung, 2008).

My dual status as an academic researcher and a black person simultaneously positioned me as an *outsider* and *insider* (not as an ex-gang member but as someone who has the same racial identity as the participants). Each of the two positions had its influence on the research process. My position as an outsider made it difficult for me to recruit study participants. Initially, most of the participants did not want to participate in the study because they were sceptical about my identity. Some of them thought that I was an undercover investigator for an intelligence agency in Edmonton. Participants' doubts about my identity were explicitly expressed in questions such as; Who are you? Why are you doing the study? Can you show me your student identity card? By providing answers to these 'identity-probing' questions and constantly explaining the purpose of the study to participants, I won their trust. Eventually, they opened up and shared their experiences with me.

As a black person (an insider), I am aware of some challenges of black youth in Canada and the perceptions they have about the Canadian criminal justice system. At the same time, my researcher/outsider position required that I place into bracket all personal presuppositions and regard the participants as experts in the phenomenon under study—experiences of black

former youth gang members. My insider status allowed me to access in-depth information from the participants as they saw me as one of them (a "brother" as they usually referred to me). However, some participants recurrently made statements such as; "as you are already aware of" and "as you know" to suggest that what they were telling me should not be new to me. Although such statements may not have created much of a methodological problem, it may have affected participants' disclosure of vital and detailed information to me as they assumed that I was aware of them. As a way of mitigating this positioning, I sought clarifications from participants whenever such statements were made and repeatedly reminded them of my role as a researcher in the study.

4.7 Validity of the study

Researchers are often obligated to show to the research community that they have done due diligence (Williams & Morrow, 2009). This practice helps them to justify the validity of their studies. Brinkmann & Kvale (2015) have argued that validity in qualitative research depends on the quality of craftsmanship in an investigation, which includes repeatedly checking, questioning and theoretically interpreting findings. This suggests that in qualitative research, validity is not determined at the end of knowledge production but ensured throughout the entire research process. Williams and Morrow (2009) have noted that validity in qualitative research could be achieved by ensuring the integrity of data (dependability), maintaining a balance between reflexivity and subjectivity (what participants say and how the researcher interprets them), and objectively reporting findings. I adopted three main steps to increase quality, credibility and trustworthiness of data analysis and interpretation in this study.

First, I ensured data quality control through what Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) describe as *communicative validation*—testing of knowledge claims in conversations with study subjects, peers or public audience. As indicated earlier, I probed deep into participants' statements to ascertain their veracity during interviews. Also, some ambiguous extracts (from

the transcribed data) and my interpretations of them were sent to some participants for thorough study and validation. Furthermore, the same extracts together with the interpretations were given to a senior academic colleague for his review and comments.

Second, I ensured validity by remaining objective throughout the research process. As mentioned earlier, I had some personal perceptions and assumptions prior to the study. However, I bracketed these perceptions and assumptions and dealt fairly with the study participants. I have provided extensive extracts from the data and given unbiased interpretations to ensure that the study's findings reflect and represent the views of participants. The 'comprehensive treatment of data' (Silverman, 2010: 280) is done to enable readers to assess participants' discursive accounts on the phenomenon under study as well as the interpretations I have made of them. While the extensive inclusion of participants' accounts helps to increase the credibility of my claims and conclusions, it also guards against accusations of anecdotalism—subjective and biased selection of data extracts that happen to fit analytic arguments (Silverman, 2010).

The third way I ensured validity was through transparent reporting of the study. The provision of detailed accounts of the steps, procedures and decisions of a research process is emphasised as a vital tool for readers to determine the validity of a study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I have provided a comprehensive account of how the study was carried out. Additionally, I have systematically and carefully shown my audience/readers the procedures and evidence that led to particular claims and conclusions in the study. For example, the reflection on my positions as an insider and outsider and the explanation of how that might have shaped the research process could ensure validity of the study.

In the next two chapters (five and six), I analyse data that emerged from this study. Key guiding questions for the analysis include: What factors accounted for participants' involvement with gangs? How did they enter their gangs? What activities did they engage in?

What motivated them to disengage from their gangs? What did participants mean when they said they left their gangs? How did they navigate the desistance process? What were their experiences with the Canadian criminal justice system? Connecting the study's data with existing gang and race-crime scholarship, I examine how participants' narratives overlap with, challenge or otherwise provide nuances to theories of deviance and crime presented in chapter three.

Chapter five: Results and analyses: Joining and exiting gangs

Extant studies suggest that the experiences of youth gang members vary and are shaped by multiple factors (Dunbar, 2017; Fast, 2017; Ngo et al., 2017; Omizo, Omizo & Honda, 1997). Understanding these experiences is a necessary condition for addressing the youth gang problem. This chapter examines why participants joined gangs, how they were initiated into their gangs, the activities they engaged in as gang members, what motivated them to desist from gangs, how they desisted and the post-exit challenges they faced.

5.1 Getting in: Reasons for joining gangs

Research shows that there are multiple risk factors for youth gang-involvement (Eitle, Gunkel & Van Gundy, 2004; Lenzi et al., 2015; Li et al., 2002). In order to explore factors that accounted for participants' involvement with gangs, I probed into their childhood experiences in their homes (families), schools and communities to determine whether those experiences had any influences on their engagement in gangs. Besides the impacts that participants' social milieu might have had on their involvement with gangs, they were also asked if they had individual motivations for the path they chose. Overall, participants offered narratives which suggest that both socio-structural and individual factors contributed to their involvement with gangs. Each of these factors are discussed in the following sections.

5.2 Socio-structural causes of black youth's involvement in gangs

Based on the discursive accounts of participants, four main socio-structural factors were identified as causes for their involvement with gangs: (1) dysfunctional families (2) unsupportive school systems (3) influence of bad neighbourhoods/communities and (4) association with delinquent peers. I analyse each of these factors as articulated by study participants.

5.2.1 Dysfunctional families

Many scholars agree that the family is one of the most crucial institutions that shape young people's behaviour (Figueiredo & Dias, 2012; Nakao et al., 2000; Prevoo & Weel, 2014; Wadsworth et al., 1985). Some studies particularly show that youth from dysfunctional or "troubled" families are mostly predisposed to gangs (De La Rue & Espelage, 2014; Centre for Social Justice, 2009; Brown, 1998). In the present study, participants were asked to talk about their family structure and childhood experiences at home. Of the 16 participants, six grew up in a family with both biological parents, eight were brought up in single-parent families and two grew up in foster homes. Reasons such as divorce, migration and parental neglect were given as explanations for their family structures. The majority of the participants (n=10) shared stories which indicate that they had negative childhood experiences in their homes and that contributed to their involvement with gangs. Their experiences ranged from growing up in poor homes where getting access to basic necessities of life was a challenge; having bad relationships with parents; being physically abused by a parent to witnessing abuse of one parent by the other—exposure to violence. In explaining how her family situation contributed to her engagement in a gang, one respondent related:

> I grew up in a bad home. My parents were like a cat and a dog. They fought all the time. At a point, there was divorce and mum only took care of us. It´s really hard growing up with a poor single mum. It´s necessary to be on the street to do something to support my mum and little sister. (Lizzy)

As evident in the quote above, the respondent attributes her involvement with a gang to negative childhood experiences she had at home due to parental conflict, divorce and single-parenting. While parental conflict and broken home were precursors to her deviant behaviour, poverty is implicated as the main reason why she joined a gang. Consequently, she appears to justify her delinquent behaviour by arguing that "It´s necessary to be on the street to do something to support my mum and little sister". Her narrative suggests that some black youth

may join gangs not because of their individual interests but to ensure the collective well-being of their families. Lizzy's experience mirrors that of another respondent who also recalled:

> I had a pretty good childhood until my mum and dad separated when I was like 10 years [old]. My mum took custody of us. But, you know, as a woman, she struggled to keep the family going. You get what I mean? Things weren´t working, right? No good food, no proper clothes. I couldn't cope with the situation anymore. So, I left home to search for a better life for myself. (Sam)

It could be deduced from the above extract that the respondent's decision to engage in a gang was shaped by separation (or divorce as he seems to mean) and poverty in his home. Although the experiences of Lizzy and Sam seem to be similar (as the same factors drove them away from home), the ultimate goals they sought to realise set them apart. While Lizzy's decision to be on the street was as a result of seeking the collective good of her family, Sam's motivation was based on his individual interest—to search for a better life for himself. The accounts of the two participants corroborate findings of other studies which demonstrate that children from broken, single-parent and poor homes are more likely to become gang-involved (Carlie, 2002).

In addition to broken homes and its concomitant problem of poverty, discourses of other participants revealed that poor relationships with their parents contributed to their engagement in gangs. For example, Omar argued:

> I blame dad for all the troubles I´ve been through. He wanted to bring me up in his Eritrean way. He's the boss of the house. He had his rules and all of us and mum were to obey them. It was like you're either with him or against him. As a kid, I tried to obey most of his rules. But my relationship with him changed when I started being myself. Anytime I got a tattoo or curled my hair or wore earrings, he got pissed off. He complained that I was becoming too Canadian. There were problems all the time. So, the police was involved and I was placed in a foster care where I met my homeboys [his gang members].

It is implied in the quote that the participant grew up in a home where his father assumed the status of a stereotypical African man who strictly controls his household/family. As he points out, the man had his rules and all his children together with his wife were expected to follow

them. So, the participant's attempt to be himself was met with opposition from his father as he was perceived to be "becoming too Canadian" in an Eritrean home. Superficially, it may be argued that the participant became gang-involved due to his poor relationship with his father which emanated from mere disagreements. However, it is worth mentioning that he deeply situates/positions his argument in a cultural conflict frame. He draws on interpretive repertoires such as "his Eritrean way" and "becoming too Canadian" to show how the clash between the two cultures led to his involvement with a gang. It is evident that the participant wanted to assume a Canadian identity which his father saw as being portrayed by getting a tattoo, curling his hair and wearing earrings. Through the use of the determiner "his" before "Eritrean way", he appears to distance himself from the Eritrean culture. However, his father's cultural intolerance did not allow him to be himself in his home. Unfortunately, his attempt to escape the cultural conflict in his home led him to a foster home where he met his "homeboys". Following Sellin (1938), it could be argued that Omar's engagement in gangs was caused by conflict of conduct norms. Thus, he was caught between the cultural worlds of his parents and the Canadian society (Adamson, 2002).

Other participants also reported how weak parental attachment and physical abuse by parents drove them away from home to peers who lured them into gangs.

> Home, it started from there. I was living with my dad alone. He was working three jobs to support the family. So, he didn't have time for me. Everyday, he slept over at his workplace. Nobody to help me with my school work and stuff. Because of that I made friends and started sleeping out. But he wasn't happy. So, he beat me anytime I slept over with a friend. I got sick and tired of his punishment. So, I left home. I stayed with a friend and that was it. (Marcus)

The above participant cites weak familial attachment or lack of parental supervision and parental abuse as factors that pushed him to join a gang. While the participant blames his father for contributing to his delinquent behaviour, he simultaneously underscores the point that childhood abuse may lead to youth gang involvement. Although there are constraints of using

corporal discipline as behaviour-correcting method in Canada (Baily, 2003), the participant's account suggests that his father employed it. His experience is not an isolated case. A recent study that delved into parenting and child disciplinary practices of African immigrants in Alberta finds that some parents still use corporal discipline as a disciplinary method (Alaazi et al., 2018). Parents who deploy corporal discipline hold that it is an effective method of child discipline (ibid). Marcus' experience suggests that when the bonds between parents and their children are weakened, the latter are more inclined to engage in criminal behaviour (Hirschi, 1969). Additionally, his account implies that youth from families that struggle economically may be predisposed to gangs. In line with his narrative, studies have shown that immigrant youth are often put at risk of becoming involved with gangs because most immigrant parents work multiple low-income jobs to sustain their families and that pulls them away from home leaving their children to supervise themselves (Fast, 2017; Ngo et al., 2013). Furthermore, where he met his gang members reveals that the child protection system can scale back parental control and facilitate social waywardness among youth who come into contact with it.

5.2.2 Negative neighbourhood/community influence

The second immediate social context in which the socialisation of individuals occur is their community. Scholarly literature demonstrates that youth who reside in communities with limited resources and social support systems are often placed at increased risk of engaging in behaviours that lead to their involvement with the criminal justice system (Lea & Abrams, 2017; Patton, Woolley & Hong, 2012). When participants were asked if their communities had any influences on their engagement in gangs, they (n=7) provided varied responses which suggest that where they grew up played a major role. One participant, for example, reported:

> Um, sure. It was a factor. I grew up in an unsafe community where one person was stabbed today and the other was shot the next day. I had to stay protected. You know what I mean? Just to be with the big boys to be safe. (Mike)

The participant construes his decision to join a gang as a logical response to insecurity. As his account exemplifies, he was often exposed to violence as stabbing and shooting were common in his community. Given this context, it may be reasonable for him to argue that he joined a gang in order to stay safe. Similarly, another participant revealed that he grew up in a community where there was a gang. However, his motivation for joining a gang was different from that of Mike. He said:

> Being in a gang in the community was nothing. I knew some of the guys [the gang members] who helped to protect the community from bad guys. I liked and wanted to be like them. That's why I joined one [a gang]. (Bembe)

While the above quoted participants argued that the quest for security was instrumental in their engagement in gangs, others expressed that housing segregation and lack of recreational facilities in their neighbourhoods pushed them into gangs. Daniel, for example, described his community as "a ghetto". He further pointed out:

> I spent most of my life in a minority hood. Like most of the people there were like refugees from African and Arab countries. It's a poor neighbourhood. No swimming pools, no basketball courts. So, we (he and his friends) had to find a way to entertain ourselves. We formed our group (gang) and started hanging out. Initially, we were taking soda together but later we tried some beer, drugs and other stuff. And it turned into something else.

Daniel's account does not only show that housing segregation and lack of recreational facilities therein contribute to youth gang involvement, it highlights that a gang may start as a "normal" social group. His group which was formed for entertainment purpose, as he claims, later became a gang when its members began engaging in criminal activities. Consistent with the participant's claim, some participants in Wortley and Tanner's (2008) study of youth gangs in Toronto reported that their gangs began as informal friendship groups.

5.2.3 Unsupportive school systems

Educational institutions play significant roles in socialising young people to become useful members of society. Nonetheless, these systems that are expected to facilitate smooth transitioning of young people to adulthood can contribute to their involvement in delinquency (Lea & Abrams, 2017). Some participants (n=5) who shared their experiences at school demonstrated how their schools contributed to their involvement with gangs. Ali, who came to Canada as a refugee, described how difficult it was for him to adapt to his new school and how that pushed him to join a gang.

> You know, I'm a refugee. Due to conflict in my country, I stopped going to school for some years because the rebels destroyed my school. In my country, I was in class four. I didn't know how to speak good English. But when I came to Canada, they just looked at my age and put me in grade seven. Bro, it was hard for me. I can't answer questions in class because my English isn't good. I have no friends because I can't talk to the white kids (his classmates). I`m always alone. I thought I was not a smart kid. So, I drop out and look for opportunities that will help me make it big in life. Lucky, one guy introduce me to the drug-trade and his gang.

In the quote above, the participant indicates that his involvement with a gang was caused by inappropriate age-grade placement. Thus, instead of considering his language competence, his school only took into account his age and unsuitably placed him in a class. This led to his isolation from other students as he could not communicate with them and participate in class activities. Eventually, he dropped out of school, began to sell drugs and joined a gang. Another participant shared an experience which reflected that of Ali.

> I came to Canada at age four. My parents were uneducated. So, speaking the English language was a problem for them. At home, we often spoke our local language. This had a huge impact on me when I started kindergarten. I was six years but wasn't good at English. I hardly understood what my teacher taught in class. Because of that I skipped classes. I grew up with that behaviour. In grade nine, I left school. I've regretted because that took me to the street. (Talia)

Apart from the difficulty in adapting to school environments due to language barriers, other participants indicated that bad experiences with their teachers partly contributed to their involvement with gangs. Jeff explains how a comment by one of his teachers drove him out of school.

> I was the dumb-ass kid in my class. My teacher didn't like me. And I didn´t like him too. He told me that I will be nothing. That was in grade eight. I got mad and insulted him. So, the school suspended me for two weeks but I didn't go back to the school again.

Jeff's narrative is suggestive of the fact that students who perform poorly academically may be less attached to their teachers and placed at increased risk of dropping out of school. This may consequently lead to their involvement in criminal groups such as gangs. While he argues that low academic performance and his teacher's poor relationship with him were the main reasons why he dropped out of school and joined a gang, another participant revealed that he was introduced to gangs by his friends in school. He recalled:

> The guys in my school had some groups. They were moving together and having fun all the time. Anytime one of them was in trouble, the others were there to help. By then, I got no friends. There's this strong guy who used to bully me. I couldn't take it anymore. So, I fought and defeated him. I became popular for beating that strong guy. One winter afternoon, I was sitting in the corner of my class when one guy came, said "hey" and asked "would you like to be part of our group?" I asked him what the group was about. He said it was for fun and watching each other's back. I was like, why don't I give it a try? I joined and started hanging out with them after school. With time, they introduced [him to] me to a lot of things. (Chilemba)

The participant implicitly suggests that a combination of factors (for example, quest for fun and security) led him to a gang. Also, he introduces an important factor—the influence of bad peers—which is dealt with in the subsequent section.

Overall, participants' school experiences suggest that as youth from immigrant backgrounds, they had peculiar challenges that were not addressed by their school systems. These challenges arguably constituted strains to the youth as they resulted in negative affect

states such as anger and frustration (Agnew, 2006). In responding to these strains, they dropped out of school. This weakened their social attachment and contributed to their engagement in gangs. For these black youth, gang involvement was thus a response to unfavourable school experiences (Thornberry et al., 2003).

5.2.4 Association with bad peers

There has been a great deal of research on the etiological impact of deviant peers on youth delinquency (Hoeben, Meldrum & Young, 2016; Leung, Toumbourou & Hemphill, 2014; Harding, 2009; Decker & Winkle, 1996; Matsueda & Anderson, 1998). Some participants (n=4) also shared experiences which suggest that their deviant friends were instrumental in their involvement with gangs. The following statements were typical:

> I became involved [with his gang] through a friend. He was my best friend. He shared a lot of stuff with me and I trusted him. He used to tell me about his group [gang]. He was like, boy, you'll make some dollars and run some beautiful chicks [young women] if you join. I wasn't interested but I didn´t want to disappoint my friend or lose him. So, I joined his group [gang]. (Notorious)

> I think my buddy was part of the reason [why he joined a gang]. He once told me that some motherfuckers were looking for him. I asked who those motherfuckers were and he said they were from another group [gang]. I was like scared. And he was like don't be. My boys will watch your back if join us. That's how I got in. (Striker)

> It's a long story. Um, how should I put it? We were a group of fun-loving guys. We play b-ball and have parties together. Some of the friends said we should sell stuff like weed and crack to make extra dollars. As a member of the group, I gave in. I connected with a group and started selling drugs for them. (Don)

It could be read from the accounts of Notorious, Striker and Don that their associations with deviant peers provided opportunities for them to engage in gangs. Thus, the impact of peer pressure was profound in their individual cases. Literature on the correlation between peer pressure and adolescents' delinquency shows that most adolescents engage in delinquent behaviours in order to either gain acceptance from their deviant peers and/or social groups or

avoid being rejected by same (Blakemore and Mills 2014; Miller et al., 2002). It is evident that the fear of being rejected and the need to remain socially accepted were central in Notorious' and Don's decisions to join gangs. For example, Notorious argues that "I wasn´t interested but I didn´t want to disappoint my friend or lose him". Although he does not explicitly state that his failure to pay heed to his friend's suggestion would have contributed to his rejection, his desire to keep his friend (as it could be inferred from the quote) demonstrates his fear of rejection. Don also situates a defence for his involvement with a gang in a group perspective. He states that he "…gave in to their idea…" because he was "…a member of the group". While his decision was meant to show loyalty to his group, it could arguably be inferred that the need to remain accepted by his group was fundamental in his entry into a gang.

Support for differential association and social learning theories can be drawn from the participants' narratives as they learned about gangs and joined them through association with bad peers (Sutherland, 1949; Sutherland & Cressey, 1978). They were socialized by their deviant peers into criminality—gang involvement. This finding lends credence to other studies that have identified the influence of bad peers as a predisposing factor to youth gang involvement (Dunbar, 2017; Fast, 2017; Wortley & Tanner, 2008).

5.3 Individual motivations for gang involvement

Discussions in the wider sociological and criminological literature on youth gangs show that a combination of structural and individual factors account for youth's involvement with gangs (See for example, Carson & Vecchio, 2015). As demonstrated in the preceding sections, some socio-structural factors were crucial in predisposing study participants to gangs. However, they also shared their individual motivations for joining gangs when they responded to the question: Did you have any personal motivation(s) for joining a gang? These motivations centred on the following themes: (1) Quest for money (2) protection/personal safety (3) respect/status (4) camaraderie and belonging. It is instructive to point out that while some

participants cited motivations which were congruent with their socio-structural accounts for gang involvement, others shared motivations that were not related/connected to their socio-structural experiences. Also, participants' individual motivations for gang involvement overlapped. A detailed examination of each motivation is provided below.

5.3.1 Quest for money

This theme basically relates to the economic arguments that participants put forward as reasons for being involved with gangs. Most of them (n=10) explained that they were from poor socio-economic backgrounds. Therefore, they joined gangs so they could make money and contribute financially in their homes. One participant explained it this way:

> It's the money. Like I said, I had to do something to support my family. But as you know, you can't help without money. Yeah, money was pretty much the reason [for joining her gang]. (Lizzy).

For Lizzy, being involved with a gang helped her provide temporary financial support to her family. A similar response was given by another participant. He, however, framed it in a series of rhetorical questions; "What else will I do all that shit for if it is not money? What put food on the table? With what can one buy good clothes? I mean, why will I be in that shit if there is no money?" (Mike). Sam also thought of being in a gang as the easiest way to make money. He shared:

> I thought I'd easily make money from being in the group [gang]. Some of my buddies said dropping off drugs in a few minutes pays more than wasting many hours on a minimum wage job like cleaning. Yeah, that was like the case in the beginning. In a day, I was making like $600 for dropping off crack and coke. It was pretty fetching. I was like my own boss until I got into trouble with the cops.

The participants cited above underscored the primacy of the economic-oriented function of a gang. They indicated that money obtained through gang involvement helped them achieve different goals including survival, supporting a family and becoming independent. The quest

for money as a reason for joining gangs is not unique to the youth involved in this study. For example, in Wortley and Tanner's (2008) study that sought justification for gang membership among some Canadian youth, most of their respondents cited money as reason why they joined gangs. In particular, respondents perceived drug dealing through gangs as an opportunity to make money.

5.3.2 Protection/personal safety

For some participants, their decisions to join gangs resulted from rational calculations in achieving personal security from predators in their schools and communities. Thus, they perceived gangs as direct response to their violent environments. Their arguments were variously captured in the following statements:

> My hood wasn't safe. I joined my crew so they could watch my back. You get what I mean? If some guys threatened to jump on me, then they go with me to beat the hell out of them. I didn't wanna anybody to walk over me. (Bembe)

> Just to stay safe in school. No bullying or anything 'cause they know if they try, my group will deal with them. (Chilemba)

> You know, a bunch of us get together and do some stuffs. Most of the time, you are with brothers so you don't worry about somebody jumping on you. The group gets your back. Yeah, we're like a family. (Daniel)

There is a utilitarian tone to the above narratives. The participants perceived their gangs as groups that could provide them with security benefits. They also emphasize the family character of their gangs where members are always willing to come to the aid of each other when the need arises.

5.3.3 Respect/status

In addition to protection, some participants cited respect and status as motivations that underlined their engagement in gangs. Notorious, for example, claimed that; "Bro, being a tough guy [a gang member] gives you respect. People are like afraid of you". Talia's response chimed with that of Notorious when she said; "It kinda changed who I was. The guys were like

she is not a weak girl or something. I was the bad girl who they showed respect". While respect was an end in itself for Talia, it served as means to an end for others. For Notorious, there was more to being respected. He elucidated:

> Just getting respect wasn't all. I had some pretty babes [girlfriends]. You know babes wan' to be with guys who boys [people] fear and respect. I mean respect is like a magnet, it attracts some babes. And if you get them, no dude comes close to them because they know you'll kick their ass.

Respect has significant importance in everyday life. According to Dillion (2003), "an attitude of respect is, most generally, a relation between a subject and an object in which the subject responds to the object from a certain perspective in some appropriate way" (n. p.). It is further noted that respect is motivational and object-generated rather than subject-generated (ibid). Contrary to this ideal concept of respect, the above cited participants construe respect as an attitude that is elicited by fear. Thus, being in gangs provided them with new identities and power through which they gained recognitions. Their notions of respect appears to be in line with Feinberg's (1975) concept of *respekt* in which the object is either dangerous or has power over the subject.

5.3.4 Friendship and belonging

Participants who were from dispossessed or fractured families indicated that their main motivations were to belong to groups that would serve as families. Marcus pointed out that "It's more of a family thing. Dad was into his own thing. I wasn't looking for parents or anything though. I needed friends who would accept me at that time. Not those who would reject me". The search for camaraderie was further highlighted by Omar when he stated that "I think friendship was key. Home was boring and I needed friends to have fun with". Yeah, it's about feeling belonged".

Generally, participants' quest for money, respect and status as motivations for their involvement with gangs offer support for subculture (Miller, 1958) and strain theories (Merton,

1968). Although most participants were from immigrant families with lower socio-economic statuses, they had focal concerns which included money, respect and status. However, they had limited legitimate means to achieve these goals. For example, the majority of them dropped out of school and could not achieve higher education that could have given them access to high-paying jobs. This arguably constituted a strain to them. In response, they adopted unconventional means (gangs) to achieve socially accepted goals (Merton, 1968). Gangs offered the youth temporary opportunities for material possession and status.

5.4 Initiations into gangs

Some gangs, like other social groups, may initiate their new members. Initiation is defined as a ritual process through which a person is changed from one state of consciousness to another (Sayinka, 1996). In gang settings, initiation helps to determine if the prospective gang member is mentally and physically strong enough to be worthy of membership (Walker, 2010). Gang initiation also "reminds active members of their earlier status, and gives the new gang member something in common with other gang members" (Decker, 1996: 255).

Study participants were asked whether they were initiated into their gangs or not. While some of them (n=11) indicated that they were initiated into their gangs, others (n=5) said they did not go through any initiations. Those who were initiated were further asked about how and why they went through that ritual. Three of the 11 initiated participants preferred not to share their initiation rituals with me because they had made a life-long promise to their gangs that such information would never be divulged to outsiders. The remaining eight participants shared their experiences. These were thematised into three categories: (1) Beaten in or jumped in (2) Went on a mission (3) Blessed-in.

5.4.1 Beaten in or jumped in

Participants who went through this type of initiation either endured beating from current members of their gangs for a pre-determined number of minutes or had to fight a strong gang

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member or all the members at the same time for a given period of time to acquire membership status. In the quote below, Striker recalled how he got into his gang.

> It's a terrible experience. I wasn't aware of it. It happened one afternoon when we met for our usual stuff. I was like some minutes late. So, when I got in, they're standing in a circular way. I was like, what's going on? The don [the gang leader] asked me to stand in the middle of the circle. I did and before I could ask why I was there [in the middle], they started beating me. It lasted for about 40 seconds. The don picks me up and ask "what's up boy?" Anyways, I survived it.

Sam also related an experience which was similar to that of Striker.

> I got in through fight. They [his gang members] were like if you wanna be part of us, show us by beating this guy. Man, I was dead instantly because the guy looked strong. There's no way I'd defeat him. The leader whistled [for them to begin the fight] and just five seconds, I was flat on the ground. It took some hours before I came back. It's a shit.

Striker and Sam's accounts suggest that they were "beaten in" or "jumped in" into their gangs (Descormiers & Corrado, 2016). Their experiences indicate that a gang's initiation ritual could be marked by violence. This violence creates a myth—legends and narratives shared by gang members regarding their engagement in violence—which is often told to increase cohesiveness among themselves (Klein, 1971). Additionally, violent initiation enables gangs to admit new members who are tough and will be able to fight to maintain the gangs' reputation and not run at first sign of trouble (Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991; Walker, 2010). Thus, prospective gang members' ability to bear initiation violence sends a signal to active gang members that they are prepared to join them.

5.4.2 Went on a mission

This theme relates to participants who reported that they were asked to commit certain crimes before they were accepted as members of their gangs. For example, Don put his experience this way:

> It was kind of prove-it-if-you-can thing. Some native motherfuckers [Aboriginal gang members] jumped on one of our members. So, my first job was to jump on any of those motherfuckers in their hood. That's really tough because the natives were powerful. But I did.

Don's narrative indicates that as a prospective member, he had to engage in an act of violence against a rival gang member on a rival turf as an entry requirement into his gang. Likewise, other participants also reported that they went on missions. However, their missions differed significantly. These included petty stealing and sale of illicit drugs for a certain period of time. As his initiation ritual, Notorious described what he did to become a member of his gang.

> My [gang] leader asked me to go steal something, sell it and bring the money to him. That was the first time for me to steal. I didn't know how and where to get the stuff. It took some weeks to plan and do it. It's dangerous. But I had no option [to become a member of the group]. So, I stole from two shops to get the money. It was 200 bucks, I remember.

In the above extract, the participant appears to suggest that gang involvement marked the beginning of his engagement in criminality. As he claims; "That was the first time for me to steal". Consequently, it took him several weeks to plan and execute his mission. Interestingly, the participant places the burden of his decision on his gang leader as he tells us that he (the gang leader) asked him to go and steal. He positions his criminal conduct situationally by shifting the blame to his gang leader. By this discursive shift, the participant downplays his personal agentic role and employs situational attribution strategy that locates the cause of his criminal behaviour in the external demand or requirement by his gang. In doing so, he seems to manage accountability for his criminal conduct. Based on his narrative, it could be argued that he was probably naive and unwilling to embark on the mission as he knew the potential consequences associated it. Nonetheless, he had no alternative means of entering into his gang. Therefore, he engaged in the criminal act which ushered him into his gang. Unlike Notorious, some participants reported that they sold drugs before they were accepted into their gangs. For

example, Talia shared; "I dropped off weed and crack to customers for a month before getting in". When I asked her why she distributed drugs, she explicated:

> I think that was the coolest [easiest] thing to do to get in. As a young girl, the cops never thought I will be involved in that shit. There was this drug bust in the city which involved my group and most of my guys got arrested. The cops were like the girl looks innocent. So, I got away with it. Yeah, I think being a girl paid. (Talia)

The above elucidation reveals that prospective gang members may rationally draw on several factors in choosing how they become part of their gangs if presented with options. As evident in Talia's account, her decision to peddle drugs as an initiation into her gang was shaped by her gender. This asset (her gender) enabled her to evade arrest by the police. Her revelation supports findings of studies that have reported gendered experiences of gang members with law enforcement (Novich & Hunt, 2017; Novich, Kringen & Hunt, 2018).

5.4.3 Blessed-in

Participants in this category reported that they did not go through any initiation rituals because they either had relations in their gangs or criminal social capital based on which they were exempted from initiation. As Marcus explained; "It was cool getting in. My friend was in already. So, he just introduced me to them [his gang members] and I got accepted into it".

Unlike Marcus, Jeff's acceptance into his gang was contingent upon his reputation for violence. He boasted; "Initiation? That wasn't necessary. I had what they wanted. I mean, I was a real player. I'd the history". Although the participant does not evince whether he was disciplined or not in his conduct, his explication for why he was blessed into his gang supports findings of prior research that indicates that individuals who are known for violence are often recruited by gangs (Descormiers & Corrado 2016; Densley, 2012; Gambetta, 2009). Contrary to accounts that portray entry into gangs as a "blood-in" process, insights from the above narratives suggest that a gang's initiation ritual could be non-violent and uneventful (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011).

5.5 "We did all sorts of things": The activities of black ex-youth gang members

Gang members engage in different activities that could be described as either non-criminal or criminal (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; White, 2013). Participants' accounts indicate that they were involved in diverse activities. As noted by one participant, "We did all sorts of things" (Ali). These *things* included having fun, drug dealing, stealing and fighting over drug turf. In recollecting the activities of his gang, Bembe said:

> It was fun being in the crew [gang]. We'd buy beer and some stuff and blow them together. In summer too, we rented cars and did some racing. We used to go for babe hunting in night clubs. Sure, it was fun to be together.

While some activities were not illegal to engage in by the ex-gang members, some participants reported that they were involved in activities which could be described as criminal. The majority of them (n=10) indicated that they peddled drugs for their gangs. Participants in the quotes below shared how they sold drugs to raise money for their gangs and basic needs:

> I had a pretty vital role in the group [gang]. I was like the smartest dope-dropper. Somebody call and in a minute, I was there with what they wanted. Because of how fast I dropped stuff, I was kind of liked by the top guys. I made money for the group so I could get my share. (Talia).

> To me, selling crack on the street was important. It was a way to get money for the group [his gang] and some for your [his] basic needs. You know what I mean? You can't work and give everything to the group. You got to be smart. Keep some for yourself. (Sam)

It could be deduced from the above extracts that drug sales offer gang members opportunity to contribute financially to their gangs and win the admiration of gang leaders. What is intriguing and worth noting is that, while some gang members may honestly account for the money they make to their gangs and claim their fair share, others can be "smart" and keep some of the money to themselves. This probably explains why it was argued that "It's not everybody who sells. You must kind of prove to them that they can trust you before they ask you to sell" (Talia).

A participant who was also involved in drug dealings indicated that his gang ran a system which assigned different tasks to its members at different times and checked on them.

> We did everything together. In every operation, we had different tasks. It depends what you are told to do. I would be a [drug] carrier, gun holder, cash keeper or a lookout depending on what the leader says. We moved together. It was safe to run things that way. No stealing from the group. (Jeff)

Some participants pointed out that proceeds from drug dealings were used for many purposes. According to Chilemba, "Some of the money was used to buy more drugs, pay for gas, and tickets for running red lights and stuff like that during operations". It was also added that "We sometimes gave some to members who got into trouble and needed extra help" (Bright).

In addition to drug dealings, other participants reported that their gangs regularly stole things. For Mike, "Stealing from the shops was part of the game. It's like okay, you know". Similarly, Ali confirmed that "There were times that we stole things and sold them for money". The items they stole varied and were often based on their need at a given time and how much they could make from selling it.

> Um, usually groceries when there was no money for it. That was like some small foodstuff 'cause you can't put big stuff in your pocket. You'll be heavy and can't run when the people get to know and start chasing you. (Lizzy)

For Marcus; "We [he and his gang members] got arrested for stealing phones, headsets, laptops and things like that. You know, stuff like that sell quicker on Kijiji and you can make good money from it". While Marcus' gang stole more of electronic appliances, Daniel reported that his gang was "…mostly interested in cars parts. We will steal it, take out some parts and sell it". Those who reported theft activities pointed out that such activities were mostly carried out outside their communities and downtown. Omar explained why such environments were not conducive targets.

> We were mostly outside our hood and downtown. You know, you can't rob members in your hood because they know you and will report you to the

cops. If you steal in downtown too, the cops are close so you can easily get caught. So, we prefer[ed] areas outside the city.

The foregoing accounts evince that gang-motivated theft may occur as part of a gang's initiation and a means to raise money for the gang. Moreover, one respondent revealed that his gang fought other gangs that attempted to 'invade' its territory.

We beat the hell out of some dudes who wanted to invade our area. It's like this area was everything to us. I mean, the source of everything. Like we had fun and got part of our money from there. And all my homies were like ready to die for it. We didn't want any motherfuckers to take it from us. Taking it from us means we are weak. So, we'd to protect it. (Notorious)

The above quote shows that space is a valuable resource for gangs (Brantingham et al., 2012). As evident, gangs may claim ownership of areas where they often congregate for social and economic activities. Control of gang set spaces helps gang members engage in socioeconomic activities at minimum risks (Tita, Cohen & Engberg, 2005). Also, the participant indirectly discloses that a gang's power or reputation, to some extent, is tied to its ability to defend its territory. Accordingly, gangs' territorial battles may be explained as efforts to build, maintain or restore their reputations. A gang's invasion of another's territory may result in a retaliatory attack. Retaliation is thus necessary to show that gang members and the gang as a group are strong. In the gang context, the failure of a gang whose territory is invaded to respond/retaliate in a timely manner can damage its reputation and expose it to further attacks (Brantingham et al., 2012; Jacobs & Wright, 2006). Given what is known about gangs' fight over territories, it might be expected that two or more gangs may not exist on the same territory. However, one participant clarified that "It's not like we fight every other crew members. We got pissed off with those alien to our hood. We were like cool with other dudes who were from the hood" (Bembe). Based on the participant's clarification, it could be argued that neighbourhood affiliation may create a master status which can positively shape the interaction of different gangs in the same territory.

Generally, participants' accounts appear to suggest that gang life may be characterized by estrangement from conforming peers, adults and social institutions. This may make it difficult to leave the gang as even after doing so, many ex-gang members continue to be treated as if they were still members and may be disadvantaged in areas such as employment. Notwithstanding their experiences, all my respondents indicated that they left their gangs. What did participants mean when they said they left their gangs? What motivated them to leave their gangs? How did they leave? What were the challenges they encountered? The subsequent sections provide detailed analyses of participants' responses to these questions.

5.6 Getting out: Meaning, motivations, methods and challenges for leaving the gang

Research on gang desistance is growing. However, some controversies exist on the meaning of the subject (Carson, Peterson & Esbensen, 2013). Scholars who have examined gang desistance seem inconclusive on what constitutes 'true desistance' (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). I investigated the nuances of the desistance process as experienced by study participants. Here, my aim was to provide insights into participants' understanding of desistance and how they navigated the process. It is believed that participants' narratives on desistance would offer valuable knowledge which can inform future development of gang prevention and intervention policies.

All respondents were asked what they meant by leaving their gangs, reasons why they left, how they left and the problems they encountered when leaving their gangs. Their responses were thematised as: (1) What does it mean to leave the gang? (2) Motivations for leaving (3) Methods for exiting the gang, and (4) Post-exit challenges. Each of these themes is examined in detail.

5.6.1. What does it mean to leave the gang?

Previous studies have explored the process of gang desistance (Berger et al., 2017; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2010). These studies show that gang desistance is

achieved when a gang-involved individual de-identifies with his or her gang and severs his or her social, emotional, physical and criminal ties to it. In this study, participants' understanding of leaving their gangs reflected the notions of de-identification and disengagement (Carson, Peterson & Esbensen, 2013; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). For most of them (n=12), to leave a gang means to stop identifying with it and disengaging from its activities.

> I left. I mean, I didn't see myself as a member again. I didn't do anything with my guys anymore. I said I was out and stayed away from them. Because I could easily go back if I kept hanging out with them. (Talia)

> You know, leaving [the gang] is like a sinner who says he is accepting Christ. I was somewhere and I thought it wasn't good. So, I told myself "I wanna leave". When I left, I stopped doing what I was doing before with the group. Like you can't say you're a Christian and continue to wobble in your dirty stuff. If you do that then you've not left yet. I'd to put down the flag, stop moving with [gang] members and say no to shit stuff. (Sam)

> It [desistance] means differently to people. I can only speak for myself. For me, getting out was becoming a new person. People close to you should know that you are no more a gangster. It's just a matter of putting the past shit behind, shunning the bad guys and working for a better future. It took some time. But that's what I did. (Jeff)

It could be inferred from the above clarifications that de-identification is a key component of the desistance process. As Talia states, to leave the gang meant she had to stop considering herself as member of her group. Jeff further adds that "getting out [of the gang] means becoming a new person". Although Jeff does not overtly deploy the word "identity", it could be posited that his use of the phrase "a new person" symbolises a *new identity* that about-to-leave gang members aspire to acquire and/or possibly put up upon leaving their gangs. This new identity as the participants variously suggest, could be acquired and maintained by "putting the past shit bind, shunning the bad guys and working for a better future" (Jeff), or "put[ting] down the flag, stop moving with [gang] members and say[ing] no to shit stuff" (Sam). These accounts corroborate findings of studies that show that gang-involved individuals

leave gangs by de-identifying and severing ties with their gangs (Carson et al., 2013; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011).

Contrary to the majority's understanding of desistance as process that involves de-identification and cessation of criminal associations, some participants (n=4) provided explanations which suggest that desistance from gangs may not be tantamount to disengagement from criminality. Bright, for example, underscored the de-identification aspect of desistance. However, he stated:

> It's a difficult question though. I will say it's about not seeing yourself as part of your group. Deep inside you, you know you are not part of them but you will have some of your buddies with whom you will still do stuff once a while. You get my point? In my case, I stopped using things that kind of linked me to the group. I didn't want to see myself as one of them. But still, I was hanging out with some of my buddies who were in [the gang]. We did some bad stuff together as friends [not gang members] to a point after which I stopped everything.

Prior research has established that gang members' de-identification with gangs may not result in a complete cessation of their involvement in criminality (Dong & Krohn, 2016). Individuals who desist may still have ties with their gang members and continue to do business with them. In other words, de-identifying as a gang member may not mean dissociating with one's former associates. As shown in the case of Bright, although he did not want to identify with his gang anymore, he maintained ties with and did "some bad stuff" with his "buddies" who were still part of the gang he desisted from. Following Pyrooz and Decker's (2011) typology which highlights the relationship between leaving a gang and desisting from crime, it could be argued that in the early stage of his gang exit (before the point at which he stopped doing everything), he was not a 'true desister' as he was still socially and criminally connected to his buddies. What this suggests is that focusing exclusively on de-identification as a yardstick for measuring gang desistance could hamper the broader understanding of the concept. In addition, the way he left his gang shows that it was a gradual drift away. Proponents of the more gradual process

of drifting away from the gang argue that desisters may continue to engage with the gang lifestyle through varying degrees of attachments and lingering ties to the gang but this decreases over time (Decker & Lauitsen, 2002; Pyrooz, Decker & Webb, 2010). Bright's exit from his gang followed a similar path. First, he de-identifies with his gang by not using things that linked him to it. Yet, he maintained ties with his former associates to a point after which he completely stopped engaging in criminality.

Overall, participants' narratives suggest that gang desistance is an ambiguous concept. However, despite the varied ways in which it is understood, it does occur in reality among gang members irrespective of how long it may take. What motivated participants to disengage from gangs is the focus of the following section.

5.6.2 "A lot of things contributed to it": Motivations for leaving the gang

There is the myth that gang membership is a lifelong commitment and that it is impossible for individuals to leave gangs once they join (Bolden 2012; Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Pyrooz 2014; Ward 2013). Contrary to this often sensationalised claim, all my respondents self-identified as ex-gang members. They gave several motives why they left their gangs. Following previous studies, I generally classified these motivations into either *push* or *pull* factors for leaving a gang (Decker & Lauritsen, 2001; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Young & Gonzalez, 2013). While push factors are considered to be internal to individuals or the gang and serve to push them from gang life, pull factors exist outside individuals or the gang and act as "hooks for change" as they present gang members with more appealing alternatives to gang life (Carson & Vecchio, 2015). It is worth emphasizing that the push and pull factors cited by participants were not mutually-exclusive. In other words, there were instances where a combination of both push and pull factors catalysed an individual's exit from his or her gang.

5.6.2.1 Push factors

Participants mostly attributed their desistance from gangs to push factors. The majority of them (n=10) stated that violence against them, fellow gang members or relatives was a key factor that pushed them away from gangs. In explaining why he left his gang, one respondent shared that a violent attack by a rival gang member pushed him away from gang life.

> A lot of things contributed to it [leaving his gang]. But if I'm to single one out, I will say a dirty attack by one guy from another group changed my life. That guy almost ended my life. I went to a club one night with my gal. While we were there enjoying music and drinks, these guys came in. Because they knew me so they started throwing up some signs. But I didn't want to do anything because I was alone [without his gang]. So, I told my gal that we should get out of here. So, as we stepped out [of the club house], those guys came out and jumped on me. One stab me on my chest and they left. My gal call 911 and they took me to hospital. I was lucky I didn't die. It's a big experience that turned my life around. (Omar)

Unlike Omar, another participant reported that violence against his gang member by a member of the same gang made him leave his gang.

> I left because of what happened to one of my homeboys. One day I was playing a video game in my big guy's [gang leader's] house. Then one of our members came in and they went to the room where we had all the stuff [drugs]. While I was still playing the game, I heard a scream. I don't know what happened. I went to the room and saw that my big guy had stabbed the other guy on his arm. I got terrified. I thought that could happen to me too. But sadly, I couldn't call the police because that would put them [the two guys] into trouble. From there, I thought I was not safe. So, later I left. (Bembe)

For Ali, vicarious attack on his mom was instrumental in his desistance from his gang.

> My mom's case caused it. Some guys attacked my mom thinking that I was the one. She took my car to a friend's party and on her way home, some guys who I think were from the other camp, attacked her. That was a bit late, around 12:30 am. They smashed the car windows and she got some cuts from the broken glasses. You know, my mom wasn't aware that I was in [a gang]. But later, she became suspicious. So, it was good to be out to save my family from trouble.

While personal and vicarious victimization caused the above quoted participants to exit their gangs, others discussed the threat of it as the reason why they desisted.

> There were threats all the time. They say that they will blow your head off and things like that. I took it normal at first because that's part of the game. You try to frighten the other guy. But with time, it got serious and I was afraid. You can't walk alone. I felt like caged because there were places I couldn't go alone. I did so [left his gang] to avoid all that. (Marcus)

> I think the threats pissed me off. It's as if you owe the dudes your life. But you can't report because if you do, you could be in trouble too. So why not leave? (Mike)

The experiences of the above participants support studies that have documented real and/or perceived violent victimisation as a motivation for gang desistance (Berger et al., 2017; Pyrooz and Decker, 2011). Besides violence, disillusionment was cited by some respondents (n=3) as the second most common factor that pushed them from their gangs. An individual is said to be disillusioned when he or she realises a consistent incongruence between his or her idealized expectations and everyday realities associated with those expectations (Casserly & Megginson, 2009). Research has shown that individuals who join gangs often have "inflated identity standard that stems from grandiose expectations they hope to achieve by joining a gang" (Bubolz & Simi, 2015:334). These expectations results from the way gangs are often glamorized as sources of protection and economic success (Decker and Van Winkle1996). In the gang setting, a gang member becomes disillusioned when the expectations for which he or she joined a gang are unmet. In several ways, participants demonstrated how disillusionment contributed to their exits from gangs.

> I think that was not for me. Maybe, I was fooled into it or something. The money blah, blah, blah, ain't real. You do a lot of shit but you get nothing. There's nothing in it. So, there's no point staying [in the gang]. I had to seek opportunities elsewhere. (Erica)

> The empty promises were like too much. They say they are there to watch your back so no worries. But you see that you are not okay. A group member

> gets into trouble and members can't help him. Trouble, trouble, trouble. It's stupid. (Notorious)

> Fed up. With time, it's like I was fed up. I look at my friends out there and they were like making it. There was no future with my crew. No job, nothing. One had to steal to survive. I don't even want to remember something like that happened in my life. The good thing is that I left and now I am working. (Striker)

The above accounts exemplify that these former gang members had some expectations before joining gangs. These included making money and getting protection from gang members—having colleagues watch their back. However, with time, they became disillusioned as they experienced incongruence between their idealised or expected gang life (characterised by money and protection) and the reality in the gang—insecurity. Consequently, they subjectively evaluated their gangs and concluded that; "There's nothing in it" (Erica), "There was no future with my crew" (Striker) and gang life was actually full of "Trouble, trouble, trouble" (Notorious). Contingent upon these personal evaluations, the ex-gang members experienced cognitive-shifts (Giordano et al, 2002) which helped them to exit their gangs and assumed increased responsibilities for their lives in ways that were less dependent on others.

The third push factor reported by two other participants was fear of incarceration. Chilemba captured it this way:

> Ending up in jail was concerning [to him]. The arrests and remand were getting more and more. They arrest you, your people come bail you and next time you are in again. And I was like if I don't take care, I may rot in jail. But that's not where I wanted to be. I didn't want to be an offender for life. Thinking about this kinda took me out of the game.

The participant's account suggest that he desisted from his gang in order to avoid his "feared self"—an image of what he did not want to become or feared becoming (Panoster & Bushway, 2009). As a gang member, he had a sense that being in the gang was dangerous as that could send him to jail. At the same time, he had a perception of his future or "possible self"—not being an offender for life. So, it is possible that his perceived sense of possible self as a non-

offender motivated him to break away from his gang. Another respondent also expressed fear of incarceration as a reason for his exit. However, he argued it from a different standpoint.

> Um, I kinda wanted to avoid jail like where the big guys go. Um, at my age then, I knew they won' jail me. But I had to wise up as I was growing. If you turn 18 [years] in the gang, the law can deal with you anyways. So, my move [exit] was like to skip jail and stuff, yeah. (Don)

Don's motive for leaving his gang brings to the fore an important point. He implicitly tells us of his awareness of the age at which individuals could be held responsible for their crimes in Canada. Per the provisions of the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA), his contention is right as young offenders are presumed to be less mature, have heightened vulnerability to crime and reduced capacity for moral judgment, and therefore dealt with from a rehabilitative perspective (Bala, Carrington & Roberts, 2011).

5.6.2.2 Pull factors

Although the factors discussed above pushed most of the ex-gang members from their gangs, a few others cited factors which independently or work in tandem with push factors to pull them from gangs. The most frequently reported experience that pulled some participants (n=7) out was police harassment. Those who stated this as motivation particularly indicated that they were often chased by the police. Therefore, they desisted in order to have privacy, peace and enjoy life. When Daniel was asked why he left his gang, he answered:

> It's 'cause of the cop. Man, they were tough. You don' really have a life when they are chasing you. I mean, no breathing space. You must run for nothing all the time. The least suspicion, then they raid your apartment 'cause they think you get dope or something. But at times, they come but they get nothing. And the annoying thing was anytime they come to your apartment, people in the hood look you differently. Some think you are this or that. Man, I needed my privacy

In the same vein, Bright touched on police harassment when he stated that; "Just wanted to have peace. I was in trouble with the law so many times. The police arrest you at least twice every month. They say they will throw you in jail and stuff".

A second pull factor cited by participants (n=5) was committed relationship or future plan to be a good mother. On their parts, Talia and Lizzy stated that they disengaged from gangs due to committed relationships.

> Why I finally left? Gosh! That's an interesting question. Um, because of one of my ex-boyfriends, yeah. He's the force that took me out. Just imagine being in love with a guy who wants nothin' but the best for you. When I first met him, I was still with my boys [gang members]. But he didn't know. So, he was like jealous. There was trouble anytime he saw me with any of the boys. So, um to show some kinda commitment to him, I had to….I thank him for that though. (Talia)

> Um, relationship, settling down with a guy. But you know, it's difficult to have time for him and the game. I'd to make a choice either to be his or the group's. It´s difficult. But I chose him. (Lizzy)

Erica, who earlier on talked about disillusionment also stated:

> It's like my decision was…I will say to some extent, was influenced by who I wanted to become in the years to come. I was growing and thought of becoming someone's mom one day. But that was not going to be possible. Who will cope with all your shit? No, it was not going to happen. And even if let's say I find a guy and I have kids with him, as bad mom, how will I bring my children up? I'm fortunate I have a sweet mum. Leaving can be difficult but if you give it a thought, you can.

In addition, pieces of advice from influential adults played a significant role in pulling some of the participants (n=3) out of their gangs. This advice came from parents, extended family members, friends and religious leaders. For example, Ali recounted the instrumental roles his parents and other family members played in his gang exit.

> Um, several calls from family members did the magic. I was away from home but they wouldn't let me be. They keep calling, calling, calling. My mom will call, weep bitterly on the phone and ask me to come home because she missed me. Some of my uncles would call me from Sudan and advise me to be a good boy. I can't count the number of calls all telling me to change.

Um, the pressure was too much. I couldn't take it anymore. So, one afternoon, I called mom and I was like "Mom, I will come home this evening". She was like "Really, I can't wait to hug you son". I wanted to make my family happy. So, yeah, I left for home for good.

Finally, one respondent characterised his motive for leaving his gang as a religious awakening. Specifically, he described it as God's intervention.

I think God made it possible [to leave his gang]. Growing up, I used to go to church with my grandma before my dad brought me here. So, I think God knows me and follows me [he giggles]. Seriously, I always, I felt like going to church when I was with my boys. But they'll make fun of like "Mr. Priest, Mr. Preacher" and stuff to dampen my spirit. But I think the awakening began when I started feeling that God has a good plan for me. That changed everything. (Marcus)

It is evident in Marcus' account that the religious bond he established during his childhood served as a motivating factor in his desistance from gangs. His experience suggests that offenders' religiosity can provide them with means to break from their past transgressions and help them acquire new identities (Robinson, 2018).

This section has covered the reasons why study participants desisted from gangs. As their accounts illuminate, the desistance process may be facilitated by several factors. It is also shown that a prospective desister has to put in much effort as the desistance process could be daunting. In the next section, I turn to *how* participants managed to leave their gangs.

5.6.3 Methods for leaving the gang

Myths abound about how gang members leave their gangs. Some studies demonstrate that gang members have to be beaten out, shoot family members or commit crimes against rival gang members before they can exit their gangs (Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Decker and Van Winkle 1996). These claims appear to support the "blood in, blood out" rhetoric. My study participants provided responses which were inconsistent with this prevalent claim. Their responses were coded under the following themes: (i) Just left the gang (ii) Moved away (iii) Final mission. I elaborate on each of these themes.

5.6.3.1 Just left the gang

Most of the participants (n=9) reported that exiting their gangs was uneventful and non-hostile. Their responses were characterised by statements such as "I just left", "I left the crew without any problems" and "I was no more interested. So, I left". In the extracts below, some participants gave detailed accounts of how they left their gangs.

> Um, actually it wasn't difficult. I just left. I know some people say once you get in, you are in for life or you have to kill somebody or do something before you can get out. I don't know if that is true for some people. But my story was different. I just told them that I wanted out. They were like "Why do you want to leave?" I told them I wanted to pursue a better life. I wanted to go back to school. I think it was easy for me [to leave the gang] because they believed I was leaving for something good. You know, [gang] members reason like normal people. They won´t pull you down if you want to do something good. Um, so yeah, you just have to let them know that you're out for something real good. (Bright)

> How I left the crew wasn't like how I got in. It's like I left the crew without any problems. I joined it. So, I had every right to say I don' wanna be in anymore. I needed to settle down with my boyfriend. It was a hard decision. But I did it myself. I mean, no one will tell you to leave even if you are dying. They need the numbers. You got to decide for yourself. (Talia)

> I was no more interested. So, I left [the gang]. Like I said, there's nothing in it. So, yeah, it's not worth the time. I'd to find a job so I could be on my own. No one opposed me. (Erica)

There are inferences that could be drawn from the foregoing narratives regarding how gang members desist from gangs. First, it could be inferred that although gang members are *social beings* (as they belong to a group and sometimes act based on the group's influence), they exercise agency in their leave decisions. Human agency consists of properties such as intentionality, forethought and power (Bandura, 2006; Dietz & Burns, 1992; Schlosser, 2015). An individual exhibits intentionality when he or she has a deliberate purpose for his or her action (Schlosser, 2015). Forethought refers to an individual's capacity to create future goals or plans which act as a guide for his or her current behaviour or action (Paternoster et al., 2015). Power also has to do with an individual's ability to act in a given environment (Schlosser,

2015). The ex-gang members cited above exhibited these agency traits in several ways. Bright, Talia and Erica had different goals (pursuing a better life by going back to school; settling down with a boyfriend; and looking for a job) for leaving their gangs. These future plans served as guides for their actions then. Their deployment of the first person singular pronoun (I) in statements such as "I just left [the gang]" "But I did it myself" and "I joined it. …I had every right to say I don´ wanna be in anymore" is instructive. It shows that as individual gang members, they had power, free will or choice to act in their gang contexts. What this means is that, they decided to leave because "… no one will tell you to leave even if you are dying" in the gang.

Second, the participants' accounts denote that gang members who desist as a result of pull factors such as education, relationship and employment may less likely face challenges or resistance. Bright points out that leaving his gang was not difficult because it was for a good cause—pursuit of education. He argues "You know, [gang] members reason like normal people. They won't pull you down if you want to do something good". On her part, Talia also states that she was able to leave her gang because she needed to settle down with her boyfriend. Bright and Talia´s experiences corroborate results of studies which show that individuals who are pulled away from gangs by factors such as employment, marriage and education may experience non-hostile exits as such motivations may be supported by gang peers (Decker & Pyrooz 2011; Carson & Vicchio, 2015).

There were other respondents who also indicated that they "just left the gang". Nevertheless, they stated that their positions and level of involvement in gang violence had significant impact on their desistance. Marcus, for example, clarified:

> Um, it's like getting out of the game wasn't like hard because I was just a [mere] member. Yeah, it was easy. You know, they could be without me. If you are like a big girl or big guy, then that's going to be different. They won't let you go. You must stay to fight for the group.

The above quote suggests that gang members are not homogenous and that their desistance experiences may vary. Secondly, the participant clearly explicates how gang members' level of embeddedness shape their abilities to desist from gangs. On the one hand, he underscores the dispensable nature of peripheral gang members and how that can make it easier for them to desist. As a mere gang member, leaving his gang was relatively easier for him as the group could still function without him. It is possible that he had a weak attachment to his gang and that probably enabled him to invest some of his time and energy in other social arenas which might have facilitated his desistance from a gang. On the other hand, he emphasizes that core-gang members (who he refers to as a big girl or guy) may find it difficult to desist because of their deep embeddedness. His observation about gang embeddedness and how that impact desistance has been noted by some scholars (see for example, Pyrooz, Sweeten & Piquero, 2013). Research specifically shows that gangs as social networks embed their members and isolate them from prosocial arenas (Thornberry et al., 2003) and gang members who are deeply embedded are often the least likely to desist (Pyrooz, Sweeten & Piquero, 2013).

5.6.3.2 Moved away

Participants in this category reported that they relocated to different environments in order to leave their gangs. The changes in environment involved moving from one city to another and from a part of the city to the other.

> Um, I think they never thought that was going to be it. Yeah, they were unaware because I didn't tell anybody. When I was like fed up [with the gang] and thought of leaving, I kinda started searching for escape routes. So, for about some weeks, I stayed away. They would call and sometime I lied that I was not around. But I will be with a friend in his apartment. The guy was not a member. He wanted me to quit. So, he gave me a place to hide and stuff. But I left finally when I moved to Winnipeg for two years. Before that, I cancelled my line so nobody could call me or whatever. Really, I had nothing to do with them during the one year I moved away. No calls, no text. Staying away from the group was really important because I could easily go back. (Mike)

There is no one way of doing that [desisting from a gang]. You got to choose which ones works for you. I changed everything. Where I lived, phone number, clothes and a lot of stuff. I found a place in the outskirt. They can get you if you keep them. So, why don't you change them and avoid troubles. Once you leave, you become enemy of your own people. Don't forget the other dudes. They can do anything. Yeah, changing things work. (Ali)

Individuals' ability to distance themselves from immediate causes or physical environments that lead to their involvement in criminality is central to desistance from crime (Farrall, 2002; Maruna & Roy, 2007). As evident in the above narratives, the ex-gang members resorted to what could be described as a "geographic cure". They were able to desist from gangs by relocating to new environments. Although desistance was the primary motive why both ex-gang members moved away from their environments, they emphasised other secondary reasons which are noteworthy. First, it is accentuated that moving away from one's environment during desistance is imperative as it prevents relapse into gangs. As Mike put it; "Staying away from the group was really important because I could easily go back". Second, change of environment by prospective desisters helps them avoid potential post-exit attacks from former fellow and rival gang members. From Ali's account, it is known that once gang-members desist, they become enemies of their former and other gang members. Although his observation may be true in some cases, it is possible that some gang-involved individuals may leave without any post-exit attacks from either former fellow gang members or rival gang members.

5.6.3.3 Final mission

Of the 16 study participants, only one indicated that he embarked on a final mission before leaving his gang. He described what he did before leaving his gang.

How I left was kinda like how I became a member. Haha, all my family members are alive though. It was a final mission. It was cool. My main boy [gang leader] was like "Okay, you wanna go right? Leave us with something. You should go lift whatever, sell it and bring the money to me". I will say it was somehow okay 'cause he mentioned no amount. It means whatever amount I get would be okay. So, I went out to some shops, picked [stole]

some items, sold them and sent the money to him. That was like 100 bucks.
Not much, yeah. That's kinda calm way of leaving though. (Don)

The participant above ironically states that all his family members are alive. His intention, as could be deduced, is to debunk the claim that gang members kill their relatives before they exit gangs. Additionally, he characterizes his exit as passive as he did not suffer violence or commit violence against anybody.

5.6.4 Post-exit challenges

Exiting a gang may come with some challenges (Carson &Vecchio, 2015). Five of the 16 participants reported that they did not face any post-exit challenges because they got enrolled in intervention programs where they were supported by psychologists, counsellors and social workers. The remaining 11 indicated that they faced some post-exit problems. Specifically, six of them experienced mental and emotional stress after desisting.

It's hard to say you're out. Because of the stress you go through. Leaving [the gang] is like being away from home for a long time. I mean, you spend your day with them. They are like your family. But now, you said goodbye so you don't see them again. For real, you miss them. But you can't go back. (Bembe)

You're like not yourself again. You feel alone. Nobody to move with again. Life becomes boring. You got to start all over. And where and how to start gives the headache. Bro, you may go back if you are not strong. (Sam)

It's good but it has some problems. It's like getting out of any group. For sure, you keep remembering the time you spent with them and you are like "Oh my G, why did I leave?" But I stuck to my guns. (Talia).

It [gang desistance] is a stressful one [experience]. You got to be ready for it. For the first two three months, it was like a mental thing. You close your eyes and you see them in your dream. You still feel them around you. It's kind of difficult to be out emotionally. (Daniel).

The above accounts show that gang members who take their gangs as surrogate families mostly encounter stress when exiting. Thus, the feeling of "being away from home" or from one´s proxy family stresses them out. To the desisted gang members, losing friends in the gang

amounted to a loss of social capital (Moule Jr., Decker & Pyrooz, 2013). As a result, they were tempted to go back to their gangs. But with determination, they succeeded in desisting.

Three other participants also reported post-exit labelling and its attached stigma as a challenge. Jeff, for example, explicated the problems he went through after desisting.

> Tagging [labelling] is the biggest hurdle to jum' over. Inside you, you're not in. But then, those around you see the old dude who is crazy and always does bad stuff. Um, the problem is how to let them know that you are out of the game. It's difficult. It blocks your chances. It's hard to find a job 'cause no employer wanna work with me if they know I was a gangster. You get my point? Yeah, it's stupid.

Apart from limiting employment opportunities, another participant stated that labelling comes with constant police harassment.

> Once you were in, the cops think that you are in for good. When I was in I had problems with the cops so many times. So, I was like if I leave, the trouble will stop. But trust me, it never. If they suspect something, they come knock my door. They ask me all kinds of shitty questions. They are like "Where were you at this time? And what were you doing? No privacy, nothing. It's bad. (Bright)

Unlike Bright, Don argued that sustained identification as being gang-involved leads to continued fear of violence from former rival gang members.

> Um, for the most part, it's the fear of being jumped on by somebody [a rival gang member] you jumped on sometime ago. They don' know whether you've quit or not. They can jump on you anytime but you get no one to watch your back. Some old dudes from one bloc [gang] tried jumpin' on me but I told them I'd quit. Maybe, it works that way. But not everyone will get the chance to tell the dudes.

Finally, two participants reported that they received threats from former rival gang members on their social media platforms. As Ali related; "I quite remember some threats on my twitter page. The guy was like I will blow your ass if I get you. But I ignored it because there's no way it was gonna happen". Likewise, Lizzy shared that "Threats on Facebook were like

common. I wasn't scared of it. I used to receive them while in the gang. You know, that's where guys try to show they are there".

Chapter six: Black ex-youth gang members' experiences with the criminal justice

system

Research in other contexts (such as the United States) shows that gang members tend to be the focus of aggressive anti-gang policing (Katz & Webb, 2006; Novich & Hunt, 2017). These studies suggest that gang unit officers target gang-involved individuals based on several characteristics including age, gender, race and geographic location (Dura´n, 2008; Novich & Hunt, 2017). Additionally, there is evidence that interactions between gang members and law enforcement are often marked by excessive use of force and abuse of authority which consequently shapes gang members' perceptions of law enforcement (Novich & Hunt, 2017). Furthermore, the presence of gang members in US and Canadian prisons, jails and juvenile institutions has been reported (Chalas & Grekul, 2017; Ruddell, Decker & Egley, 2006; Winterdyk and Ruddell, 2010). What these research accounts generally suggest is that gang members routinely come into contact with the criminal justice system. Given this context, I explored participants' experiences with the Canadian criminal justice system—police, youth courts and correctional institutions—to better understand how they perceived and interpreted those experiences. All the study participants reported that they had contacts with different arms of the criminal justice system. Their experiences are analysed in the subsequent sections.

6.1 "It's about the cop you meet and how you behave on the spot": Participants' experiences with police

All my participants reported that they had contacts with some officers from the Edmonton Police Service (EPS). Overall, they shared experiences which could be described as unpleasant/negative, pleasant/positive or mixed. A participant underlined the variations in gang members' experiences with police when he said "Bro, it varies. It's about the cop you meet and how you behave on the spot" (Marcus). Despite the differences in participants' experiences with police, most of them (n=9) offered narratives which indicated that they were physically

and verbally abused, harassed, disrespected and treated unfairly by the police. Their experiences, as they demonstrated, occurred in circumstances deemed as either legitimate or illegitimate. For instance, in an interview with Striker, he recalled how a police officer choked him when he attempted to swallow a piece of crack cocaine during an arrest.

> The cops are looking for something to charge you with. They're smart. So, you got to be smart too. Just know when to throw or destroy what. But they ain´t happy if you play smart. Yeah, that's true. I remember one fucking choke by one motherfucker [police officer]. It was a shit. They pulled me over on my way home after hanging out with a friend. They asked me to come out [of his car]. As I was stepping out, I quickly threw it [a piece of crack cocaine] into my mouth and tried to swallow it. But one of them got to know it and choked me. So, I brought it out and they charged me. Though I think I was wrong for trying to swallow it, I was expecting them to show some respect.

In Canada, police are entrusted with the responsibility of enforcing law and maintaining order. To do this effectively, some legislations have been put in place to allow police officers to discharge their duties with discretion and substantive powers (See for example, Section 25 of the Criminal Code). The participant's experience reveals that his encounter with the police officer was characterised by what could be described as use of force—direct or indirect physical coercive act by a police officer towards a member of the public (Hine et al., 2018). The force applied by the officer in the respondent's case could arguably be described as excessive. Worden (1996) argues that excessive force is said to be used or applied when a law enforcement officer employs more force relative to resistance by a person being dealt with. In the above encounter, the participant reports that one of the police officers realised that he was attempting to swallow a piece of crack. So, he was choked. There was no resistance as his account suggests. Although he agrees that the police was right to charge him with possessing a drug and attempting to destroy an evidence, he expected them to treat him with respect. His experience with police is not unique as results of some studies reveal that gang members are physically abused and sometimes disrespected by gang unit officers (Duran, 2009, 2013;

Novich & Hunt, 2017). Another participant also offered a narrative which echoed an abusive experience. Unlike the above participant, he resisted an arrest because he thought he had done nothing wrong to be arrested. Yet, the police abused him.

> The police sucks. They ain't good. They abuse you if you want to fight for your right. I mean, they think you're nothing if you're in [a gang]. They came to arrest two of my homeboys for stealing someone's car. Because we were living in the same apartment, they I thought I too was a thief, right? So, they jacked [arrested] me too. I challenged them and they were real hard on me. They pushed me here and there. (Don)

Don deems his arrest and abuse as unfair as he was arrested not for stealing but for where and with whom he was. There are two possible interpretations that could be made of the participant's claim. On one hand, it could be argued that his arrest was solely based on his location. On the other hand, it could be posited that he was probably abused (pushed here and there) for not complying with the police.

For other participants, their experiences were marked by both physical and verbal abuse. Sam recalled how some police officers physically and verbally abused him when he failed to cooperate during his arrest.

> We [he and his gang members] jumped on one dude one time and we scattered [went into hiding]. That's stupid though. The next day I was in my room when I heard the bell ring; konn, konn. I peeped through my window and saw some cops. Um, they were like three. They kept knocking but I said to myself "Don't open the door". So, I didn't. After some minutes, they kicked my door and entered with their guns pointing to different directions. I was like "What have I done?" And they said "Shut up! You little rat. You know what you have done". Before I could say anything again, they gripped me hard on my shoulder, one pulled my hands behind my back, handcuffed me [tightly] and took me away.

Another participant similarly reported a verbal abuse in his encounter with a police officer. He stated that a derogatory word "nigger" was used in reference to him during his encounter with a police officer. He related: "We were out there [on the street] selling crack when a white male cop tapped my shoulder. I turned and he asked "When will you niggers stop doing this?" I got

pissed off. It's an insult to call me a nigger, right?" (Notorious). Some black people condemn the use of nigger (the n-word) as they understand it as a dysphemistic racial slur. However, it is argued that nigger, like many other potentially offensive terms, may be used with no offense and that its interpretation or meaning should be sought in *utterance* context (Allan, 2016). Considering the person who used the word (nigger) and the utterance context, there are two possible interpretations that could be made from Notorious' castigation of the police officer for a racial slur. First, he probably got offended because the term was used by a white male police officer. It is possible that his interpretation of nigger would have been different if it had been used by a black police officer because some blacks (especially African-Americans) use *nigger* among themselves when expressing camaraderie (Croom 2013; Kennedy, 2000). Second, the participant was probably angry with the policer officer because of the context (time and what they were doing). Here were some young black youth who were violating the law by selling crack cocaine. They knew they were offending. This perhaps explains why he understood the police officer as being offensive. Arguably, the question he was asked (When will you niggers stop doing this?) has a stereotypical connotation as the policer officer appears to say that black youth sell crack.

Concerning police harassment, some respondents pointed out that they were frequently stopped, interrogated and searched by the police. When Chilemba was asked about his experience with police, he stated; "The cops ain't my friends. They were on my neck all the time. They knew I was a bad boy so they stopped me many times and searched my car for drugs or something". The problem of police harassment was confirmed by Daniel who said; "They are out there looking for your trouble. Just guess how many times I was asked damn questions like what are you doing here? Where are you going? That's kinda embarrassing".

There were three respondents whose accounts conflicted with those discussed above. For them, the police was fair and respectful in their interactions. Considering his gang membership at the time, Bembe argued that the police dealt with him fairly.

> Um, my experience with the cops was okay. I will say they were like fair [to him]. Like who I was, I think, yeah, they were kind of fair. You can't sell dope and expect the police to be your friend. They arrested me about three times. You know, I was a trouble-maker. But in each one [arrest], they were like fair. They charge[d] me depending on what they found on me. I hear some cop can put something on you and charge you for it. No, they didn't do that [to him]. Yeah, they're cool.

In addition to fairness, another respondent discussed that police officers were respectful to her. She favourably ranked how the police interacted with her and underlined the reciprocity of respect in police-gang member interaction.

> I'd some problems with the police. But if I am to give them [the police] marks for how they treated me, I will give them seven out of 10. I'm only speaking for myself. I don't know for others. How they treat you depends on how you behave when you're with them. If you respect them, they show you respect too. There was a day the police came to our dope house. And they were like "No one should move. Stay where you are". We obeyed and that was it. No beating, nothing. Yeah, it's like show respect and be respected. (Talia)

Likewise, Lizzy also described police's interaction with her as respectful. She put it this way:

> For sure, I may sound weird. But trust me, the police are not as bad as people think. Some are super-nice. They are not out there to kill gang members. Some of them advised me to quit that [gang] life. They treated me as their younger sister. Really, some are super-nice.

The above respondent seems to debunk the idea that police officers are usually hostile towards gang members. Her revelation shows that police anti-gang strategies may not be often aggressive. It is appears evident in her case that the police adopted a non-aggressive strategy (advice) and that probably contributed to her desistance from her gang. Gang members generally tend to be distrustful of and have bad perceptions about law enforcement because they subject them to intense scrutiny and poor treatments during contacts (Dura'n, 2013; Hunt

& Novich, 2017). Contrary to these claims, the accounts by Bembe, Talia and Lizzy suggest that gang members form good opinions about police officers when they perceive their interactions with them as procedurally fair.

The remaining four subjects offered stories that showed that their experiences with police were mixed. Strikingly, their accounts revealed that police-gang members' interactions could be influenced by gender, personality traits and race. Their stories were marked by statements such as "It depends", "Man, you don't expect the same treatment every time" and "Anything was possible". In her description of her experience with the police, for example, Erica stated; "It depends. Some cops were good to me but others were not". She further expounded why her experiences varied with some police officers.

> I think being a girl was a factor. The cops act like they should. Like the male officers were pretty nice most of the time. They kinda respect you as a lady when searching. They know where and where not to touch. Because of that I could stuff things [keep drugs in her private parts] and get away with it. They are not like the female cops who screw you up. I just didn't like them.

It could be inferred that the participant's experience with police was gendered. The impact of gender on policing patterns has been documented (see Gibbidon, Higgins & Potter, 2011). The literature indicates that gender plays a role in who the police stops, what they ask for and how they behave in face-to-face interactions. Consistent with Erica's narrative, Novich & Hunt's (2017) study found that male gang members were two times likely to be stopped by police compared to their female counterparts. Furthermore, in their qualitative study which involved 253 male and female drug-dealing gang members in San Francisco, Novich, Kringen & Hunt (2018) observed that police officers (who were mostly males) only searched male gang members as the law required them to do only same gender searches. Consequently, their male study participants reported procedural unfairness as they perceived the enforcement of the law to their detriment.

The influence of personality traits and race on police-gang members' interactions was discussed by some participants. For Mike; "It [his experience with the police] was bad and good". When asked why that was the case, he explained:

> Who the cop was matter[ed]. Some are good by nature and others are bad. So, it's about who you meet. I met some who were like "This life won't take you anywhere, so you better quit" and some were also like "I don't give a damn about your fucking behaviour. I will throw you in jail". They threaten[ed] me with jail most of the time. So, it's about who the cop is.

Regarding race, Omar argued that its impact on the interactions between police and gang members is real and complicated.

> People don't wanna talk about racism. But it's out there. Some police [officers] are racist. Man, you don't expect the same treatment every time. Black police [officers] are cool when they are alone. Say they come to arrest you, they treat you like a brother, you know. But when they are with Whites, they are not nice 'cause they wanna prove to them [White colleagues] that they are working hard or something. It's the same with White cops. They try to be nice when you meet them with black cops. But they can be bad if you meet them without black cops. I observed that a couple of times.

Omar's argument was corroborated by Ali who remarked:

> Anything was possible. The black cops I came across were good. It's like brothers' move. No shit, nothing. Though some white cops were like cool as well, most of them hurt. When you make them sweat, they make you sweat too. But a black cop will take it easy. I think race counts for sure.

The above narratives suggest that the influence of race on police-gang member interaction is fluid. Thus, race can have both positive and negative impacts on how police officers interact with gang members. Interestingly, race acts like a double-edged sword. Its influence on police gang member interaction is determined by who the gang member meets and how he or she behaves.

6. 2 Participants' experiences with youth courts

In Canada, criminal cases involving youth are handled by youth courts. Nine participants had cases that brought them before youth courts. Their cases involved theft (mostly shoplifting), drug possession and assault (violence). While two of them had their cases dropped at pre-trial stages for lack of evidence, the remaining seven were tried and convicted by youth courts. Of the seven, four were given custodial sentences while three received non-custodial sentences. Despite differences in participants' offences and the consequent sentences they received, they generally shared their experiences with the youth court system with me. Most of them (n=4) mentioned that the processes they went through as accused persons were tedious. In particular, Sam commented on the time-consuming nature of the youth court processes.

> It's a waste of time. You get a mail that says come to court. You go and they say come back again. You know, time is money. You can do some job and get money. But they just take all your time.

Others also added that securing bail from the youth court was often difficult. For example, when Ali was asked about his experience with the youth court, he responded "They [the courts] won't set you free. They ask you to bring somebody before they give you bail. You bring the person and they say he must have this and that before they let you go". While Ali complained about difficulty in finding a surety, some respondents who were granted bail during their trials argued that their bail conditions were vague and unrelated to their offences.

> It looks like some of the people don't know what they are up to. I was charged for shoplifting at Best Buy. Guess what! The judge gave me a bunch of conditions. He was like, "You should obey the rules in your home, don't enter any Best Buy shop, blah blah blah". To say I shouldn't go to any Best Buy shop was like right. But my offence has nothing to do with obeying rules at home. You understand what I mean? Obeying the rules in my home was kind of broad and that wasn't important. It didn't make sense to me. (Mike).

Relatedly, one respondent stated that the numerous unrelated and vague bail conditions further contributed to their breaches with the law. Chilemba who reported being charged with breaching a bail condition explained:

> The bail rules [conditions] can be many and that put you in a tight corner. You disobey one and trouble for you. They charged me a couple of times and I went to the [Edmonton Young Offenders] centre 'cause I couldn't follow all the rules [conditions].

In line with the experiences of the above participants, empirical studies in the Canadian context have consistently shown that youth accused of crimes are often released to surety (Myers, 2019; Myers & Dhillion, 2013) and on multiple bail conditions (Myers, 2009; Sprott & Myers, 2011, Sprott & Sutherland, 2015). Myer and Dhillion's (2013) study that examined 199 youth bail cases across four courts in the Toronto area reported that 86.7% of the accused youth were released to surety. However, in contravention with Section 515(3) of the Canadian Criminal Code, prosecutions in the cases they examined did not provide justification for imposing release to surety. Also, Sprott and Sutherland´s (2015) study which quantitatively analysed 725 youth court cases to assess the unintended consequences of multiple bail conditions for youth found that on average, each accused youth had 7.6 release conditions. The vagueness of bail conditions reported by participants has been noted by other studies. Myer and Dhillion's (2013) research found that 40.7% of the bail conditions imposed on accused youth in the cases they examined had no apparent connection to the cases.

In addition to challenges with the bail system, some participants (n=3) who were detained prior to their trials argued that their detention was unlawful and subsequently claimed that it might have been racially-motivated. Notorious, for example, elaborated why he thinks his pre-trial detention was unlawful and constituted an infringement on his rights.

> Bro, common on, you should know better. Some of the people there (in the youth court) are racist. But they fear to show it. Can you believe this? I stole someone's phone. They arrested and charged me for stealing. Before they

> send me to court, my parents came to bail me. But they said "no". Why no?
> It's because they fear blacks. They think we do all the shit in the hood. If it's
> not racism, they will give me bail because I wasn't gonna go anywhere. They
> detained me for court.

Given the participant's account and under the law as it presently exists, the police should have released him. However, he was detained for bail hearing. According to Section 515 (10) of the Criminal Code of Canada, a justice of the peace shall detain an accused person:

> (a) Where the detention is necessary to ensure his or her attendance in court… (b) Where the detention is necessary for the protection or safety of the public, including any victim of or witness to the offence, having regard to all the circumstances including any substantial likelihood that the accused will, if released from custody, commit a criminal offence or interfere with the administration of justice, and (c) If the detention is necessary to maintain confidence in the administration of justice.

Also, section 11 of Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms clearly states that "[a]ny person charged with an offence has the right … not to be denied reasonable bail without just cause". Given this legislative context, the minor nature of Notorious' case, the apparent lack of threat he posed to society and the low likelihood that his release would have affected the administration of justice, his denial of bail appears baffling. This probably explains why he attributes his pre-trial detention to racism in the criminal justice system. It must be emphasized that the participant's account is appreciated at its face value. It is possible that a further probe into his criminal records could have indicated why he was treated so. Another participant who was pre-detained before being sentenced to custody for assaulting a rival gang member explained why he thinks the police and youth courts pre-detain some accused black youth.

> They don't give a fuck about you. They think like you're threat so go rot in detention. It's not about your good. It's about their good and other peoples. They clear you from the community so nobody will bother them. (Jeff)

The participant in the quote appears to construe pre-trial detention as a measure of risk aversion and risk management. He generally argues that bail decisions by some criminal justice actors

are sometimes not made based on evidence or merits of the cases brought before them but on their intent to ensure public safety. Additionally, it could be deduced from his claim that pre-trial detention enables some criminal justice actors to prove to the communities they serve that they are working as detaining accused persons stop community members from bothering them.

Regarding sentences that were imposed on participants by youth courts, the majority of them (n=5) stated that their sentences were proportional and had meaningful consequences. Mike shared; "I got into a program for like six months. They teach you like problems with shoplifting and how you can stay away from it. It was helpful". A participant who assaulted another youth indicated; "They asked me to write a long essay, like 2000 words why I won't do it again. I sent apology letter to the guy too. I felt ashamed of myself and said never again" (Lizzy). Mike and Lizzy's accounts imply that they received extra-judicial sentences which had meaningful consequences on the lives. Striker who was sentenced to custody for six months for possessing crack cocaine also emphasised the proportionality of his sentence and offence.

> I did about six months in the centre. I think it's fair because some people do more than six months. I don't know. Maybe, I was lucky. I don't know, I don't know.

Canada's Controlled Drugs and Substances Act (1996) makes provisions for adjudicating cases related to controlled drugs and substances. Section 4(1) of the said Act states that "Except as authorized under the regulations, no person shall possess a substance included in Schedule I, II or III". Also, Section 4(3) (a-bii) prescribe punishment(s) that could be meted out to someone who contravenes subsection (1) quoted above. For example, a person who possesses a substance listed in Schedule I could be found guilty of an indictable offence and sentenced to seven or less years of imprisonment or could be found guilty of an offence punishable by summary conviction and asked to pay a fine, serve a sentence not exceeding six months or do both. Indeed, it could be said that Striker was "lucky". He was charged with possessing crack cocaine, a Schedule I substance. Per his account, he was found guilty of an offence punishable

by summary conviction. Arguably, the justice who sentenced him was considerate or lenient as he was asked to serve six months in custody without a fine.

Contrary to those who perceived their sentences to be meaningful, proportional and helpful, Sam, who served the latter part of his time in his community (under the supervision of a parole officer), argued that "It's nonsense. It's prison in real life. He [the parole officer] is watching you 24/7. So many conditions. I mean, no freedom". Likewise, Talia, who was referred to an anger management program (as her sentence) reported; "I did not get anything out of it. Lots and lots of notes and stuff. I got nothing".

Moreover, a respondent who recounted his court room experience indicated that the environment was intimidating and humiliating.

> Um, for me, for me, being in the box in front of the judge and the crowd was a problem. It's like they make you say what you don't want to say. When I went to court, the cop came in [to the court) with his papers saying you did this, this, this. The judge was like "What do you say to that?" Honestly, the questions were many. And the more like I tried to answer, the more I was humiliated. Man, I won´t want any of friends or siblings to go there. (Daniel)

6.3 Correctional experiences of participants

The four participants who received custodial sentences were asked about their experiences at the youth custody facilities. Specifically, how they perceived their interactions with correctional officers and service provision at youth custody facilities (where they served their sentences) were sought. They reported inadequate service provision, officers' use of force against them and racial segregation. The experiences shared by participants overlapped.

All four participants complained about inadequate service provision in the facilities to which they were sentenced. This manifested in the form inadequate medical care, inadequate feeding and inadequate rehabilitative programs. Commenting on the state of medical care in the facility where he was, Bembe stated; "Nothing works there. Poor health care. If you are

sick and you tell them, it takes days before you see a doctor. Nothing works. I don't know".

For Striker, the amount of food served in his custody facility was inadequate.

> I wasn't eating well. They give you small food for the day. But you know, you need energy to survive. When I got out, I was this thin. I don't think they wanted to starve us to death though.

The inadequacy of rehabilitative programs was also brought to the fore by Sam when he stated:

> Life there is boring, for sure. The idea is, you go there, you learn something and come back as a changed person. There are some programs but you have to be on the list for so long. Like I sign up for one when I got in. But it was like after four months that I was accepted. I didn't finish before leaving. So, I didn't benefit from it.

While inadequate service provision was a common experience to all, two participants further reported that some correctional officers used excessive force against them while in custody. In his evaluation of his interactions with correctional officers, Striker stated "Some officers are not good. I hate them. If they come lock your door and you say you wanna go somewhere for a sec, they push you hard back in". Similarly another participant related an incidence where an officer shoved him back to his room.

> One day, my brother came to visit me. He came in late. So, while we're still chatting, this officer came and he was like "Your time is up". I was like "Give me some minutes" He said "No". He sent my brother out and I was following [him]. So, he started pushing me back to my room. (Bembe)

Striker and Bembe's experiences of officers' use of force against them are not unique. Research has shown that correctional officers often use force against black inmates (Office of Correctional Investigator, 2014). For example, in 2012 and 2013, black inmates were over-represented in the use of force incidents (ibid). Unlike Striker and Bembe, Omar revealed that his experience at a youth custody facility was marked by racial segregation. He narrated:

> You go through a lot and you are like "Man, is it because I'm black?" You realise that you are nothing. Black guys have their rooms and white guys

have theirs. Even if you not cool with your roommate, you can't complain.
Because you are blacks you must be together.

Equally, another participant revealed; "In my facility black kids were treated in a different way. They use the n-word when they're talking about you. Always the hard core officer deals with black kids" (Sam). The experiences of Omar and Sam suggest that race has impact on how the correction system deals with black youth gang members. Their narratives offer support to studies that have reported systemic racism against black people in correctional centres (Gittens & Cole, 1995; Office of Correctional Investigator, 2014). Although the participants implicate race as the reason why they were segregated, recent reports generally suggest that segregation is a worrying practice in young offenders' centres across Alberta. Available statistics indicate that between 2017 and 2018, 333 young offenders were segregated in youth facilities across Alberta. Of the total number, 166 were segregated twice or more times and 18 were placed in solitary confinement 10 or more times (Omstead, 2019).

Finally, some participants complained that they had no autonomy while serving time in custody. It was reported that being in a custody facility; "It´s like being a kid. You have no power. The officers tell you what to do. Go and eat, sleep, they lock your room when it's time. You got no rights" (Striker). This observation was confirmed by Sam who said; "You lose your rights when you go to the centre. You are not on your own. Um, someone is watching you over you. Yeah, you can hide nothing. I mean, there is no privacy."

Overall, this chapter has offered a detailed analysis of participants' experiences with the police, youth courts and corrections. As participants' accounts illuminate, racist language and attitudes plague the environments of some youth correctional facilities. The next chapter provides a conclusion to the study.

Chapter seven: Conclusion and implications of the study

7.1 Conclusion

This study has explored the engagement and disengagement experiences of black ex-youth gang members. Specifically, it sought to understand why some black youth join gangs, why they disengage from gangs and how they interpret their experiences with the Canadian criminal justice system.

Discursive accounts of participants suggest that black youth gang membership results from a reciprocal relationship between individual and structural factors (Wood & Alleyene, 2010). Contrary to research that suggests that some youth are forced or coerced into gangs (Carlie, 2002; Robinson, 2017), my study participants joined gangs out of their own volition. They offered several reasons why they joined gangs. These included adverse experiences they had at home, in school, in their neighbourhoods and the influences of bad peers. Most participants cited dysfunctional families and their associated problems of single-parenting and poverty, poor parent-child relationships and lack of supervision as factors that pushed them into gangs. This finding is important to appreciate as it corroborates dominant discourses that suggest that children from single-parent families (Murray, 1990), poor socio-economic backgrounds (Goldson & Jamieson, 2002), and with weak parental attachments (Young et al, 2014) are more likely to join gangs. Most of the study participants were from immigrant families that faced economic hardships. As one participant highlighted, his father had to work multiple jobs and regularly sleep over at his work place so he could provide for his family. Congruent with participants' familial experiences, research in the Canadian context demonstrates a link between immigrant families' economic challenges and the involvement of immigrant youth in gangs (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Rossiter et al., 2015). Some studies, for example, report that some immigrant families (especially refugees) support youth gang

membership or criminal activity to generate income for repayment of government loans (such as refugee transportation loan) (Ngo et al., 2013; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009).

In addition to economic challenges, cultural conflict, to some extent, played a role in the black youth's engagement in gangs. While in Canada, parent of a participant still held on to and wanted to pass on his cultural norms from his home country to his child. In the participant's attempt to resist what could be described as "cultural imposition" at home, he got into trouble with his parent. Consequently, he left home and associated with bad friends who lured him into a gang. For this youth, gang membership occurred in his struggle for cultural identity.

The study's results further show that participants' communities had influence on their engagement in gangs. Those who had gangs in their neighbourhoods and were repeatedly exposed to gang-violence sought out gang membership as means of protection for themselves and their community. It has also been evident that housing segregation and lack of recreational facilities contributed to the black youth's engagement in gangs.

Education can help youth to transit to adulthood, acquire status and build social networks (Kirk & Sampson, 2013). This is, however, contingent upon the ability of educational institutions to offer safe environments where academic success could be achieved. The study's findings indicate that unsupportive educational systems partly accounted for the black youth's involvement with gangs. Participants faced challenges including inappropriate age-grade placement, language barrier, and poor relationship with teachers. These challenges caused them to drop out of school, lose attachments to a prosocial institution and subsequently join gangs. The experiences of these participants offer support to studies that have observed a link between drop out of school-aged adolescents and their engagement in criminality (Lea & Abrams, 2017; Ngo, 2010; Ngo et al., 2013).

A large body of research has consistently demonstrated that delinquent peers are strong predictors of youth gang involvement (Fast, 2017; Decker, Melde, & Pyrooz, 2013; Howell,

2012; Krohn & Thornberry, 2008). In line with these studies, the present study shows that the influence of deviant peers was a contributory factor to participants' gang involvement. This played out in different ways. On one hand, assurance from gang-involved peers that their gangs would offer protection and material wealth was keen in attracting some of the black youth into gangs. On the other hand, the fear of rejection by friends led some participants to the world of gangs.

Besides the social structural risk factors, participants also construed gang involvement as an avenue for having fun, and acquiring money, respect, status and friendship (Wortley & Tanner, 2006; Peterson, 2012). However, the quest for money was by far the most frequently cited individual motivation for gang membership. Participants perceived gangs as viable contexts for acquisition of economic wealth. Given the fact that most of the participants were from families with low socio-economic statuses, it is understandable that they were attracted by gangs' promise of social and economic wealth. Participants' subjective reasons for gang involvement, when examined together, suggest that some black youth seek out gang membership as a means to address survival, social, safety and esteem needs (Maslow, 1943). Overall, it could be said that decisions by some black youth to join gangs do not originate from within their private spaces alone but are shaped by their social, cultural and economic contexts.

There are several ways through which prospective gang members may enter into gangs. The study's findings show that while some prospective black youth gang members go through initiations, others are accepted into gangs without any initiations. Gangs determine what prospective members do to become members. Many of the participants were "beaten or jumped in" into their gangs. This is the most common form of initiation documented by studies that have reported gang initiation (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Descormiers & Corrado, 2016; Huff, 1998; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Miller & Brunson, 2000; Spergel, 1995; Vigil, 1988). Other participants also went on missions as a way of entering into their gangs. For those who

joined gangs through this way, the process ushered them into criminality. Participants who had criminal social capital (such as reputation for violence or relations in gangs) were blessed-in into gangs. Their initiations involved mere introduction and acceptance.

The study has shown that black youth gang members mostly engage in different forms activities—non-criminal and criminal. Street-level drug sales constituted a means through which participants made money for their gangs and basic needs. Although the study did not delve into the organisational structures of participants' gangs, it appears street-level drug dealings among black youth gang members tend to be well-organised as individual members are assigned roles such as drug carriers, gun holders and lookers by gang leaders. Support for this finding is found in Sánchez-Jankowski's (1991) assertion that gangs may be rational organisations with formal leadership structures, roles, codes of conduct and specific duties. Although every youth gang member may be a potential street-level drug seller, the study finds that "it's not everybody who sells" (Talia). Gang members ought to demonstrate that they are trustworthy before their gangs allow them to participate in street-level drug dealings. The money earned from drug sales is used for short-term concerns such as reinvesting in drugs and catering for other unforeseen contingencies. In addition to drug sales, the study's results show that black youth gang members engage in theft. They take into account what, why and from where to steal. As evident, black youth gang members tend to steal products that they are able to sell quickly and their activities are mostly carried out outside their communities and neighbourhoods where they can easily evade arrest by law enforcement.

Congruent with other studies (Brantingham et al., 2012; Tita, Cohen & Enberg, 2005; Newman, 1972; Valasik & Tita, 2018), the study finds that black youth gang members tend to have 'defensible spaces' or 'zones of influence' (Adamson, 2000) where they carry out social and economic activities, and that an invasion of a gang in another's space may trigger conflict. For black youth gang members, defending a claimed space is thought of as a process of

asserting dominance, controlling resources, and reifying power relationships (Peterson & Panfil, 2014; Valasik & Tita, 2018). In the context of this wisdom, it was anticipated that two or more gangs would not exist and operate in the same space. However, it has been evident that neighbourhood affiliation provides a master status that facilities good interaction among gangs in the same space.

The study's results indicate that black youth gang involvement tends to be temporary and mostly lasts for a year. Participants' understanding of desistance generally suggests that it is a *process* by which gang members de-identify with their gangs and disengage from its criminal activities. Despite this common understanding, there were variations in how they navigated the process of desistance. For most participants de-identification with gangs and disengagement from criminality occurred concurrently. However, for others, the two processes occurred at different times.

There are several factors that accounted for participants' disengagement from gangs. Consistent with general patterns for gang desistance (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011; Carson, Peterson & Esbensen, 2013), most of the participants desisted from gangs because of actual or threat of violence to self, family members or gang members. Other internal factors such as disillusionment with gang life and fear of incarceration also pushed some participants out of gangs. In addition, police harassment, committed relationships, advice from influential adults and religious awakening helped pull some participants from gangs. The risks factors for gang involvement and desistance among black youth are asymmetrical (Uggen & Paliavin, 1998), rarely linear or unidirectional and occur in response to a given situation (Maruna, 2001). That is, the forces that propel some black youth to join gangs are different from their motivations for leaving gangs.

An important finding is that black youth gang members' motivations for desistance appear gendered. While most of the male participants desisted from gangs due to violence,

most female participants reported committed relationships as reasons why they left gangs. For most participants, gang desistance began with triggering events such as violence and expressions of fear and disillusionment (Berger et al., 2017). Following these events, they assessed their circumstances, explored alternative lifestyles, and eventually left their gangs. Gang desistance requires commitment on the part of the prospective desister (Dunbar, 2018). My analysis shows that participants played active roles in their desistance processes suggesting that in the gang context, gang members exercise agency in their leave decisions.

Gang desistance may occur either abruptly or gradually (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). As the study's findings demonstrate, most participants desisted abruptly or "knifed off" (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002). The abrupt changes involved physically leaving the neighbourhood and/or relocating to another city. The change of environment helped the ex-gang members to avoid relapse and post-exit attacks. Only one participant "went on a final mission". Leaving a gang may entail some degree of ceremony. However, participants' narratives suggest that exit rituals or ceremonies seem not to be a norm for black youth gang members. The majority of them desisted without any ceremony. The study shows that the likelihood of desistance among black youth gang members is often conditional on factors such as the motivation for leaving and one's position in the gang. For example, while peripheral black youth gang members are more likely to desist, the reverse holds for deeply embedded members. Desisting from a gang may come with some challenges. Participants' accounts indicate that black youth gang members who desist experience emotional stress, post-exit labelling and police harassment, and threats from rival gang members.

Findings presented in chapter six show that black youth gang members regularly come into contact and have different experiences with the criminal justice system. Although the explanation for youth gang members' routine involvement with the criminal justice system is complicated, the present study shows that black youth's participation in gangs increases their

criminality, visibility and frequent contact with law enforcement. Public authorities including criminal justice actors are obliged to be procedurally just or fair in dealing with their subjects (Tyler, 2006). Perceptions that individuals form about authorities depend on how they are treated by the authorities (Novich & Hunt, 2017). The black ex-youth gang members formed their perceptions about police based on how they behaved during their engagements. The majority of them characterised their experiences with police as abysmal as they were physically and verbally abused, harassed and disrespected by police officers. These abuses included choking, shoving, gripping and use of the n-word in reference to black youth gang members. Generally, participants seemed to dislike the police. This was explicitly expressed in statements such as "I just didn't like them" (Erica) and "The police sucks" (Don). Participants' perceptions of the police are not surprising because gang members usually commit crimes that the police are sworn to detect and prevent (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). In addition, their encounters with the police mostly did not produce desired outcomes. For participants, the context of their arrest, stop and search were primary differentiating components that shaped their perceptions about the police. Given the observation that police often treat gang members poorly during points of contact (Dura´n, 2008; Katz & Webb, 2006), one of the unexpected findings of this study was that some participants reported good experiences with the police. These participants highlighted that the police offered them advice to quit gangs and rightly charged them with offences for which they were arrested.

The study reveals that police-black youth gang members' interactions are influenced by gender, race and personality. Male police officers seem to treat female black youth gang members differently. As one participant shared, "they know where and where not to touch" during searches. Consequently, female black youth gang members appear to have good perceptions about police officers. The reverse hold for female police officers who thoroughly search female black youth gang members. Mostly, black police officers treat black youth gang

members fairly in their encounters when working alone (without white officers). However, they end up abusing black youth gang members when they attempt to demonstrate fairness in the presence of colleague white officers. Also, White police officers deal fairly with black youth gang members when working with colleague black officers. The reverse becomes the case when all-white police officers encounter a black youth gang member. Clearly, police officers' fear of being stereotyped as racist (by colleagues) shapes their interactions with gang members (Kahn & Martin, 2016). This is suggestive of the fact that some racial biases exist in the criminal justice system. Black youth gang members' racial identity protects them from and increases their vulnerabilities to police abuse. Although study participants were former black youth gang members, it appears their experiences are reminiscent of black people's experiences with police in Canada. For example, police officers frequently stop, question, search and use force against black people (Wortley, 2006; Wortley & Akwasi Owusu-Bempah, 2011).

The study shows that the criminal activities of black youth gang members lead to their contacts with youth courts where they often released to surety and on multiple vague bail conditions. While the imposition of multiple bail conditions is intended to increase the likelihood of court attendance and reduce the likelihood of reoffending (Myers & Dhillon, 2013), the study reveals that numerous bail conditions lead to black youth gang members' further involvement with the criminal justice system. Participants' accounts demonstrate that some black youth gang members are unlawfully detained prior to trial due to racial biases in the criminal justice system. Despite their perceived racialized treatments, most participants underscored the leniency of youth court judges, and the proportionality and meaningful consequences that their sentences had on them. A few others, however, argued the irrelevance and overly restrictive nature of their sentences.

There have been reports on challenges confronting youth correctional facilities in Canada (Crawford, 2017; Office of the Correctional Investigator & Ontario Office of the Provincial

Advocate for Children and Youth, 2017). In keeping with these reports, participants cited inadequate access to medical care, rehabilitative programs and food as key challenges in some youth custody facilities. Furthermore, participants' have echoed the observations that the use of force and racist language against black inmates continue to plague the environments of some youth correctional facilities in Canada (Commission on Systemic Racism in Ontario Criminal Justice System, 1994).

7.2 Implications of the findings for theory, practice and policy

Theoretically, the study's findings extend the utility of the criminological theories I employed. For example, support for differential association theory can be drawn from the finding that some participants were introduced to gangs through association with gang-involved peers (Sutherland, 1949). In addition, the finding that most participants were from poor socio-economic or disadvantaged backgrounds and joined gangs to acquire money, respect, status and protection is consistent with strain theory of crime causation (Merton, 1968; Agnew, 2001, 2006). Furthermore, the findings that some participants joined gangs because of weak parental attachments and cultural conflict at home buttress the propositions of social control and cultural conflict theories respectively (Hirshi, 1969; Sellin, 1938). Moreover, the finding that race impacts black youth gang members' experiences with the criminal justice system supports critical race theorists' contention that the criminal justice system is not colour-blind (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

In terms of practice, the study's results highlight areas that need to be focused on in preventing at-risk youth from joining gangs, assisting gang-involved youth to desist from gangs, and improving youth gang members' experiences with the criminal justice system. Given the reasons for the black youth's involvement with and desistance from gangs, and their experiences with the criminal justice system, the study makes the following recommendations:

Provision of family-focused support

Family risk factors played key roles in participants' gang involvement. In particular, familial economic struggles and its concomitant problem of weak parent-children attachments, divorce and cultural conflict led the black youth to gangs. Addressing these issues may be one of the effective ways of preventing at-risk youth from gang involvement. This could be done by providing opportunities (for example, supplemental income) for families to spend ample time together, mediating family conflicts, teaching parents about appropriate and effective disciplinary measures, educating parents of at-risk youth on family management and offering informal support to at-risk youth through mentoring and recreational activities (Young & Gonzalez, 2013). These support will help at risk-youth to develop strong attachment to pro-social others and prevent or reduce gang involvement (Ngo, 2010). Provision of these family-focused support must be evidence-based, context-sensitive/specific and acceptable to recipient families (Shute, 2013).

School-based support

Given the findings that some study participants became gang-involved due to adverse experiences at school, there is the need for school-based support programs that focus on responsive academic programming, appropriate age-grade placement, and building strong relationships between teachers and students from black and immigrant backgrounds. For example, specific school-based transitional programs such as English as a second language (ESL) should be organised for newcomer immigrant youth prior to entering the Canadian educational system. Teachers must understand the second language acquisition process of youth from immigrant families and deal with it appropriately. There should also be opportunities to promote good social interactions between teachers and students from minority racial backgrounds. Rossister and Rossister (2009), for example, suggest that teachers, as well

as other school staff receive training in intercultural competence so they can positively interact with and address challenges of students from diverse racial backgrounds. Hiring more diverse pool of teachers would also help. These can help prevent or reduce school drop-out among immigrant and/or minority racial youth and their subsequent involvement with gangs.

Community-based support

There should be integrated network of community systems to prevent at-risk youth from joining gangs. These networks should include community youth service agencies and anti-gang advocacy groups who would educate youth on the dangers of being gang-involved. Relevant information about these services should be made available and accessible to the youth as well as their families. Also, there is the need for service providers to build better relationships with ethno-cultural communities who may be potential beneficiaries of their services. Furthermore, research has shown that recreational activities such as sports have positive effects on youth trying to join or leave gangs as it provides outlet for aggression (Sharkey et al., 2015) and avenue for social recognition (Cowan & Taylor, 2016). To save youth who join gangs because of boredom, community-based gang prevention and intervention strategies should provide recreational opportunities for youth who are at risk of joining gangs or already involved with gangs.

Timely intervention programs

Research has underscored the potential for positive transformation among criminally involved individuals following traumatic experiences (Vicchio, 2013; Turanovic & Pratt, 2014; Lasky, Fisher & Swan, 2018). It has also been evident in this study that most black youth gang members desist following traumatic experiences. Following from these insights, I believe the period right after violent victimizations is critical for black youth gang intervention as it presents victimised gang members with opportunities to re-evaluate themselves and explore alternative life options. Timely intervention programs should therefore be organised for gang-

involved youth who become victimised or traumatized. These intervention programs should preferably use ex-gang members who have successfully passed through similar experiences and understand the mentality of gang-involved individuals. Places of target should include hospitals and jails. These programs could help facilitate post-traumatic growth and (re)connect victimised youth gang members to pro-social others (Tedeschi & McNally, 2011).

Promotion of procedurally just behaviours among criminal justice actors

In Canada, there are policies and legislations that ensure that criminal justice actors act in procedurally just ways. Apparently, encounters between black youth gang members and the criminal justice actors mostly do not produce desired outcomes. Youth gang members, however, appreciate being treated with respect and dignity regardless of the *context* of their interactions with criminal justice actors. As such, there is the need to incorporate practices that employ the principles of procedural justice in the criminal justice system. For example, police officers should be constantly reminded of the need to treat all persons with respect and dignity by avoiding all forms of abuse. In addition, segregation practices in youth correctional facilities should be reviewed, training for correctional officers should be improved, and there should be systems in place that would receive complaints from minority or racialized youth in custody and address them impartially.

Policy-wise, the study's findings have some implications. Although there are national and provincial policies that focus on the resettlement and integration of immigrant families in all spheres (see for example, Government-Assisted Refugee Program), participants' narratives suggest that these policies have not yielded the expected results as some youth from immigrant backgrounds still go through several challenges. This suggests the need for review, revision and update of existing national and provincial policies on resettlement and integration of immigrant families into the Canadian society. In this regard, federal and provincial governments should revise their integration policies to offer support (such as free access to

recreational programs) to low-income immigrant families and strengthen educational policies that promote quality learning for students with ESL needs, cultural diversity and inclusive school cultures. Existing literature shows that stakeholders of the criminal justice system have implemented some measures to address discrimination and segregation against people from minority backgrounds (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2014). However, the finding that some participants experienced racial segregation in youth facilities calls for the need to continuously reinforce and train frontline actors of the criminal justice system to deal appropriately with people from minority or racial backgrounds. Moreover, the study's findings suggest the need for improvement in health care and rehabilitative programs in youth correction facilities.

7.4 Implications of the findings for future research

This study has explored why some black youth join gangs. However, there are many black youth who do not or would never join gangs. To be the best of my knowledge, there is paucity of empirical studies on this population. Future research should therefore focus on this population so that factors that render them resilient to gang-involvement could be uncovered. Counter-narratives from such studies could be used in youth gang prevention and intervention programs.

The literature review in chapter two has also shown that black youth gangs exist across Canada. However, given the fact that gang members' experiences are shaped by *context* (White, 2008), the experiences of participants in this study cannot be assumed to be the same as black ex-youth gang members elsewhere (in other provinces). Therefore, there is the need for a national study that will explore the experiences of current and former black youth gang members and provide a nuanced understanding of the black youth gang phenomenon and how it could be addressed.

Finally, the results of this study raise concerns about how black youth gang members are policed in Canada. Given the finding that most study participants had poor experiences with police, future research needs to delve into how black youth gangs are policed and what can be done to improve police-black youth gang members' interactions in Canada. Results from these suggested studies would provide a holistic understanding of the engagement and disengagement experiences of black youth gang members and proffer solutions for the black youth gang problem.

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Criminal Code, RSC 1985, c C46.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Consent form for participants who are 16 years and above

PROJECT SUMMARY AND CONSENT FORM

Project title: Exploring the experiences of black ex-youth gang members in Edmonton.

Study ID: Pro00076250

Researcher: Anthony Mpiani, Graduate Student, University of Alberta

Telephone: 587-974-0244 Email: mpiani@ualberta.ca

Instructor: Dr. Temitope B. Oriola, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology

Telephone: 780-492-0476 Email: oriola@ualberta.ca

Introduction: It is important for you to understand why this study is being conducted and what it will involve before you decide to participate in it. Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. You can contact me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Project summary: Youth are often considered as an asset to society. However, not all youth become what society expects them to be. Research indicates that a number of youth across the globe have been or are involved with gangs. Studies and surveys have shown that youth gangs exist in Canada. While most of these studies and surveys provide valuable insights into the types of youth gangs, their activities and impacts on individuals and the Canadian society, a few have examined the following question: (1) why do some black youth join gangs? (2) Why do they leave their gangs? (3) What are black youth gang members' experiences with the Canadian criminal justice system? This study investigates these questions. In so doing, it aims

to promote a better understanding of the engagement and disengagement experiences of black youth gang members.

Purpose: This study is being carried out in fulfilment of the thesis requirement for the award of Master of Arts (MA) in Sociology at University of Alberta.

Interview procedure: You are invited to participate in this study because you are black and have been involved with gangs. If you decide to participate, I will interview you for approximately 45 to 60 minutes. During the interview, you have the right not to answer any question(s) you are uncomfortable with. The entire interview will be recorded (upon your approval) and later transcribed for analysis in writing the final report.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in the study is strictly voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your participation at anytime without a penalty. You can also ask for withdrawal of any data collected from you. However, you have two weeks after the interview to withdraw your interview data.

Benefits: There are no financial benefits for you as a participant in this study. However, you will receive travel reimbursement of CAD 20.

Risks: The topic I will be interviewing you on may be sensitive. It is thus possible some questions may arouse your emotions or trigger memories of some bad experiences you may have had with criminal justice actors during the interview. In such instance(s), I will stop the interview and give you additional time if needed. If you need additional assistance, I will refer you to a counselling resource.

Confidentiality: Participation is strictly confidential. You will not be identified by your name in the final report of the study. I will give you a pseudonym to ensure you are not identified with any information you provide. Your anonymity will be maintained throughout the study and thereafter. The only exception to this promise of confidentiality is that I am legally obligated to report evidence of child abuse or neglect. You may request for a copy of the

transcribed data to review your responses. All the information you will provide will be kept confidential unless required by law.

Further information: If you have any further questions concerning this study, kindly contact me at (587) 974-0244 or my supervisor at (780) 492-0476. The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Consent statement

The purpose of the study has been thoroughly explained to me and I have received a copy of the consent form. I understand that any information obtained from me for this study will be confidentially and anonymously kept. I understand that participation is voluntary. I agree to participate in this study.

_____   _____   _____

Participant's name   Signature   Date

_____   _____   _____

Researcher's name   Signature   Date

Appendix 2: Assent form for participants below 16 years

PROJECT SUMMARY AND ASSENT FORM

Project title: Exploring the experiences of black ex-youth gang members in Edmonton.

Study ID: Pro00076250

Researcher: Anthony Mpiani, Graduate Student, University of Alberta

Telephone: 587-974-0244   Email: mpiani@ualberta.ca

Instructor: Dr. Temitope B. Oriola, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology

Telephone: 780-492-0476   Email: oriola@ualberta.ca

Introduction: It is important for you to understand why this study is being conducted and what it will involve before you decide to participate in it. Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. You can contact me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Project summary: Youth are often considered as an asset to society. However, not all youth become what society expects them to be. Research indicates that a number of youth across the globe have been/are involved in gangs. Studies and surveys have shown that youth gangs exist in Canada. While most of these studies and surveys provide valuable insights into the types of youth gangs, their activities and impacts on individuals and the Canadian society, a few have examined the following question: (1) why do some black youth join gangs? (2) Why do they leave their gangs? (3) What are black youth gang members' experiences with the Canadian criminal justice system? This study investigates these questions. In so doing, it aims to promote a better understanding of the engagement and disengagement experiences of black youth gang members.

Purpose: This study is being carried out in fulfilment of the thesis requirement for the award of Master of Arts (MA) in Sociology at University of Alberta.

Interview procedure: You are invited to participate in this study because you are black and have been involved with gangs. If you decide to participate, I will interview you for approximately 45 to 60 minutes. During the interview, you have the right not to answer any question(s) you are uncomfortable with. The entire interview will be recorded and later transcribed for analysis in writing the final report.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in the study is strictly voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your participation at anytime without a penalty. You can also ask for withdrawal of any data collected from you. However, you have two weeks after the interview to withdraw your interview data.

Benefits: There are no financial benefits for you as a participant in this study. However, you will receive travel reimbursement of CAD 20.

Risks: The topic I will be interviewing you on may be sensitive. It is thus possible some questions may arouse your emotions or trigger memories of some bad experiences you may have had with criminal justice actors during the interview. In such instance(s), I will stop the interview and give you additional time if needed. If you need additional assistance, I will refer you to a counselling resource.

Confidentiality: Participation is strictly confidential. You will not be identified by your name in the final report of the study. I will give you a pseudonym (such as respondent 1) to ensure you are not identified with any information you provide. Your anonymity will be maintained throughout the study and thereafter. The only exception to this promise of confidentiality is that I am legally obligated to report evidence of child abuse or neglect. You may request for a copy of the transcribed data to review your responses. All the information you will provide will be kept confidential unless required by law.

Further information: If you have any further questions concerning this study, kindly contact me at (587) 974-0244 or my supervisor at (780) 492-0476. The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Assent statement

I have carefully read and fully understood what I will be doing in this study. Also, I have talked to my parents/legal guardian about the study and I agree to participate in it.

_____   _____   _____

Participant's name   Signature   Date

_____   _____   _____

Researcher's name   Signature   Date

PARENTAL/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM

Project title: Exploring the experiences of black ex-youth gang members in Edmonton.

Study ID: Pro00076250

Researcher: Anthony Mpiani, Graduate Student, University of Alberta

Telephone: 587-974-0244   Email: mpiani@ualberta.ca

Instructor: Dr. Temitope Oriola, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology

Telephone: 780-492-0476   Email: oriola@ualberta.ca

Introduction and study objective: I am conducting a study which explores the experiences of black youth who have been gang-involved. The objective of the study is to promote a better understanding of the engagement and disengagement experiences of black ex-youth gang members. Specifically, the study investigates the following research questions: (1) why do some black youth join gangs? (2) Why do they leave their gangs? (3) What are former black youth gang members' experiences with the Canadian criminal justice system?

Your son/daughter has expressed interest to participate in the study. If you give me permission, I will contact him/her and invite him/her for an interview. I will arrange a time and place with him/her for an interview. The interview will last for 45-60 minutes.

Benefits: There are no financial benefits for him/her as a participant in the study. However, he/she will receive travel reimbursement of CAD 20.

Risks: The topic I will be interviewing him/her on may be sensitive. It is thus possible some questions may arouse his/her emotions or trigger memories of bad experience(s) he/she may have had with criminal justice actors during the interview. In such instance(s), I will stop the

interview and give him/her additional time if needed. If he/she needs additional assistance, I will refer him/her to a counselling resource.

Confidentiality: Participation is strictly confidential. He/she will not be identified by his/her name in the final report of the study. I will give him/her a pseudonym (such as respondent 1) to ensure he/she is not identified with any information he/she provides. His/her anonymity will be maintained throughout the study and thereafter. The only exception to this promise of confidentiality is that I am legally obligated to report evidence of child abuse or neglect. He/she may request for a copy of the transcribed data to review his/her responses. All the information he/she will provide will be kept confidential unless required by law.

Further information: If you have any further questions concerning this study, kindly contact me at (587) 974-0244 or my supervisor at (780) 492-0476. The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Consent

Do I have your permission to include him/her in the study?

Yes ☐

No ☐

Parent/guardian's name	Signature	Date

Researcher's name	Signature	Date

Appendix 4: Interview guide

Socio-demographic profile.

Q1. Can you briefly tell me about yourself? For example, your age, level of education, nationality, how long you have been in Canada, the age at which you became involved with a gang, how long you were involved with gangs, the age at which you desisted from gangs, etc.

Reasons for joining a gang

Q2. What were your experiences growing up in your family?

Q3. Were you able to share your thoughts and problems with your parents?

Q4. How would you describe your relationship with your parents?

Q5. Did your parents know who you were always with when you were away from home?

Q6. Were any of your family members involved with gangs?

Q7. Would you say that your childhood experiences at home had any impact on your involvement with gangs? If yes, how?

Q8. Let us talk briefly about your community. Where did you grow up?

Q9. How would you describe the community? For example, was it a safe community? Did you have access to resources that you needed? Were there gangs in the community?

Q10. Do you think where you grew up played a role in your gang-involvement?

Q11. Let us look back on your school experiences. Can you share with me some of the experiences you had at school? For example, did you enjoy being in school? Did you have some goals that you wanted to achieve? If yes, what were these goals? Why did you choose them? Did you face any challenges at school? If yes, what were they?

Q12. How would you describe your relationship with your teachers?

Q13. Were you able to share your problems with them?

Q14. Did your teachers assist you in times of trouble?

Q15. Would you say your school contributed, in any way, to your engagement in gangs? If yes, how?

Q16. Did you have any friends then? If yes, how would describe them? Were they good or bad friends? Why? Were any of your friends involved with gangs?

Q17. Did your friend(s) contribute in any way to your involvement with gangs?

Q18. Did you have any personal motivation(s) for joining a gang? If yes, what were these motivations?

Modes of entry into gangs

Q19. Can you tell me about the gang you were involved with? (Eg. its name, your signs, number of gang members, where it was located, etc.).

Q20. How did you become a member of your gang? Did you go through any initiation rites? If yes, can you share with me what you did? Why did you do that?

Gang activities

Q21. What were some of the things you did as a gang? Why did you do them?

Q22. What was the worst thing you did as a gang member?

Q23. How was gang life like?

Exiting gangs: motives, meaning, methods and challenges

Q24. Why did you leave your gang?

Q25. What does leaving a gang mean to you?

Q26. How did you leave your gang?

Q27. Did you face any challenges when you decided to quit your gang? If yes, what were some of these challenges? Were there any challenges after leaving your gang?

Q28. Would go back to join you're a gang again? Why?

Experiences with the criminal justice system

Q29. Did you ever encounter the police in the course of your life as a gang member? If yes, what was the encounter about? How did it happen? What transpired between you and the police?

Q30. How would you describe your experience with the police?

Q31. Generally, how would you describe the relationship between police and youth gang members?

Q32. Did you ever come into contact with a youth court? If yes, what led you the court? What offence were you charged with?

Q33. How would you describe your experience with the court? For example, were you fairly treated by the court? If yes or no, why?

Q34. Were you ever sentenced to a youth facility? If yes, what were your experiences with correctional officers? For example, how were you treated as an offender? Did you have access to the needed resources at the facility where you were?

Q35. How would you describe your experience at the facility?

Closing remarks: Is there anything you would like us to discuss regarding your experiences as former gang member? Thank you for your time.