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What Happens Next? A Grounded Theory Exploration of the Psychological Impact of Leaving the Gang

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WHAT HAPPENS NEXT? A GROUNDED THEORY EXPLORATION OF THE
PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF LEAVING THE GANG

A Dissertation

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the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education
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by
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ABSTRACT

Very little research exists regarding the psychological impacts of gang membership and the mental health needs of gang members. Of the few studies that have been conducted, gang members were found to have increased rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (1.77 odds), current substance abuse (2.58 odds), oppositional defiant disorder, (1.24 odds) and conduct disorder (4.05 odds) (Harris, Elkins, Butler, Shelton, Robles, Kwok, Simpson, Young, Mayhew, Brown, & Sargent, 2013). Violent ruminative thinking, violent victimization and fear of further victimization were also significantly higher in gang members and believed to account for high levels of psychosis and anxiety disorder in gang members (Coid, Ullrich, Keers, Bebbington, DeStavola, Kallis, Yang, Reiss, Jenkins, & Donnelly, 2013). A gap remains in the gang literature for the role of psychology generally, as well as research focusing on the psychological implications of gang membership, and the mental health needs of former gang members. This study will address these gaps and add to the current gang desistance literature by focusing on the psychological process involved with gang desistance using a qualitative approach. The
primary purpose of this grounded theory study is to understand the psychological process an individual experiences when leaving a gang.

11 youth associated with the gang prevention program GRASP, and who identified as former gang members, or in the process of leaving the gang, were interviewed. The study aimed to create a model representing the psychological process a former gang member experiences after deciding to leave the gang and end their gang ties, as well as to better understand the specific mental health impacts for this population. In the resulting model, Negative Impacts on Mental Health falls under the Core Category: Living with Continuous Internal Struggles and Emotional Discord. Youth described various negative impacts on their mental health, including experiencing stress and anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, trauma symptoms, and the impact of grief and loss.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

According to the National Gang Intelligence Center (NGIC), gangs continue to expand, evolve, and threaten the safety of individuals in many communities throughout the United States (NGIC, 2011). Results from the 2012 National Youth Gang Survey indicated there were an estimated 30,700 gangs and 850,000 gang members throughout 3,100 jurisdictions with gang problems (Egley, Howell, & Harris, 2014). The United States Department of Justice (USDJ) defines gangs as follows:

“(1) an association of three or more individuals; (2) whose members collectively identify themselves by adopting a group identity which they use to create an atmosphere of fear or intimidation frequently by employing one or more of the following: a common name, slogan, identifying sign, symbol, tattoo or other physical marking, style or color of clothing, hairstyle, hand sign or graffiti; (3) the association's purpose, in part, is to engage in criminal activity and the association uses violence or intimidation to further its criminal objectives; (4) its members engage in criminal activity, or acts of juvenile delinquency that if committed by an adult would be crimes; (5) with the intent to enhance or preserve the association's power, reputation, or economic resources; (6) the association may also possess some of the following characteristics: (a) the members employ rules for joining and operating within the association; (b) the members meet on a recurring basis; (c) the association provides physical protection of its members from other criminals and gangs; (d) the association seeks to exercise control over a particular location or region, or it may simply defend its perceived interests against rivals; or (e) the association has an identifiable structure. (7) this definition is not intended to include traditional organized crime groups such as La Cosa Nostra, groups that fall within the Department's definition of "international organized crime," drug trafficking organizations or terrorist organizations” (U.S. Department of Justice [USDJ], 2015).

The 2011 National Gang Threat Assessment also uses the following definitions to distinguish different types of gangs: Street, prison, outlaw motorcycle (OMGs), one Percenter OMGs, and neighborhood/local (See Table 1, Appendix B). The 2013 National
Gang report indicated that the gang composition in the United States consists of approximately 88 percent street gang members, 9.5 percent prison gang members, and 2.5 percent outlaw motorcycle gang (OMG) members (NGIC, 2013).

**Gang Trends in the U.S.**

According to the 2011 National Gang Threat Assessment and key findings from the 2013 National Gang Report, gangs are becoming more powerful and influential in large-scale drug trafficking, with gang members being recruited from suburban and rural communities. Drug trafficking was identified as the most common criminal activity of gangs. Street-level drug distribution and trafficking serve as a primary source of income for gangs, with supplementary funds coming from crimes that are viewed as less risky, such as prostitution, tax fraud, counterfeiting, and extortion (NGIC, 2011; 2013). While street gang members are active in drug sales, it has also been noted in the gang research that few street gangs control drug distribution operations (Howell & Griffiths, 2016).

Local neighborhood, hybrid, and female gang membership is also on the rise. Gang alliances, collaboration, and improved communication methods have allowed national-level gangs to expand within the U.S. and extend to other countries. Gang members are also becoming more sophisticated in their structure and operations, in order to evade law enforcement (e.g. no longer displaying gang related colors, tattoos, or hang signs). Additionally, gangs are engaging in more complex criminal schemes, such as white-collar and cyber crime, and targeting and monitoring law enforcement (NGIC, 2011). While gangs continue to commit white collar-type crimes such as identity theft and credit card fraud, they continue to commit violent crimes including assaults, robberies, threats and intimidation more frequently (NGIC, 2013).
Gang members are also extremely influential within various organizations. They exploit corrections facilities, military installations, government bodies, and law enforcement agencies to perpetuate criminal activities. Gangs also use technology in order to communicate covertly and conduct criminal operations, such as locating and establishing targets; to intimidate rivals; to facilitate criminal activity; enhance criminal operations; and monitor law enforcement, with minimal risk of detection. Examples of popular social media/networking sites gangs use include: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. Voice-over-Internet Protocol (VoIP) technology has been used, in addition to gangs exploiting online gaming systems such as Xbox and PlayStation (NGIC, 2013).

Gang presence in U.S. schools is another major area of concern, seeing as street gangs have been linked to crime in elementary, secondary, and high schools, and on select college campuses. Schools provide easy access for recruitment and many public schools are widespread with gang activity such as assaults, robberies, threats and intimidation, drug distribution, and weapons offenses. While some gang members have moved toward colleges to escape gang life and to join college athletic programs, this has also been indicated as a concern when some gang members go to acquire advanced skill sets for their gang (NGIC, 2013).

With the general increase in gangs also comes the increase in all-female gangs, as well as female participation, and full-fledged memberships within male-dominant gangs. Female gang members have often supported male gang members, serving as mules for drugs, couriers for weapons, and gathering intelligence for the gang, although, many have taken more active roles by serving as soldiers or co-conspirators. Additionally, female
gang members in some jurisdictions are also forming their own gang sets and committing violent crimes comparable to their male counterparts (NGIC, 2013).

**Gang Research**

Gang research has focused primarily on the early stages of gang membership, including the reasons for joining a gang, risk and protective factors; as well as the relationships between gang membership, delinquency, drug use, and violence. Melde, Diem, & Drake (2012) revealed factors that are associated with stable gang membership, including: joining gangs for protection, increased victimization after initial gang involvement, and greater involvement in violent delinquency. Joining gangs has also been acknowledged as a stepping-stone in a longer pathway of delinquency involvement, starting in childhood to adolescence and into adulthood (Howell & Griffiths, 2016; Loeber et al. 1999).

A study on delinquent youth (Stouthamer-Loeber, Wei, Eg, & Masten, 2004) indicated the following protective factors were associated with desistance from serious delinquency: low physical punishment by parents in early adolescence and being employed or in school in early adulthood. Risk factors during early adulthood included: serious delinquency during late adolescence, hard drug use, gang membership, and positive perception of problem behavior in early adulthood. A study on Norwegian adolescents has also linked antisocial behavior with gang members - before, between and after periods of gang membership (Bendixen, Endresen, & Olweus, 2006).

The process of gang desistance, conceptualized by Pyrooz & Decker (2011) “as the declining probability of gang membership—the reduction from peak to trivial levels of gang membership” (p.419), has been focused on much less in the literature. While
some researchers have identified ways of leaving a gang: you “age out, die, go to prison, get a job or join another organization” (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991, p. 61; Bovenkerk, 2011, p. 268), there are still occasional contradictions to some of these finding. The Melde et al. (2012) study indicated that youth who join a gang at older ages also report staying in gangs longer than average. Having joined a gang to make money, however, was significantly related with desisting from gang involvement within one year.

A recent study by Pyrooz & Decker (2011) attempted to develop a typology to understand the relationship between gang ties, gang membership, and involvement in crime, as these are viewed as important variables in understanding the gang desistance process. Leaving the gang was characterized as a gradual process, in which an individual leaves their gang, but retains a diminishing number and diminished intensity of ties to members of the former gang. The authors highlight that even once an individual has left their gang, criminal involvement may not cease. Therefore, involvement in crime, particularly crimes committed with members of the former gang, are expected to wane over time. A scarcity of research was indicated for various groups: terrorists, cult members, hate group members, criminal offenders, or gang members. Additionally, recommendations for future research included both qualitative and quantitative methods that examines the desistance process and the “post-gang” lives of individuals.

**Mental Health Issues**

Despite the abundance of work that relates gang membership to delinquency, drug use, victimization, and violence, very little research exists regarding the psychological impacts of gang membership and the mental health needs of gang members. The
following section provides an overview of some of the more recent studies that have been conducted on this topic.

Using data from 349 urban African American youth, Li, Stanton, Pack, Harris, Cottrell, & Burns (2002) found that youth with current or past gang membership had higher levels of risk involvement, lower levels of resilience, higher exposure to violence, and higher distress symptoms. Gang membership alone may also be associated with increased risk exposure and negative effects on psychological well-being. Strong family involvement and resiliency were protective against gang involvement. Support mechanisms for leaving a gang included police protection or safe houses. Another study found that youth gang members were found to have increased rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (1.77 odds), current substance abuse (2.58 odds), oppositional defiant disorder, (1.24 odds) and conduct disorder (4.05 odds) (Harris et. al., 2013).

A larger study conducted in Britain examined three groups: gang members, violent men, and non-violent men. Both violent men and gang members were found to be younger than non-violent men, more likely to have been born in the UK and more likely to be unemployed. In terms of mental health, gang members and violent men were significantly more likely to suffer from a mental disorder and access psychiatric services than non-violent men. The exception was depression, which was significantly less common among gang members and violent men. Violent ruminative thinking, violent victimization and fear of further victimization were significantly higher in gang members and believed to account for high levels of psychosis and anxiety disorder in gang members. The findings showed that, of the 108 gang members surveyed: 85.8% had an antisocial personality disorder; Two-thirds were alcohol dependent; 25.1% screened
positive for psychosis; More than half (57.4%) were drug dependent; Around a third (34.2%) had attempted suicide; and More than half (58.9%) had an anxiety disorder (Coid, Ullrich, Keers, Bebbington, DeStavola, Kallis, Yang, Reiss, Jenkins, & Donnelly, 2013).

More recently, longitudinal data has emerged from the Seattle Social Development Project on the consequences of adolescent gang membership for adult functioning. The effects of adolescent gang membership on illegal behavior, educational and occupational attainment, and physical and mental health were assessed at the ages of 27, 30, and 33 years. Results showed that in comparison with their non-gang peers, those who had joined a gang in adolescence had poorer outcomes in multiple areas of adult functioning, including higher rates of self-reported crime, receipt of illegal income, incarceration, drug abuse or dependence, poor general health, and welfare receipt and lower rates of high school graduation. The authors noted that the finding that adolescent gang membership has significant consequences in adulthood beyond criminal behavior indicates the public health importance of the development of effective gang prevention programs (Gilman, Hill, & Hawkins, 2014).

It is clear that the mental health needs of gang members and the psychological impact of youth gang membership in adulthood are areas of much needed attention moving forward. Gang members are likely to be impacted by psychological problems, particularly substance abuse and trauma, including violent victimization. Potential protective factors, such as resiliency and post-traumatic growth, have yet to be explored in the research. A gap remains in the gang literature for the role of psychology generally,
as well as research focusing on the psychological implications of gang membership, and
the mental health needs of former gang members.

**Purpose of the Study**

While the research has addressed some of the reasons for joining and leaving a
gang, the process of how desistance occurs remains unclear. A variety of theories have
been developed for gang membership; however, researchers studying the gang desistance
process have primarily relied on the life-course theory of crime and applied this to gangs.
The life-course theory is a developmental theory. A *developmental pathway*:

“refers to patterned sequences of behaviors, such as patterns of delinquency from
less serious problem behaviors to more serious offenses, or from minor
delinquency to gang involvement, and in turn serious property and violent crimes”
(Howell & Griffiths, 2016, p. 93).

*Trajectories* refer to “larger classes or groups of individuals who differ in a behavioral
trait or crime pattern over time, such as early vs. late onset of delinquency” (Howell &
Griffiths, 2016, p. 93).

Developmental pathways focus on the relationship between age and delinquency,
also known as the age-crime curve. The percentage of youth involved in delinquency
increases from late childhood (ages 7-12) to middle adolescence (ages 13-16) where it
peaks, and then decreases from late adolescence (ages 17-19) into early adulthood (ages
that offending peaks in the late teens, and declines precipitously thereafter. This lays the
groundwork for the desistance argument generally” (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011, p. 418).

“The life-course approach typically examines three distinct periods relative to
involvement in crime: onset, continuity, and desistance. To analyze this process, “gang”
can be substituted for the typical life-course variable “crime” and these three stages can
be examined analogously” (Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2014, p. 492). Therefore, the process of gang membership itself can be thought of as a trajectory. While there are some exceptions, gang members also often join in late childhood, become more active in middle adolescence, and generally desist from gang activity in late adolescence (Howell & Griffiths, 2016).

As Laub & Sampson (2003) have pointed out: “human agency must be recognized as an important element of understanding crime and deviance over the life course” (p. 38). In order to better understand desistance from crime and groups, Pyrooz & Decker (2011) indicate it is also important to identify “the dynamic and variable factors that facilitate reductions in offending,” including “factors that describe desistance from crime, such as age-graded informal social control, cognitive transformation, identity reformulation, and role sets” (p. 418). *Age-graded informal social control* focuses on an individual’s bond to society, such as to family, peers, schools, and institutions (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Howell & Griffiths, 2016). Sampson & Laub (2005) argue that gang interventions can be most effective by making these relationships stronger in an effort to increase social capital.

Gang desistance research has focused primarily on the motivation and methods for leaving the gang, with a more recent emphasis on gang ties and gang embeddedness. Desistance research has shown that the impact of turning points in the life-course of gang membership (becoming a parent), as well as the retention of gang ties, impact the desistance process. Pyrooz & Decker (2011) found that those who retained ties were at least twice as likely to be victimized violently or to be arrested for serious offenses regardless of why or how one left the gang. Violence has also been most frequently cited
as the reason to leave the gang (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002). Given what the current research has shown us so far, and the general lack of psychological and mental health based research with this population, further studies regarding the psychological impacts of gang membership and mental health needs of this population are greatly needed within the broader spectrum of gang research. Focusing on these areas within gang research will also be very useful for gang prevention and intervention efforts.

Therefore, the primary purpose of this grounded theory study is to understand the psychological process an individual experiences when leaving a gang. This study attempts to add to the current gang desistance literature by focusing on the psychological process involved with gang desistance, therefore increasing the understanding of concepts such as cognitive transformation and identify reformation that may occur during this process. Based on a life-course framework, this dissertation will examine the psychological process that is experienced by former gang members after deciding to leave the gang, and the psychological process that occurs when they decide to end gang ties.

**Research Questions**

When individuals decide to leave gangs, they encounter challenges and difficulties. If a youth decides to leave the gang, but retains their former gang ties, they may experience higher levels of victimization despite having left the gang (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Yet, there are fewer studies exploring why they leave gangs, despite various challenges related to leaving gangs. Thus, to better serve this population, it is critical to understand their psychological process involved in leaving gangs. To obtain this understanding the following central research questions will be addressed: What is the
psychological process a former gang member experiences after deciding to leave the gang? What is the psychological process a former gang member experiences after deciding to end their ties to the gang?
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Overview

While gang related activity dates back to the 1600s, the first gang like groups emerged after the American Revolution in 1783 (Sante, 1991; Howell & Griffiths, 2016; Howell, 2012; Howell & Moore, 2010). Despite this early existence of gangs in the U.S., the systematic study of gangs did not begin until the twentieth century (Hardman, 1967). Since this time, numerous theories regarding deviant behavior have been developed within fields such as criminology and sociology. These theories have been used to better understand gangs and gang related behavior, and to develop further gang specific theories, such as theories of joining or desisting from gangs. In order to better understand the current research related to gangs, it is important to be aware of the historical background of gangs in the United States, the theoretical models associated with both criminology and gang behavior, and the development of gang research and methodologies used over time.

This literature review will provide a brief history of gang development in the United States, describe the influence of The Chicago School and the first foundational study of 1,313 gangs (Thrasher, 1927), the prominent theories of crime and deviance, the theories related to gang membership, and the current gang related research. It will also address terminology and discuss the various conceptualizations of the term “gang.”
A Brief History of Gangs in the United States

While the first active gangs were reported by Pike (1873, 1876) in England during the 17th century, the first street gangs to emerge in the U.S. were on the east coast around 1783, at the end of the American Revolution (Sante, 1991; Howell & Griffiths, 2016; Howell, 2012; Howell & Moore, 2010).

The history of gangs in the U.S. has been summarized by examining different regions and time periods (Howell, 2012; Howell & Moore, 2010; Curry & Decker, 2002). Howell & Moore (2010) have looked at four major regions: The Northeast, Midwest, West, and South, while Curry, Decker, & Pyrooz (2014) have also described four major periods of gang presence in the USA—the 1890s, 1920s, 1960s, and 1980s. For the purposes of this review, the history of gang activity will be summarized for the four major regions in the United States.

The Northeast. Three phases mark the development of street gangs on the east coast: 1.) The emergence of gangs immediately after the American Revolution ended in 1783, 2.) More serious “ganging” (e.g. structured and dangerous) in New York City around 1820, due to large-scale immigration from Europe, and 3.) Further gang activity during the 1950s and 1960s after the arrival of mass Latino and Black populations (Adamson, 1998; Sante, 1991; Howell & Moore, 2010). New York City was a primary area of gang growth and will be described in more detail.

New York City. Three major periods of gang growth have been documented in New York City. During the first period, five most prominent groups of gangs included: The Smiths’s Vly gang, the Bowery Boys, the Broadway Boys (White, mainly Irish groups); The Fly Boys, and the Long Bridge Boys (mainly Black groups) (Sante, 1991;
Howell & Moore, 2010). Italian and then Jewish gangs with a mixture of Italian, Irish, and Scandinavian members also began to emerge (Riis, 1902, 1969; Sante, 1991; Howell & Moore, 2010). Other groups that followed during this period included: Dutch, Welsh, Scots-Irish, Irish Catholic, German youth, and mixed ethnicities (Adamson, 2000; Howell & Moore, 2010).

The second period was marked by a distinct period of gang activity in the city’s slums, leading to the rise of several other influential gangs of the time. The Whyos were one of the most powerful gangs during the 1890s. The longest-lived gang alliances on the lower east side of Manhattan included: The Five Pointers, the Monk Eastman, the Gophers, and the Hudson Dusters (Sante, 1991; Howell & Moore, 2010). Additionally, Chinese influences were also taking place through the running criminal of operations that controlled opium distribution, gambling, and political patronage during the 1860s (Chin, 1995; Howell & Moore, 2010).

The third period brought the growth of Latino and Black gangs throughout the city. “By the 1960s, more than two-thirds of the New York gangs were Puerto Rican or black” (Gannon, 1967, p. 122). Chin (1996) has also shown “the highly organized Chinatown gangs reigned for nearly 20 years—from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s—during which they were responsible for systematic extortion and violence” (Sullivan, 2006, p. 22).

**The Midwest**

**Chicago.** Similar to the way New York City was the epicenter of gang emergence in the Northeast, Chicago played the same role in the Midwest. Two major periods of gang growth have been documented in Chicago. The first period included what Perkins
(1987; Howell & Moore, 2010) described as white gangs “roving the streets” in the city as far back as the 1860s. Chicago’s first street gangs developed among White immigrants in the 1860s—particularly Irish, German, and Lithuanian backgrounds. Irish gangs, such as the Dukies and the Shielders, made their presence known by robbing men leaving work, fighting among themselves, and terrorizing the German, Jewish, and Polish immigrants who settled there from the 1870s to the 1890s (Perkins, 1987; Howell & Moore, 2010).

The second period of gang growth (1940s–1970s) in Chicago began during the 1930s due to steady migration of Mexicans and Blacks to northern cities (Marks, 1985; Miller, 2008, as cited in Howell & Moore, 2010). Following the 1919 race riot, Black males formed gangs to confront hostile White gang members who were terrorizing African American communities. Mexican American gangs likely formed in the 1950s, if not earlier.

Three major street gang organizations were formed between the 1940s and the early 1960s: The Devil’s Disciples, P-Stones, and Vice Lords (Perkins, 1987; Howell & Moore, 2010). Chicago’s largely African American gang problem exploded in the 1960s, with more gangs and more violence. Public housing high-rises became gang incubators and drug turf battlegrounds beginning in the 1970s.

The West. The major city where gang emergence took place in the West is Los Angeles. Street gangs in the Western region emerged from the palomilla (flock of doves) gangs, formed primarily of groups of young Mexican men that were attached to barrios (neighborhoods) in Mexico and in Los Angeles. The West differs from the other regions previously mentioned in that “Gang emergence in the West was not stimulated by racial
and ethnic clashes or by immigrant succession and replacement as in the Northeast and Midwest” (Howell & Moore, 2010, p.20). National pride is a characteristic that separates Latino gangs in the U.S. It is this feature that has also been associated with the rise of transnational gangs (Howell & Moore, 2010).

The west has been characterized by three periods of gang growth. During the first period (1890s–1920s), gang like groups of Mexican descent appeared in the Western region in the 1890s. The second period lasted from the 1940s to the 1950s. The second period consists of two historical events during the 1940s: the Sleepy Lagoon murder and the Zoot Suit Riots, which led to the development of Mexican-American gangs in the Southwest. Mexican immigration then accelerated in the early 1950s. The third period lasted from the 1950s to the 1980s. The third period demonstrated the rise of Black gangs in Los Angeles, following a similar route of the emergence of Black gangs in Chicago (Howell & Moore, 2010).

**Los Angeles.** The first Los Angeles Mexican American gangs likely formed in the 1920s. Latino gang growth began in the barrios (neighborhoods) of East Los Angeles. These were said to be comprised of adolescent friendship groups in the 1930s and 1940s (Moore, 1993; Howell & Moore, 2010). By the 1950s, African American gangs in Los Angeles were beginning to assume a street gang presence. African American gangs were well established by the 1960s in low-income housing projects. Mexican American gangs steadily grew following the Vietnam War, the War on Poverty, and the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s. By the 1970s, street gangs had emerged in most populated areas across California. In the 1980s, the gang culture melded
with crack cocaine dealing and consumption in the African American ghettos (Howell & Moore, 2010).

**The South.** Gang activity likely did not emerge in the southern states prior to the 1970s. It’s first period has been labeled from the 1970s to the 1990s. The Southern region was late to emerge as an important gang territory, primarily due to lacking large central cities where gang activity was taking place. As of 1980, only Miami and San Antonio were considered to have a moderately serious gang problem. Gang activity grew further throughout the South between the 1970s until the 1990s. Several southern states saw sharp increases in gang activity in multiple cities and counties by 1995. From the 1970s through 1995, the South had a 32% increase in gang affiliated cities, compared to 26% in the Midwest, 6% in the Northeast, and 3% in the West (Miller, 2001; Howell & Moore, 2010). Before the end of the 20th century, the Southern region matched the other major regions in the prevalence of gang activity. Houston has also emerged in the past decade as a major gang center (Miller, 2001). While the South’s gang history did not emerge until later years, it is clear that gang activity continues to remain a growing problem in this region, as well as across the United States.

**Defining Gangs**

There is still much debate about the precise definition of the term “gang” and how this impacts gang related research. Scholars and researchers have yet to agree on a precise definition for the term (Miller, 1982; Spergel, 1984, 1989; Ball & Curry, 1995; Esbensen, Winfree, He, & Taylor, 2001). Some have discussed the logic of such definitions and their use within the gang research (Esbensen, Winfree, He, & Taylor, 2001), while others have used self-report data from middle school students to better
understand definitional issues (Ball & Curry, 1995; Esbensen & Winfree, 1998). Others have compared the opinions of police, members of a Task Force on gangs, and juvenile detainees to learn how gangs are viewed/appraised across varying groups (Decker & Kempf-Leonard, 1991).

The earliest formal definition of the term gang begins with the foundational work of Milton Thrasher and his study of 1,313 gang cases in Chicago. Thrasher defined the gang as follows:

“The gang is an interstitial group originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict. It is characterized by the following types of behavior: meeting face to face, milling, movement through space as a unit, conflict, and planning. The result of this collective behavior is the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, esprit de corps, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory” (1963, 1927, p. 46, p. 57).

Numerous definitions for the term “gang” have been offered since this time, resulting in what has been described as “considerable definitional diversity in American research,” and making it hard to compare gang related research among U.S. regions and globally (Decker, Gemert, & Pyrooz, 2009). During the mid-1970s, one of the most experienced gang researchers, Walter Miller, prepared his monograph “Violence by Youth Gangs and Youth Groups as a Crime Problem in Major American Cities” for the National Institute for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Based on his research including six “gang-problem” cities, the five most frequently cited criteria for defining a gang in rank order included: Violent or criminal behavior - a major activity of group members; Group organized, with functional role-division, chain-of-command; Identifiable leadership; Group members in continuing recurrent interaction; and Group identifies with, claims control over, identifiable community territory. Using this data from respondents, Miller came up with the following gang definition:
“A gang is a group of recurrently associating individuals with identifiable leadership and internal organization, identifying with or claiming control over territory in the community, and engaging either individually or collectively in violent or other forms of illegal behavior” (1975, p. 9).

As Miller continued his research into the 1980s, it was clear he felt there had been no movement in improving “the concept of gang,” including “making it more precise, more refined, and more useful as a basis for analyzing and coping with collective youth crime” (Miller, 1982, 1992, p. 17). He indicated that “At no time has there been anything close to consensus on what a gang might be--by scholars, by criminal justice workers, by the general public” (Miller, 1982, 1992, p. 16). Similar to his 1975 version, Miller then offered his definition for “youth gangs”:

“A youth gang is a self-formed association of peers, bound together by mutual interests, with identifiable leadership, well-developed lines of authority, and other organizational features, who act in concert to achieve a specific purpose which generally includes the conduct of illegal activity and control over a particular territory, facility, or type of enterprise” (1982, 1992, p. 21).

Later researchers added that definitions "have varied over time according to the perception and interests of the definer, academic fashions, and the changing social reality of the gang" (Spergel et al., 1989, p. 9). Klein (2001) for example, later offered his definition of a “street gang” as follows:

“A street gang is used to indicate a group-accepted and acknowledged orientation toward anti-social or criminal activities. It includes some specialty-focused groups such as street-level drug sales groups but not organized, upper level distribution systems and cartels. It includes some hate groups such as a number of skinheads, but not terrorist groups. It excludes prison gangs, motorcycle gangs, football hooligans, and the many youthful groups at school and elsewhere that may occasionally dabble in delinquent activities but not orient themselves around these” (2001, p. 61).

Sociological characteristics of gangs have also been analyzed in an attempt to better understand the structure of the gang. This includes things such as: a formal structure,
leaders and core members, names, insignia, and other identifiers, etc. (Johnstone, 1981; Spergel, 1984; Franzese, Covey, & Menard, 2006). Organizing gangs by type has also been examined. Franzese, Covey, Menard (2006) summarized the literature on youth gangs to include four major types of gangs: social, retreatist, conflict, and criminal (See Table 2, Appendix B). They conclude that the literature “suggests that most of the gangs described historically and cross-nationally may be classified as social gangs” (pp. 162-163). The social gang is described as engaging in lower levels of illegal behaviors, such as petty property crime and public disorder.

Definitional issues regarding the term “gang” have also impacted the way research is carried out. There are those who argue that due to the uniqueness and intricate nature of the gang, any attempts at operationalizing the term “gang” is much too complex an endeavor if the end goal is to obtain large scale generalizable results. On the other hand, globally speaking, some countries have already come to an agreement regarding the definition of the term “gang.” In order to do this, a much simpler and broader definition has been used. The Eurogang Research Project for example, which has been underway for the last decade, has decided on the following definition: “A gang is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity” (Klein, 2006, p. 4). In order to address definitional concerns, gang researchers in the U.S. may provide the definition they are using that is specific to their study. As can be seen in their St. Louis study, Decker and Lauritsen (2002) defined gangs as “age-graded peer groups that exhibited permanence, engaged in criminal activity, and had symbolic representations of membership” (p.55).
Theoretical Approaches to Criminality and Deviant Behavior

Various theories have attempted to explain gang involvement, delinquent youth behaviors, and engagement in criminal activity. Before summarizing these theories, it is important to acknowledge where they emerged from within the fields of sociology and criminology.

**Frederic Thrasher’s The Gang.** Sociologist Frederic Thrasher of the Chicago School of Sociology originally published *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago* in 1927. This was the first largest and longitudinal study done on gangs in Chicago and within gang research generally. Rooted in Chicago School ethnography, Thrasher’s book is also referred to as “the founding, classic text in the study of gang life” (Dimitriadis, 2006, p. 336), and continues to be cited frequently in current gang research. It was later updated in 1963 with an introduction by his colleague, James Short. In the original version, Thrasher (1927) called the concept of *interstitial* sites the most important of the book. These are described as follows:

“[The] spaces that intervene between one thing and another…In nature foreign matter tends to collect and cake in every crack, crevice, and cranny—interstices. There are also fissures and breaks in the structure of social organization. The gang may be regarded as an interstitial element in the framework of society, and gangland as an interstitial region in the layout of the city” (p. 22).

Thrasher’s (1927) work paved the way for further sociological, crime, and gang related research and theory development. Important ethnographic research on the social structure of poor urban neighborhoods (Whyte, 1943) followed Thrasher’s work during the 1940s, as well as influential systematic efforts to map and explain patterns of delinquency and gang involvement (Shaw and McKay, 1942, 1969). In the Introduction to Shawn and McKay’s revised edition of *Juvenile delinquency and urban areas; a study of rates of*
delinquency in relation to differential characteristics of local communities in American cities, Short commented “the foundation laid by Shaw, McKay, and others…remains of vital significance for contemporary research and theory and for programs oriented to delinquency control” (1969, p.xlii). This next section will discuss two of the major theories of crime, followed by theories of gang formation.

**Control Theories.** Following Thrasher’s work at the Chicago school, numerous theories of crime and delinquency began to emerge, of which control theories became very popular and influential. Control theories of crime attempt to explain the factors that control human behavior in order to understand why individuals conform to societal rules (Taylor, 2001, p. 369; Hobbes, 1957).

“Such theories assume that the potential for asocial conduct is present in everyone, that we would all commit delinquent acts were we not somehow prevented from doing so. Put another way, they assume that we are born amoral, that our morality has been added by training and is maintained by ties to other people and institutions. In control theories, the important differences between delinquents and non delinquents are not differences in motivation they are, rather, differences in the extent to which natural motives are controlled. Control theories thus focus on the restraints on delinquent behavior, on the circumstances and desires that prevent it” (Hirschi, 1977, p. 329).

Two of the most widely debated control theories include social control theory and self-control theory. These will now be discussed in more detail.

**Social Control Theory.** While the concept of social control was introduced at the turn of the 20th century, social control theories were later advanced during the 1950s. It has been argued that some social control theories were developed in contrast to strain theories. Some of the Chicago school’s theories have been considered emergent social control theories as well (Taylor, 2001).
In *Causes of Delinquency* (1969), Hirschi introduced his social control theory, one of the most influential and empirically tested theories within the field of criminology (Taylor, 2001; Pratt, Gau, & Franklin, 2011). Control theories suggest that delinquent acts are the result of a weak or broken bond an individual has to society. They utilize two complex concepts – the *bond* of the individual and *society* (Hirschi, 1969). The influence of the social bond has also been described during childhood as follows:

“Offending is prevented by the social bond, which operates on psychological constructs such as the individual's conscience. However, a breakdown in social bonds during childhood leaves a child free to act on his/her natural inclinations without negative emotional repercussions” (Wood & Alleyne, 2010, p.105).

Hirschi’s (1969) social control theory is based on four elements of the social bond: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. *Attachment* focuses on sensitivity to the opinion of others. A person who is insensitive to the wishes and expectations of others is able to deviate. *Commitment* focuses on the investment a person makes in conventional behavior, such as investing time and energy into activities such as pursuing their education and career goals, or generally working to improve their reputation. When deviant behavior is being considered, so is the risk of losing the investment that is made in the conventional behavior. *Involvement* is when an individual is actively participating in conventional activities, and therefore may be too busy to engage in deviant behavior. *Belief* assumes that individuals vary in terms of how much they believe they should obey societal rules. The less likely an individual believes they should obey the rules, the more they increase their chance of violating them.

In terms of motivation for crime and delinquency, Hirschi (1969) referred to the “Yes, but *why* do they do it?” question as “the most disconcerting question the control theorist faces” (p. 31). Agreeing with a control theorist perspective, he argued that we are
all animals naturally capable of committing criminal acts. More importantly; however, is
the notion that most individuals are able to control these acts or urges. In order to do this,
Hirschi points to the influence of the social bond and the belief that the bonds of
prosocial values, prosocial people, and prosocial institutions are what end up controlling
our behavior when we are tempted to engage in criminal or deviant acts. Therefore a
question more applicable to the theory is not “Why do they do it?” but “Why don’t we do
it?” (Hirschi, p.34; Pratt, Gau, & Franklin, 2011; Taylor, 2001). Hirschi also later
summarized social control theory as follows:

Social control theory assumes that delinquent acts are acts contrary to law. “It
follows that (1) delinquent acts are contrary to the wishes and expectations of
other people; (2) they involve the risk of punishment, both formal and informal;
(3) they take (and save) time and energy; and (4) they are contrary to conventional
moral belief. If these assumptions are true, it follows further that those most likely
to engage in delinquent acts are (1) least likely to be concerned about the wishes
and expectations of others; (2) least likely to be concerned about the risk of
punishment; (3) most likely to have the time and energy the act requires; and (4)
least likely to accept moral beliefs contrary to delinquency” (1977, p. 329).

While Hirschi’s (1969) social control theory was one of the most influential, it is also
worth mentioning some of the various control theories existed prior to Hirschi’s theory,
such as Shaw and McKay’s Social Disorganization Theory (1942), as well as Reckless
(1943) and Sykes and Matza (1957) who drew upon informal social control to some
extent (Pratt, Gau, & Franklin, 2011). Hirschi was distinct from Reckelss due to four key
elements, with the major difference being that he rejected emphasis being placed on inner
containment and personal control (Taylor, 375-376). Pratt, Gau, & Franklin (2011) also
ascribe Hirschi’s theory as unique and original due to three properties involved in the
development and marketing of Causes of Delinquency, including: A New Approach to
Theory Construction, Operationalizing Theories, and Hirshi’s use of the comparative test
which “has been a staple of criminological theory and research ever since” (p. 64). Numerous studies continue to test Hirschi’s social control theory, along with its integration with other theories. Despite theoretical integration work being contrary to the notion of comparative testing, it is still being used in current research. Bouffard and Petkovsek (2014) for example, linked social control and rational choice theories, suggesting that in order to increase the effectiveness of deterrence, policy-makers may need to consider improving the individuals’ connections to society. Overall, Hirschi’s work has had a great impact on the continued interest in testing his theory, along with others, within the field of criminology.

Pratt, Gau, & Franklin (2011) also indicate five tangible ways that Hirschi’s work has influenced the field of criminology. These include: 1.) the use of “the “comparative test” between competing criminological ideas” (p. 64), 2.) “providing the field with a set of operational measures for certain key variables specified by each of the major theoretical traditions in criminology” p. 64), 3.) creating “an enormous level of interest among scholars seeking to test his theory” (p. 65). 4.) having “the effect of creating theoretical “camps” within criminology” (p. 65). “Finally, Hirschi’s theory has served as the intellectual foundation for two subsequent criminological perspectives that have themselves become major traditions in the field of criminology. First, Sampson and Laub’s (1993) life course theory…[and] self-control theory (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990)” (p. 65). These theories will be addressed in the sections that follow.

**Self-Control Theory.** Hirschi later worked with Gottfredson on *A General Theory of Crime* (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990), where aspects of his original social control theory are left behind in favor of self-control theory.
“In this work, Hirschi retained the core notion that individuals are naturally predisposed toward criminal behavior and therefore need to be restrained from doing so, yet he rejected the notion of “indirect control” that had been a hallmark of his 1969 work. Instead, Gottfredson and Hirschi reconceptualized the control theory tradition as one of “direct control” involving individuals themselves” (Pratt, Gau, & Franklin, 2011, p. 66).

Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) view low self-control on the individual level. Self-control theory differs primarily from social control theory in that it “ascribes stable individual differences in criminal behavior to self-control” (p. 87). The main premise of the theory is that “high self-control effectively reduces the possibility of crime – that is, those possessing it will be substantially less likely at all periods of life to engage in criminal acts” (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990, p. 89).

“Viewed in this way, those who lack self-control…will be impulsive, short-sighted, prone to risk taking, and will seek the very kind of immediate gratification (e.g., excitement, material goods) that criminal behavior provides” (Pratt, Gau, & Franklin, 2011, p. 66). Additionally, Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983) argue that the age distribution of crime is invariant over a broad range of social conditions and that these uses of the age distribution are not justified by available evidence. This aspect has since been examined in longitudinal researched by Sweeten, Piquero, and Steinberg (2013) who conclude that the relationship between age and crime in adolescence and early adulthood is largely explainable, though not entirely, attributable to multiple co-occurring developmental changes.

Given the development of these theories generally, others have argued that explanations of juvenile delinquency need to take into account the reasons/motives behind the act, and the obstacles/restraints that inhibits its occurrence. Theories of delinquency tend to focus on one of these areas and ignore/exclude the other, with a
tendency to favor motivational theories. While these theories continue to be critiqued, they have also laid a foundation for further theories about gangs.

**Gang Formation Theory**

While gang theory development was at a standstill for 40 years prior to the new millennium, since Cloward and Ohlin’s (1960) strain theory/differential opportunity theory (Howell & Griffiths, 2016), numerous theories of gang formation have emerged through the influence of theories of crime. Generally speaking, macro-level theories attempt explain the existence of gangs, while mirco-level theories focus on how an individual becomes involved in a gang (Howell & Griffiths, 2016). Strain theory/differential opportunity theory will be reviewed briefly in this next section, followed by influential macro and micro-level theories.

**Strain/Differential Opportunity/Anomie Theory.** Merton (1938) has also been linked to gang formation theory. Merton (1938) described a conceptual schema of the socio-cultural sources of deviate behavior, and how some social structures exert a definite pressure upon certain persons in the society to engage in nonconformist rather than conformist conduct. In agreement with Merton (1938), Cloward and Ohlin (1960, 2000) assert that anomie (strain) develops not because of breakdown in regulation of goals alone, but instead, because of a breakdown in the relationship between goals and the legitimate avenues of access to them.

“Anomie/strain conceptions of gang formation, similar to social disorganization, hold that economic disadvantage or poverty is a key component and that gangs form in response to a blocked opportunity structure. In other words, the gang forms and creates a realignment of what constitutes success and the legitimate means to becoming successful.”

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Macro-level Theories

**Social Disorganization Theory.** A majority of the theoretical explanations for the presence of gangs in cities are based on economic disadvantage (Decker, Gemert & Pyrooz, 2009). Of the macro-level, or ecological theories, priority attention has been given to social disorganization theory (Howell & Griffiths, 2016). In the influential work of Shaw and McKay (1942, 1969), social disorganization theory was elaborated upon, and allowed for later links to the theoretical foundation of gang formulation. Social disorganization theory argues that three structural factors - low economic status, ethnic heterogeneity, and residential mobility - lead to the disruption of community social organization, which then accounts for variations in crime and delinquency.

Social disorganization theory was later tested by Sampson & Groves (1989). Data was analyzed for 238 localities in Great Britain constructed from a 1982 national survey of 10,905 residents. The model was then replicated on an independent national sample of 11,030 residents of 300 British localities in 1984. Results from both surveys supported the theory and showed that between-community variations in social disorganization transmit much of the effect of community structural characteristics on rates of both criminal victimization and criminal offending. The study also showed that communities characterized by sparse friendship networks, unsupervised teenage peer groups, and low organizational participation had disproportionately high rates of crime and delinquency. Variations in these dimensions of community social disorganization were shown to mediate in large part the effects of community structural characteristics (i.e., low socioeconomic status, residential mobility, ethnic heterogeneity, and family disruption) in the manner predicted by the theoretical model. (Decker, Gemert & Pyrooz, p. 398, 2009).
Further contributions that account for gang violence have also been made to social disorganization theory by Papachristos and Kirk (2006).

**Micro-level Theories**

**Multiple Marginalization Theory.** Vigil’s (2002) *multiple marginalization theory*, an explanation for Mexican-American gang membership, suggests that:

“macrohistorical forces (racism and repression) and macrostructural (immigration and ghetto/barrio living) combine to strain and undermine social control and bonds with the family and school while also diminishing respect for law enforcement” (Howell & Griffiths, 2016, p. 98).

**Interactional Theory.** Interactional theory (Thornberry, 2005) has also been used to account for why some youths join gangs (Howell, 2012). This theory focuses on the risk factors for gang membership which can be “found in several interacting domains, including individual, family, peer, school, and neighborhood. The different domains are more influential at different developmental stages in childhood and adolescence” (Howell & Griffiths, 2016, p. 97). Gang involvement theories such as these and others have addressed gang involvement as a developmental pathway. The next section will outline the developmental theory that is being used in this study.

**Theoretical framework: Life Course Theory**

Life-course frameworks have been used throughout the history of studying crime and the desistance from crime. In *Understanding Desistance from Crime*, Laub and Sampson (2001) argue that the “study of desistance from crime is hampered by definitional, measurement, and theoretical incoherence,” and that “a unifying framework can distinguish termination of offending from the process of desistance” (p. 1). They differentiate between “termination” and “desistance” by defining termination as “the point when criminal activity stops” and desistance as “the underlying causal process”
Several frameworks of desistance are reviewed (maturation and aging accounts of desistance, developmental accounts of desistance, life course, rational choice, and social learning), with the conclusion that a life-course framework has the most promise for studying desistance from crime and other problem behavior (Laub and Sampson, 2001). These frameworks will be described briefly in order to gain a better understanding of life-course theory and its applicability to gangs.

**Maturation and aging accounts of desistance.** Maturation and aging accounts of desistance from crime view maturation as the key element in explaining desistance from crime. The Gluecks developed their theory stating “the physical and mental changes which enter into the natural process of maturation offer a chief explanation of improvement of conduct with the passing years” (Glueck & Glueck, 1974, p. 149). Desistance from crime is therefore viewed as occurring with the passage of time, leading what they believed to be a “decline in recidivism during the late twenties and early thirties” (p.175). With the exception of serious biological and environmental deficits, offender desistance is viewed as normative and expected. The Gluecks also argued that persistent recidivism could be explained by a lack of maturity.

**Developmental accounts of desistance.** Various developmental accounts of desistance have been explored within the study of crime. Some argue that desistance is the result of shifts in behavioral patterns that characterize adolescence (Mulvey & LaRosa, 1986) while others argue that explanations of desistance and cessation from crime with age must incorporate biological factors (physical strength, energy, psychological drive, need for stimulation), psychological (well-being, psychological maturation), and sociological variables (socially constructed roles) (Gove, 1985).
**Rational choice.** Rational choice frameworks of desistance argue that the decision to give up crime is based on the individual’s conscious review of the cost and benefits to crime. Desisters are viewed as “reasoning decision makers” (Cornish & Clarke, 1986, p. 13).

**Social learning.** Akers (1990) argues that social learning accounts of desistance incorporate elements of rational choice and deterrence frameworks. The social learning approach is applicable to all crime types as well as illicit drug use, alcohol abuse, and other problem behaviors. Within this framework, the basic variables that explain initiation into crime also account for cessation from crime. Imitation is less important after onset, as social and nonsocial reinforcements become more important. The most important factor in desistance is peer associations (Akers, 1998).

**Life-Course.** Life-course frameworks of desistance focus on continuity and change in criminal behavior over time, while also taking into account historical and other contextual features of social life. It argues that there are large within-individual variations in antisocial behavior over time. Where change is the norm for the majority of adolescents, stability characterizes those at the extremes of the antisocial-conduct distribution (Moffitt, 1994).

A key thesis of the life-course framework is that salient life events influence behavior and modify criminal trajectories. Sampson and Laub (1993) argue that changes in crime (desistance) are due to variations in informal social control or social bonds that are independent of age. Therefore, similar to developmental accounts of desistance, they maintain that other factors besides age influence the desistance process. Another key point is that the salient life events in the life course may or may not change criminal
trajectories. More importantly, it is how these salient life events (work, military, marriage) affect social bonds and informal social control. Life course events matter in the onset, continuation, and desistance process. Life course events help explain stability and change in behavior over time.

Laub and Sampson (2001) distinguish life course accounts from developmental, arguing that developmental accounts flow primarily from psychology and focus on regular or “law like development over the life span” (p. 44). Developmental approaches contain the notions of stages, progressions, growth, and evolution (Lewontin, 2000). While life course theory maintains elements of developmental theories, such as aging over time, Laub and Sampson (2001) differentiate life-course theory from developmental theory by including the notion that lives are unpredictable and contain exogenous changes. There is a theoretical commitment to the social malleability across the life course and the focus on the constancy of change (p. 44-45). The focus is on the unfolding of lives in social context. There is also a focus on situations –time-varying social contexts—that impeded or facilitate criminal events.

“The bottom-line difference from developmental (especially psychological) accounts is the theoretical commitment to the idea of social malleability across the life course and the focus on the constancy of chance, including dynamic processes the serve to reproduce stability” (p. 45).

They also indicate there are commonalities among desisting from different types of behaviors, such as addictive behaviors and predatory crime. Significant elements of desistance from these types of problem behaviors are the decision or motivation to change, cognitive restructuring, coping skills, continued monitoring, social support, general lifestyle change, especially new social networks (p.38).
Life-course frameworks have greatly impacted the criminology field and were revitalized after the 1980s through the major works of Sampson and Laub (1993) and Laub and Sampson (2003) (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011).

According to Elder (1998), the life-course perspective is based on several principles, including:

“acknowledging historical time and place and recognizing that our lives are embedded and shaped by context, the developmental effects of life events are contingent on when they occur in a person’s life, the acknowledgement of intergenerational transmission of social patterns – the notion of linked lives and interdependency, and the view that human agency plays a key role in choice making and constructing one’s life course” (p. 47).

A life-course perspective attempts to link social history and social structure to the unfolding of human lives. It tries explain variations in crime within individuals over time, regardless of studying persistence or desistance. It is also compatible with several criminological theories – social control, social learning, and rational choice (Laub and Sampson, 2001).

Within the life-course perspective, the emphasis is shifted from a focus on early socialization to one on the entire life-span (Elder, 1994). Elder (1994) defines the life course as “the interweave of age-graded trajectories such as work careers and family pathways, that are subject to changing conditions and future options and to short-term transitions ranging from leaving school to retirement” (p. 5). Important parts include the multidimensionality of trajectories. Not everyone enters all developmental trajectories. People can be characterized in terms of the trajectories they do and do not enter. Entrance into some can impact movement along others (e.g. educational attainment can alter family and career development just as antisocial behavior can influence a variety of conventional or prosocial trajectories like school, work, and family formation (Elder,
A central theme of the life-course perspective is in the timing of transitions into or along trajectories – that this can have behavioral consequences. The timing and interlocking nature of trajectories can create turning points, a redirection or change in the life course itself. The life course is never fully determined. There is always the possibility of well-established pathways to be deflected by new conditions and events.

“Gang membership may act as a turning point that has the potential to alter or redirect basic life-course pathways” (Elder, 1994, p. 7). The applicability of life-course frameworks within the gang research will be discussed next.

**Applicability of a Life-Course Framework to Gang Research.** Originally intended to focus on criminal behavior over time, life-course frameworks have also been used in gang research (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2014). A life-course approach typically examines three distinct periods relative to involvement in crime: onset, continuity, and desistance.

“The understanding of gang members, gangs, and the behavior of their members can benefit from the life-course perspective as it examines explanations for why adolescents join, persist, and desist from their involvement in gangs” (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011, p. 417).

As Pyrooz & Decker (2011) point out, “Desistance from crime can bring meaning to desistance from groups” (p. 418). Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb (2014) used a life course framework to examine the three distinct periods relative to involvement in crime: *onset*, *continuity*, and *desistance*. These were then applied to gang processes. “To analyze this process, “gang” can be substituted for the typical life-course variable “crime” and these three stages can be examined analogously” (p. 492). Therefore, the process of gang membership itself can be thought of as a trajectory.
Further gang research has examined “turning points” in the life-course of gang membership, concluding that fatherhood has acted as a turning point toward desisting from gangs (Moloney et al., 2009). Qualitative life-course research has also examined the shifts in the influence of friends and in the nature of friendship choices, and how these changes can facilitate desistance processes (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Holland, 2003).

In order to better understand the gang related research, the following terms used in reference to gang processes will be defined:

**Onset and Termination.** “Operationally, onset and termination are marked by the identification and deidentification of gang membership, a well-established methodology in the criminological literature” (Esbensen, Winfree, He, & Taylor, 2001; Webb, Katz, & Decker, 2006; Winfree, Full, Vigil, & Mays, 1992) (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011).

**Continuity.** Simply put, continuity has been defined as “behaviors during active periods of membership” (p. 492), as well as noted for receiving the most attention in the literature (Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2014).

**Desistance.** According to (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011), “Desistance can be conceived as the declining probability of gang membership—the reduction from peak to trivial levels of gang membership” (p. 419).

**Gang ties.** As operationalized by Pyrooz & Decker (2011) are social and emotional attachments to the former gang that persist despite having departed. Other studies have indicated that without geographical distance or replacement with an alternate support structure, former gang members are at greater risk for being drawn back into the gang environments due to strong emotional ties (Bolden, 2013).
**Gang Related Research.** The majority of gang research has focused on the periods of onset and continuity (Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2014). This includes, but is not limited to, areas such as: risk factors for joining a gang, reasons or motivations for joining a gang, the social and environmental factors related to gang involvement, and the ways gang involvement is linked to delinquency.

Studies examining the reasons why youth join gangs (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003) have suggested that social disadvantage, poor performance in school, early dating, externalizing behaviors, prior delinquency, and delinquent beliefs increase the chances of a youth subsequently joining a gang. These results were also noted to be consistent with the multidimensionality of a life-course perspective. “It does not appear that gang membership is associated with a single developmental domain; on the contrary, gang members have multiple disadvantages in multiple domains of their development” (p.75).

Others have examined patterns of gang membership before the typical age of onset – a middle school population. Specifically, reasons to join the gang were examined along with the organizational characteristics of the gang, gang process issues, and family variables. These results, in large part, are consistent with earlier field studies and school-based surveys of older adolescents that have concluded that gangs are not highly organized and lack the ability to impart discipline to their members (Curry & Decker, 2000). Earlier studies have also shown the relationship between self-reported gang membership and delinquency that emerges during early adolescence (Esbensen & Winfree, 1998; Curry, Decker, & Egley, 2000), as well as a statistically significant
relationship between self-reported gang membership and referral to the juvenile court for delinquency (Curry & Decker, 2000).

Social and environmental factors for gang involvement have also been examined in the literature. In a British study, the authors found that gang-involved youth were more likely than nongang youth to be older, and individual delinquency and neighborhood gangs predicted gang involvement. “Parental management, deviant peer pressure, and commitment to school had indirect relationships with gang involvement.” (Alleyne & Wood, 2011).

**Drug Related Research.** The relationships between involvement with drugs and gangs has also been documented in the literature. Gang members are disproportionately involved in drug use, drug sales, and violent offending (Esbensen, Peterson, Freng, & Taylor, 2002). Katz, Webb, & Decker (2005) found the level of a youth’s gang involvement significantly impacted their drug-use behavior. Current gang members were significantly more likely to use marijuana and cocaine compared with former gang members. The severity of collective gang crime has also been associated with the prevalence of drug use within a gang (Fagan, 1989).

While the research shows that gang members are at risk for drug use, the impact of the organizational structure of the gang on drug use and related behaviors has been conflicting. Earlier research has shown that substance use and delinquency among gangs occur in gangs with well-developed organizational structures and social norms (Fagan, 1989). More recently, Decker, Katz, & Webb (2008; 2007) found whether current or former gang members were analyzed, significant positive relationships between the level of gang organization and involvement of the gang in violence and drug sales were found.
They argue that “Because these results are inconsistent with the expectations from the literature, they merit elaboration.”

**Gender.** Gender differences have been examined relevant to reasons for joining a gang. Boys have reported joining for excitement, to have their own territory, and for protection and belonging. Girls joined because family and friends were involved and to get a reputation – they focused more on the socialization and associational aspects of gang joining (Maxson and Whitlock, 2002).

**Violence & Victimization.** Some gang researchers have used social network analysis to better understand gang structure and violent behaviors (Papachristos 2006; Papachristos, 2009). Papachristos (2009) used a network approach to examine violence within gangs, specifically the structure of gang murders in Chicago. DeLisi, Barnes, Beaver, & Gibson (2009) found that:

> “Membership in a gang increases youths’ chances of being victimized above and beyond personal characteristics, and the deleterious gang effect does not weaken over time. The most antisocial youths and those with more delinquency victimization were more likely to join gangs”

**Qualitative Methods.** Recent qualitative methods have examined gang behaviors using social network dynamics to better understand the processes of joining and leaving the gang, in addition to the consequences of fluid gang behaviors (e.g. switching gangs or belonging to more that one gang). This research has shown that gang desistance was very common, with success depending primarily on geographical separation (e.g. schooling in a different area) and alternate support systems (e.g. occupations such as the military that can provide economic security and relocation). Without one of these components, former gang members are at greater risk for being drawn back to the gang through strong emotional ties (Bolden, 2013).
Global Studies. Canadian research on an urban aboriginal gang revealed that former gang members viewed themselves as having taken a conscious decision not to be involved in criminal activity, but not to leave the gang (Deane, Bracken, & Morissette, 2007). Research from Scotland argues that community shares a role in assisting youth from desisting from gangs by replacing their previous identification as gang members (Gormally, 2014).

Gang Desistance. As Klein and Maxson (2006) pointed out, “surprisingly little research has been conducted on gang desistance and the processes of leaving gangs” (p. 154). This next section will review the available gang desistance literature, beginning with some of the longitudinal studies that have examined the motives and methods for leaving the gang.

Using both active and former gang members, Decker and Lauritsen (2002) conducted a three-year field study of 24 former St. Louis gang members between October 1990 and September 1993, with follow-up data for approximately half of the sample through 1998. 99 active gang members and 24 former gang members were interviewed. The authors stated that “leaving the gang is a more complex and variable process than suggested in previous research, and many parallels can be found in the research on desistance” (p. 66). Of the 24 former members who were interviewed, the majority (16 former gang members) left due to level of violence, and many left due to personal experiences of violence. Others left due to the threat or fear of personal violence, or having family members who were victims of violence or threatened. The other eight reported a combination of moving out of town, therefore severing geographical ties with their gang, leaving due to family ties such as obligations to caring for children, and not
having a reason why they left. Some offered a single event, such as violence, for leaving, while others reported a number of events and attachments that occurred prior to leaving. Participation also declined with age and was associated with involvement in other activities (e.g. job, family, concern about one’s future) that are typical of post adolescent stages of the life course. The authors indicate that “a combination of maturational reform, aging, and proximity to violence produced the motivation for leaving the gang for a number of individuals” (p. 58).

In their (2002) study, Decker and Lauritsen call attention what they describe as the “gray area” of the gang desistance process. They questioned the “operationalization” of what it means to be a “former” gang member, despite retaining ties to the gang. This was further explored by Pyrooz et al. (2010) and Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb (2014).

Pyrooz et al. (2010) and Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb (2014) used data from the Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (ADAM) program that was established by the National Institute of Justice in the late 1980s to research the social and emotional ties to the gang that persist after departure. Using a sample of juvenile arrestees in Arizona, Pyrooz et al. (2010) found that neighborhood gang activity, school attendance, and length of separation from the gang were associated with persisting gang ties. Former gang members who retained their ties were also more likely to be victimized than those who did not possess lingering connections. Using a life-course framework and a cross-sectional sample of juvenile arrestees in Arizona, Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb (2014) found that individuals who belonged to gangs exhibiting stronger organizational characteristics experienced more victimizations as did males and those with more gang ties.
Pyrooz & Decker (2011) also interviewed 84 juvenile arrestees in Arizona from ADAM. Motives for leaving the gang were organized into factors internal (push) (cognitive shifts or transformations about gang life - “I got tired of the gang lifestyle” or “I wanted to avoid trouble and violence”) and external (pull) to the gang (girlfriends, jobs, children), while methods for leaving the gang were organized into hostile and non-hostile modes of departure. Push motives and non-hostile methods were the modal responses for leaving the gang. While it was not uncommon to experience a hostile departure from the gang, most former gang members reported walking away without ritual violence or ceremony. This method was conditional on the motive for departure, however. None of the individuals leaving the gang for pull or external reasons experienced a hostile departure. Gang ties persisted regardless of motive or method, and retaining such ties corresponded with serious consequences. They found that those who retained ties were at least twice as likely to be victimized violently or to be arrested for serious offenses regardless of why or how one left the gang. These results indicate that leaving the gang is not automatically associated with reduced serious offending or violent victimization, unlike the finding form Pyrooz et al., (2010). Alternatively, those who left the gang in combination with attenuating or eliminating their ties were arrested for less serious offenses or experienced less violent victimization.

Other methods of leaving the gang have been summarized in earlier literature. Sanchez-Kankowski (1991) indicated six ways of exiting the gang: “age out, die, go to prison, get jobs, join other organizations, and leave as the gang subdivides” (p. 61). Vigil (1988) explains that exit rites exist and similarly to being “jumped in” to initiate membership, some members may be “jumped out” of the gang to leave.
“These exit rites have also been found to be limited to situational and temporary members who have expectations of continued contacts with gang members. Most members of the gang are said to mature-out. Additionally, violent incidents were found to be a deterrent to further participation, similar to the more current studies mentioned previously above” (pp. 106-107).

Caldwell and Altschuler (2001) explored why youths leave gangs and the circumstances under which they leave, and to determine risk and protective factors in gang membership and whether they are age-related. They argue for early intervention to leave the gang with a focus on individual age-specific developmental needs. Personal agency has also been cited as a vital feature that has emerged from the qualitative data to desist (Laub & Sampson, 2001).

Relationships between criminal offending and gang membership is an area that has also been examined over time. A five year longitudinal study by Sweeten, Pyrooz, & Piquero (2013) examined the intraindividual changes in gang membership and self-reported criminal offending for 226 individuals who were gang members at the onset of the study. They found that disengaging from gangs is indirectly related to offending through less exposure to antisocial peers, less unstructured routine activities, less victimization, and more temperance. Gang disengagement was associated with decreased contemporaneous offending but did not predict future offending after controlling for desistance mechanisms. Evidence also suggested that those who leave gangs more quickly are less exposed to antisocial peers, and possess better work histories and psychosocial characteristics even while in the gang.

**Summary and Research Questions**

While the study of gangs has taken place over the course of a century, the literature has primarily focused on the periods of onset and continuity. Less attention has
been paid to the desistance process. Recent desistance research has informed us that leaving the gang aids with crime reduction, delinquency, and violent victimization for former members. The decision to leave the gang, and the gang ties that are left behind are an important part of the desistance process and the ability to re-offend. Structural components and gang embeddedness also impact this process. Additionally, gang research has predominantly been studied from criminological and sociological perspectives. Research that focuses on the desistance process, as well as addresses the psychological aspects of gang membership, have been noted in the literature as important areas to explore as gang research moves forward. Gaining a better understanding of the psychological implications of gang involvement, particularly any mental health challenges that may occur after leaving the gang, will be beneficial to future intervention work with this population.

This dissertation attempts to build on the previous gang desistance research by examining the process of leaving the gang – motives, method, and ties – as well as the psychological and emotional implications of leaving the gang. Based on a life course framework as it relates to the gang desistance process, this dissertation will examine the process of leaving the gang, with an emphasis on the emotional process that is experienced after deciding to leave the gang, and the emotional process that occurs when deciding to end gang ties. This study will therefore focus on the following central research questions: What is the psychological process a former gang member experiences after deciding to leave the gang? What is the psychological process a former gang member experiences after deciding to end their ties to the gang?
CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

Qualitative Research

Broadly speaking, qualitative research is an approach to the study of social phenomena. It contains two unique features “1.) the researcher is the means through which the study is conducted, and 2.) the purpose is to learn about some facet of the social world” (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 5). The desistance period during the life-course of gang membership, particular the emotional process that a former gang member experiences during this process, may therefore be viewed as the social phenomena being studied in this dissertation. Qualitative research was an appropriate method to use for this study as it “attempts to understand a problem from the perspectives of the local population it involves” and it is also “especially effective in obtaining culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviors, and social contexts of particular populations” (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005, p. 1). The data collected in this study focused on former gang members who are currently living in the community, adding to the overall research that is needed in these settings. The specific approach I used in this study is Grounded Theory. Grounded theory applies nicely to this study as I examined the psychological processes involved in gang desistance.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory emerged from the field of sociology and the Chicago School. Its history is in ethnographic fieldwork and interview studies. Originally developed by
Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory is a methodology that aims to build theory from data. This is done by constructing robust explanations of actions and interactions (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Some have included Grounded Theory as an overall approach or genre in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013), while others view it more as an analytic approach (Rossman & Rallis, 2012).

The grounded theory approach implies there will be simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis - that the merging analysis shapes data collection decisions. Early analytic work allows for the collection of more data around emerging themes and questions. The methods used in grounded theory are considered to be systematic and inductive, where gathering, synthesizing, analyzing, and conceptualizing qualitative data is used to construct theory (Charmaz, 2001). As Charmaz (2003) also indicates: “The core components of grounded theory studies are analytic categories developed while studying the data rather than preconceived concepts or hypotheses” (p. 86).

While grounded theory has its origins in sociology, it has also been used more broadly among the social sciences and in various settings, of which Psychology is included. As Charmaz (2003) indicates: “Psychologists can use grounded theory to study individual process, interpersonal relations, and the reciprocal effects between individual and larger societal processes. Including: motivation, emotion, etc.” This study attempts to primarily examine the individual emotional process of former gang members. Additionally, gangs and gang members (former or current), both impact or are impacted by larger societal processes. For these reasons, grounded theory was selected in order to address the emotional and psychological aspects of gang desistance that remain unexamined in the literature.
Constructivist Grounded Theory

Since its original introduction in 1967, grounded theory has been modified and used in many studies presently with the inclusion of a constructivist approach. The constructivist form of grounded theory, largely developed by Charmaz (1995, 2002, 2005), supports the following principles: “a.) multiple realities exist, b.) data reflect the researcher’s and the research participants’ mutual constructions, and c.) the researcher, however, incompletely, enters the and is affected by the participants’ worlds” (Charmaz, 2002, p. 678).

Social Justice Emphasis

Grounded theory has also been incorporated with the study of social justice issues. “Studying social justice issues means paying greater attention to inequality and its social and historical contexts” (Charmaz, 2005, p. 529). This is in line with life-course theory, which emphasizes the life-course of an individual within their broader societal and historical context. A social justice research approach can also use grounded theory to plan for future action, practice, and policies in the analysis (Charmaz, 2005, p. 512). Community action research is an example of this type of research. While I did not conduct any community action research, data will be shared with the community affected by it - with group and community leaders who may agree or disagree with the findings, but who may also find them useful regardless to future programing with youth who are trying to leave the gang. The social justice approach is also in line with Counseling Psychology’s Multicultural Guidelines, Social Justice goals, and Ethical Standards of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2010). This study therefore incorporated a constructivist form of grounded theory with an emphasis on social justice issues.
Suitability of Grounded Theory

Grounded theory was the most suitable approach for my topic, as I strived to understand the psychological process a former gang member experiences after deciding to leave the gang. Using a grounded theory approach, “The researcher focuses on a process or an action that has distinct steps or phases that occur over time…a grounded theory study has “movement” or some action that the researcher is attempting to explain” (Creswell, 2013, p. 85).

I selected grounded theory as my approach primarily based on my research questions (see next section) and what I was interested in learning about gang desistance. Creswell (2013) indicated that “Grounded theory is a good design to use when a theory is not available to explain or understand a process” (p. 88). Based on my review of the literature, a majority of the studies being done in this area have focused on the process of joining a gang, rather than leaving a gang. The grounded theory approach was helpful in exploring the psychological process of gang desistance.

Creswell (2013) also indicted that “Participants in the study would all have experienced the process, and the development of the theory might help explain practice or provide a framework for further research” (p. 83). This approach was appropriate for participants who are former gang members, as they would have all experienced the process of being in and then leaving a gang. I also appreciated this approach’s potential to provide a framework for future research. As Pyrooz & Decker (2011) indicated that criminal involvement may not cease after leaving a gang, learning more about the psychological process of gang desistance may be beneficial for future intervention research with this population.
Framing of Research Questions

While the research has addressed some of the reasons for joining and leaving a gang, the process of how desistance occurs remains unclear. The purpose of this grounded theory study was to understand the psychological process an individual experiences in leaving a gang.

Initial research questions in grounded theory should “focus on understanding how individuals experience the process and identify the steps in the process (What was the process? How did it unfold?)” (Creswell, 2013, p. 88). As the research progresses and participants are re-visited, further questions that address the core phenomenon, causal conditions, strategies, and consequences are addressed. A helpful way to organize this information is to write a central question, beginning with *how* or *what*, followed by several sub-questions (Creswell, 2013).

Applied to this study, the central question that guided my study was: What is the psychological process a former gang member experiences after deciding to leave the gang? Sub-questions included: What situations, beliefs and/or feelings led to your decision to leave the gang? How would you describe the process of leaving the gang? What meaning does the gang have for you currently? and How has leaving the gang impacted your life today?

Setting

This study took place in the greater Denver metropolitan area. Adolescent former gang members or those trying to leave their gang were recruited from the Denver community for participation in the study. Specifically, participants were recruited with the assistance of a community partner/gatekeeper who is the Program
Assistant/Education Specialist for the community organization Gang Rescue and Support Project (GRASP). GRASP is a peer-run, community intervention program that works with youth who are at-risk of gang involvement or are presently active in gangs in Denver and surrounding areas. They aim to prevent youth from joining gangs and/or help youth who are in the process of leaving the gang. They do this by providing a safe space for youth to attend things like workshops and weekly support groups. They also work with doctors to help youth with gang tattoo removal; and with schools, other community organizations, and are sometimes featured on local radio programs.

I was first referred to GRASP in 2012 while completing a psychology training practicum at the Denver County Jail. After approaching GRASP with this research project, I was then referred to my initial community partner, Ron Blan, the A-GRIP Outreach Worker within GRASP, with whom I was able to further discuss the details of my proposal and the options for conducting interviews. The initial community partner helped with pilot testing the interview protocol, as well as trying to identify another staff member who would also be willing to pilot test the interview protocol, prior to beginning the formal recruitment process. Ron Blan eventually left GRASP, and I ended up working with my community partner for this project, Jason McBride, over the past two to three years, who was added to the project as a research assistant.

Participants

**Purposeful Selection.** Participants were recruited for interviews based on purposeful selection. Theoretical selection was also applied in later portions of the data collection process.
**Inclusion criteria:** Participants were screened for inclusion criteria; including being a male or female between 13 – 29 years of age, having self-identified as a former gang member or trying to leave their gang, and speaking English or Spanish (according to the preference of the participant). Participants were also screened for exclusion criteria: having severe neurological impairments, severe developmental disabilities, and a history of severe psychopathology and/or impaired decision makers. No one was excluded from participating in this study.

**Sample.** Community based sampling that integrates convenience sampling was used for this study. Participants were recruited with the help of a community partner/gatekeeper who is the Program Assistant/Education Specialist for GRASP. As an outsider, my community partner was helpful in presenting the study to potential participants in a non-threatening and non-obligatory manner. My information was made available and participants were able to contact me about the study. Each participant received a $20 gift card for their involvement in the study.

**Sample Size.** Twelve interviews were completed and 11 included in the analysis for this study. Glaser (1998) cautions against preconceiving “interview guides, units for data collection, samples, received codes, following diagrams, rules for proper memoing and so forth” (p. 94). While some grounded theory studies may use more than 30 participants, it has also been noted that “the sample for grounded theory study needs to be representative, but it's unnecessary and perhaps defeating to collect huge amounts of data” (Stern, 2007, p. 117). As Glaser (1998) pointed out, “these large files tend to go unanalyzed, or researchers becomes overwhelmed with the sheer volume they have to deal with, and loses the fundamental processes going on in the area of study” (Stern,
He also states that “Most methodology authors advise learners that saturation is reached when the learner hears nothing new” (p. 117).

Participant Recruitment. Participants were youth between the ages of 15 – 26, who self-identified at White/Caucasian, Hispanic/Latinx/Chicano/a, and Black/African American. They were recruited with the help of the community partner/gatekeeper, Jason McBride, who is the Program Assistant/Education Specialist for GRASP. Participants for this project were recruited primarily through GRASP’s weekly youth groups that are led by the community partner and other staff. With the support of my community partner, I attended this group regularly and explained the nature of the study. Youth were told that if they were interested in participating in the study, but would like to discuss it privately, they may contact the community partner. Youth already had the community partner’s phone number and also used social media, such as Facebook, to contact the community partner and stay updated on GRASP activities. The community partner/research assistant also recruited participants from additional community programs/organizations, including: High Above Everything, which supports the City Wide Tutoring and Mentoring, and Kids Above Everything programs, Free School Supplies and Haircuts (FRESH101) program, and Future Leaders Training Institute.

The community partner/research assistant also helped obtain parent/guardian consent for youth who were under 18 years old. A separate meeting date with each participant was scheduled in order to conduct each interview. Interviews took place at the GRASP office or at locations that were convenient to the participant, such as their afterschool program, or other community office space, according to their preference.
The community partner was present at each of these meetings to facilitate introductions between the PI and participants.

**Table 1. Participant Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
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<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic/Latino/Latina/Chicano/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
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<td>Male</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hispanic/Latino/Latina/Chicano/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>P11</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Collection**

Individuals interested in participating were screened in-person for eligibility to participate in a study that examines the psychological process of leaving a gang. Eligible participants then participated in a 1.5 – 2 hour interview on the same day if they were at the weekly group meeting. I introduced myself and thanked each participant for their willingness to share their experience with me. Participants were given both verbal and written consent information. I reviewed the informed consent form with each participant and had them complete the demographics form. I explained that we might discuss topics in the interview that could lead to feelings of stress, and that the participant was not obligated to answer all of my questions and could withdraw at any time. Each participant was also provided with a list of community counseling resources.
After any participant questions were answered, participants were asked to complete a demographics questionnaire prior to the interview. Interviews were then conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol. Water and snacks were provided. At the end of each interview, participants were asked if they would like to schedule a follow-up meeting(s) or phone call(s) to check that I had accurately captured their responses and experiences (member checking). Participants were thanked and given a $20 gift card for their participation. Two drawings for a $25 gift card at each drawing was also completed for those who participated in follow-up interviews.

Data was collected only after obtaining informed consent. Participants were assigned a pseudonym to match an ID number generated for the purpose of the study. The only place this pseudonym was linked to participants' ID numbers was on a password-protected electronic file kept on my password-protected computer. All other research materials contained only the pseudonym. Pseudonyms were generated by myself with the help of the community partner so each pseudonym was not traceable to the participant. Project data was also be backed up on an encrypted jump drive with only participant pseudonyms. Throughout the study, all materials, both paper and digital (encrypted jump drive), were maintained in a locked cabinet in a secure location that only I was be able to access.

**Data Sources.** There were two primary sources of data: semi-structured interviews and field notes. Memos were also written.

**Semi-Structured Interviews.** A semi-structured interview protocol (See Appendix B) was used to conduct all interviews. As indicated on the protocol, I attempted to answer certain questions during each interview, with others being listed as
supporting questions or probes that I asked as necessary or relative to the context being discussed. However, it was not my goal to get answers to all the questions during each interview. The semi-structured interview format served as a guide to understanding the experience of the individual, but it could also be deviated from. Once each interview was complete, I thanked the participant, discussed their reaction to the interview, reminded them to use the counseling resources, and discussed member checking.

**Field Notes.** Prior to obtaining IRB approval I engaged in re-establishing rapport with the GRASP. I regularly attended one of their weekly groups for youth who are former gang members or trying to leave the gang. Field notes were written throughout the data collection process away from the site.

**Data Analysis**

Using the systematic procedures of Strauss and Corbin (1990; 1998), I conducted and transcribed my semi-structured one-on-one interviews with 12 participants to saturate the categories. I used an interview protocol based on my central question and sub-questions. The interview protocol allowed for follow-up probes. I also used memoing throughout the research process to aid in theory formation.

“While there are many analytic strategies, two stand out. These are asking questions and making comparisons” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Glasser (1978; 1992) has also noted that studying the emerging data is most important. For the purposes of this study, *open, axial, and selective coding* (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) along with the *constant comparative method* (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) of data analysis were used to develop an initial theory. While Strauss & Corbin (1990) separated open and axial coding initially, they later reinforce that they go hand in hand, and were only talked
about separately for descriptive purposes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Open coding was therefore used to search for major categories in the data. Axial coding was used to help identify the central phenomenon. Further categories were created around this core phenomenon and a visual model developed. Finally, selective coding was used to develop propositions about the model, by interrelating the categories, ultimately developing the story and theory.

**Ethical Considerations**

Working with this population carries inherent risks. In order to minimize these as much as possible, it is important to consider numerous ethical issues for both participants and researcher. The primary issues of concern within this study in particular were: ensuring safety, protecting confidentiality, protecting participant’s rights, and managing potential mental health issues.

**Ensuring Safety.** When considering safety concerns for this study, the initial thoughts that came to my mind involved aspects of physical space, such as the location where interviews were held and who will be there at the time of each interview. Qualitative research has been very flexible in this regard, with researchers interviewing their participants in public or personal spaces, such as their homes. Gang research in particular even began at the ethnographic level with Thrasher’s (1927) foundational work in Chicago. Other ethnographic gang studies (Rodgers, 2007), have also been conducted, each arguably containing their own safety risks for the researchers who exposed themselves to the gang environment. Although I will be interviewing former gang members, several safety concerns regarding physical space need to be addressed.
The location of the interview is very important when it comes to safety of both participant and researcher. As has been recently commented in the literature, former gang members may retain ties to their gang (Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2014), which may be the case with some of the participants I will be interviewing. Some may be hesitant to even participate in this type of study to begin with, for fear that their former gang will find out. As I will be conducting the interviews, I will also naturally become associated with the former gang members I speak with. In order to minimize these associations and protect both participants and myself from any negative implications as a result of these interviews, I will do things like arrive early to the interview site and leave after the interviewee has left. I will change the times for each interview so there is no predictability in scheduling. For example, if I am frequently interviewing participants after a group meeting, I will arrive one hour early and leave one hour late (barring unforeseen consequences such as the building needing to be locked) for one interview. For the next interview, I will arrive 45 minutes early and leave 30 minutes after the end of the interview. I will also consult with program leaders (gatekeepers) to see where they think it is best for interviews to be held and if they or someone else who is aware of the project will be able to remain in the building for the duration of the interview. This will also be essential for the debriefing/mental health concerns check that will done at the end of each interview. More of this will be covered in the mental health section.

Other ways of improving safety of the researcher include things like dress and transportation. I will observe how other program leaders dress, and try to do the same. As an outsider, my goal is to present a non-threatening demeanor, while being careful to not come across as trying to over-identify with everyone through my dress, which has
the potential to be interpreted in a negative manner. For example, some of these programs may sell T-shirts advocating for their program. I would not find it fitting to purchase one of these and wear it to each interview, seeing as I have not been heavily involved with these programs, beyond attending some community events and networking with key individuals. To the youth who I will be interviewing, I remain a stranger, an outsider. Therefore, I will most likely be dressing in a more casual style than in other professional settings, in order to respect the general organization atmosphere, while also remaining accurate to my own identity. I will also be mindful not to wear anything containing logos or slogans that could be distracting to anyone. I hope that by doing this I may also be able to build rapport easier with interviewees.

Depending on where interviews will be held, transportation is something I will be aware of as well. I believe most of the groups will be held in schools, therefore I will most likely park in the school’s lot. If the school has security or an escort service I will be sure to use this for my own safety. If I am doing an interview at a community mental health center I will likely use the lot there as well and follow the same procedure. If at any time I need to park and walk to a site I will need to be more mindful of my surroundings. I would not feel comfortable conducting any interviews at night, especially if I will need to park away from the site. Therefore I will be trying to conduct interviews earlier in the day. If conducting an interview at night is the only option, I will try to get an escort for that evening or reschedule the interview. Additionally, I will let my advisor know of my whereabouts each time I plan to visit a site and conduct interviews.
Protecting Confidentiality. Due to the nature of this population, extenuating measures will need to be taken in order to protect each participant’s confidentiality. While I will explain and provide a confidentiality form to each participant (should they choose to take one), I will not require them to sign the form, as putting their real name on any document has the potential to cause more harm. While I plan to take other precautions, such as keeping all research materials in a locked cabinet, there is no guarantee that one of these forms may end up in the wrong hands, which could have serious consequences to any parties involved. Therefore, in an effort to protect each participant, alternate methods of consent will be used, such as checking a “yes” or “no” box on the copy of the form that I keep, or by giving verbal consent at the start of each interview. Participants will also be given pseudonyms that will be used throughout the study in order to protect their identity. Materials will be shredded at the conclusion of the study.

Protecting Participants’ Rights. I will also be discussing the sensitive nature of the interviews at the beginning when reviewing the confidentiality and consent forms. Protecting participant rights is important to address at this time as well. Due to the power differential involved in the interview process, there is always the possibility that the participant may feel the need to answer all of my questions. Therefore, I will be sure to highlight at the beginning of each interview that if the participant feels uncomfortable answering any questions, they may simply ask to skip those questions, including debriefing questions at the end. Additionally, I will remind participants that they may withdraw from the study at any point in time. If a participant chooses to withdraw, I will ask them the debriefing questions to make sure they are feeling ok, but will also remind
them that they do not have to answer these either. I will also be sure to thank each participant both at the beginning and end of each interview.

**Managing Potential Mental Health Issues.** Interviews can generally be unpredictable. We cannot predict how someone will answer a question or how a question will make them feel. As this study in particular is looking at a psychological process, each interview has the possibility of stirring up a variety of feelings and emotions for the participant involved. This may include feelings of depression or anxiety. Some participants may also feel more comfortable sharing their personal experiences, which may include traumatic events. Although, the level of detail shared is less relevant compared to how each participant feels after the interview. Each participant will have their own reaction to the interview once it is completed. Therefore, I plan to take some time at the end of each interview to process how the interview went for each participant and how they are feeling in that moment. For me this is the most important aspect of the interview. After asking former gang members to open up about their experiences and be vulnerable with a stranger, it would not be fair to leave them feeling overwhelmed with any residual feelings that have the potential to harm their current emotional state or make them feel worse in that moment. A check-in and debriefing period is necessary at the end of each interview to make sure each participant has the opportunity to process the actual experience of being interviewed and to make sure they feel stable enough to leave.

While I wish to protect the mental health and safety of each participant, I will also need to monitor my process as well. As a psychologist in training, I may begin to feel overly protective of participants, and need to be mindful of this, so that an interview
does not turn into a form of a counseling session. I view my role as using my counseling knowledge to evaluate how each participant is feeling at the end of the interview and to discuss this with them some, but to then provide them with appropriate referrals. I will be doing this for each participant even if they do not have any concerns after the interview is completed. If a staff member is there, they may also speak with them. Ideally someone will be there to be available to a participant after the interview is completed if the participant wishes to talk more.

**Subjectivity Statement**

In line with a constructivist point of view, it is important to acknowledge both realities of the researcher and the participants’ mutual constructions (Charmaz, 2006). As I stated previously, I became interested in this topic after watching a presentation associated with my counseling training at the jail. Why was I so interested in this presentation in particular? What led me to even pursue a counseling training experience at the jail to begin with? These answers have to do more broadly with my commitment to helping what are typically referred to in counseling psychology as underserved and economically disadvantaged populations, of which a large portion tends to include ethnic minorities. Within this population, I experience a bias towards working with ethnic minorities who identify themselves as Latinx.

So why gangs? Why gangs, when I have never been involved with a gang, joined a gang, or associated with a gang or any gang related activity? The answer, in part, comes down to something very simple: pain. When I think of gangs, my mind automatically goes to Latinx based gangs first. It then becomes painful for me to think about the history of gangs in Latin America, particularly during the civil war in El
Salvador (also the time when I was born), and the subsequent violence that has ensued. Too many lives lost. Too many families displaced and gone. I consider myself lucky to be alive. When I think about all of the painful and traumatic instances people will endure in their lives, somehow it still pains me most to think about the ways in which similar ethnic and cultural groups, such as Latinxs, continue to be trapped by gang violence - continue to fight against each other, continue to kill each other.

I approached this research from my reality, which is largely influenced by my bi-cultural background (Latina and Jewish), coupled with my privileged status and training as doctoral student in a Counseling Psychology program. Born in El Salvador, I was raised in a Jewish family. I learned Spanish when I was six years old. I have experienced and learned to cope with my own trauma and mental health concerns, and have become more resilient in the process. While I considered topics for this dissertation that were more directly relatable to my own personal life experiences, I could not shake the feeling that something felt off. In the end, the links between my past, my feelings of pain, and my identity brought out a new passion and made me feel more compelled to work with this population.

Despite having some potential commonalities with participants, such as partial ethnic identity, I also acknowledge that I was likely viewed as an outsider, especially with respect to my privileged status and education level. While I also identify as Latinx, I am lighter in my skin tone and complexion than a majority of the participants. The meaning of this for me within the research was that of needing to be observant of my position of power as the interviewer, and respectful of the boundaries of each participant.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Data Analysis

Eleven participant interviews were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Each interview was subjected to the same in-depth analysis. First, I listened to and reactionary notes were taken. Open coding then took place in an unstructured line-by-line format. I then coded each interview using axial and selective coding. Interviews were listened to once again and notes were taken on the emotionality of each interview. Shorter memos were conducted throughout the entire process, as well as an additional longer memo that was written up as the last step to the listening and coding process. The following sections describe the results of this analysis beginning with a brief description of each participant.

P1

At the time of his interview, P1 had just joined GRASP after being referred to Jason by his family. He had recently relocated to Denver from another state and his family was concerned about his gang affiliation. He described a good connection with Jason, and appeared confident and goal-oriented. He talked about the streets as a living entity, using language like “made me” or “did to me.” He also used mental health language, and acknowledged feeling “depressed” in prison and “traumatized” due to the street lifestyle. What stood out to me in his interview was his mental state, self-awareness, attitude towards change and self-confidence to create change.
P2

P2 had been coming to GRASP for some time and is well known among the mentors. He was recruited to be in his family affiliated gang at 9-10 years old and got his first gang tattoos then as well. He expressed some career goals, and his main motivator to leave the gang is his sister. In his member checking interview, he stated he has started thinking about himself more but is still motivated by his sister and niece (born later) to leave. P2’s salient event was when his uncles went to prison, which was a big tipping point for him to leave the gang. During his member checking he also indicated that he plans to pursue emancipation from his family. He seemed more confident during member checking, but also still anxious and doubtful if he can stick to goals in the future.

P3

P3’s interview is reflective of a more mature youth who is further along in the desistance process. P3 informed her family of her desire to leave the gang when she was younger, approximately 16 years old. She is currently 19 and does more reflection in her interview on things being hard “at the time” of leaving, and how they have improved since. She attributes much of her success in finding GRASP, and mentor at the time Gerardo Lopez, who came to her school to give a presentation about GRASP. Youth found herself wanting to go to a meeting because she could relate to Gerardo. While Gerardo is no longer with GRASP, P3 has continued to attend GRASP youth group meeting and events.

P4

P4 is older than some of the other study participants, and has been out of the gang for some time, after spending approximately a decade being involved. He was exposed at a young age during childhood due to his family’s gang history. He was very open and
able to describe his feelings with greater depth than some of the other participants. P4 discussed the meaning of “being a man” and modeling his behavior after uncles and cousins. He spoke about factors motivating him to leave such as his girlfriend, wanting his family to be proud of him, and being a better person. P4 also asked about treatment for PTSD, noting some trauma symptoms, but saying he felt “lucky” to not be in a position as bad as other gang members he knows. He noted the importance of more trauma work with gang members.

P5

P5 was different from other participants because he was the only one who disclosed that he had founded a gang. He explained that this took place with other youth he met while waiting for the train one day. He described going to someone’s basement and hanging out and fighting each other to demonstrate interest in forming the gang. He communicated with his new friends (and soon to be gang members) via social media and they kept the group growing this way and at parties.

P5 also had a different plan for leaving the gang. He didn’t tell anyone he wanted to leave the gang, but had his own strategy to bring new people into the gang with hopes that they would eventually replace him, so he could exit from his leadership position. His major actions and efforts to exit the gang were keeping an eye out for up and coming new members with promise to replace him, as well as avoiding hanging out with members when they wanted to commit crimes. He was the first youth to give specific examples of lies he would tell members to get out of seeing them, such as “I’m with my parole officer” or “I’m having dinner with my family.” He talked about taking alternate routes to
get to places to avoid running into people in person, distancing himself from members on social media, and staying at home where he feels the most safe.

Emotionally, he expressed mixed emotions of feeling positive about his efforts, while also being worried about his safety and threat to life if he ran into members. He also felt bad about leaving behind good friends who once “had my back.” He felt like he was betraying the gang. He talked about the loss of those friendships. A big tipping point for P5 seemed to be when he went to jail and upon release began hearing from gang members who wanted to hang out with him to engage in more crime. His experience in jail helped deter him from wanting to engage in activity that could get him sent back again. He also indicated that GRASP was helpful but did not talk about it as much as some of the other participants.

P6

This interview was conducted with a youth who was gang involved from approximately 14 years old to 16 years old. She reported being left out of family, not asked to do things, and stated they probably thought she was “weird.” She did not elaborate on why, but reported she was eventually asked to do stuff for the gang and was affiliated via her cousin, who was later described as protecting her by minimizing her involvement to others. She went back and forth on her definition of involvement, which seemed muddled by her cousin’s interpretation as well. Sometimes he would say it was “acceptable” for her to be involved, and other times he did not want her to be. She said she was not formally jumped into the gang, but at times jumped in other members. She made many conflicting statements regarding these levels of involvement. Ultimately, she still did need to have a conversation with members to leave, not OGs, but significant leaders it seemed, before she was able to exit. She reported the process of exiting wasn’t
as hard for her as for others and she did not need to be jumped out, but worried about getting jumped even after leaving, if some people thought she was still gang affiliated. While I will not label her an active member, she was close enough to be considered gang involved during those years.

She made reflections about joining when she did, saying she was a kid at the time, and that the gang “put a lot of stuff in my head” and “all this crazy stuff.” Ultimately, it was hard seeing her family in the gang light, and she was impacted by the “sacrifices” people make for the gang, and commented about how when you are in the gang, it is hard to see beyond that. She described what seemed like a gang bubble environment, making it hard to think about others you impact. Being in the gang can make people so focused on moving up within the gang hierarchy she commented, something that hasn’t been expressed as much in other interviews. Other descriptors of her involvement included “unreal” and “scary” (what people sacrifice to be in gang). She commented about seeing many people die, seemingly for not good reasons, a sentiment that was similar to P3. Her comments about feeling “reckless” are similar to P1 and “savage.” She experienced some shift in thoughts of others, how actions would impact family, as turning point, and similar to other interviews. She stated she also realized the gang “wasn’t me” and she is “better than that.” She continues to explore the idea of identity and not wanting to identify with the gang. She had career goals to be a nurse, similar to other youth wanting to pursue higher education. Religion helped her leave and was a bigger turning point as she became more interested in the content and it gave her something to do in place of the gang (introduced by father and aunt – helped with aunt’s class). She made behavioral efforts to stay on track by focusing time and energy on school and work. She reported several
coping skills, including continuing to journal every other day, as well as describing her sister as a role model – someone she could relate to who overcame her own challenges.

P7

This interview was conducted at the GRASP office. Youth has a family history of gang involvement from 2 rivalry gangs. He finds it “weird” that his family argues over gang issues and that gang members from the same gang fight each other. Motives to leave were primarily from his older brother who “scolded” him and warned him to stay away from the gang and to pursue a better life. Youth also was motivated to do other thing with his time and found work and meaning in making “real money” or legal money, versus fast / illegal money via gang activities. He also described his time in the gang as “fun” which I have not heard before, but when he specified he also meant because of the “rush” of getting caught, which has been described as appealing by some. He claims his affiliation was with a “clique” which is described as a “made up” version of the gang since members of cliques are usually too young to joining the gang. He then contradicted himself by saying everyone in his clique but him were affiliated with the gang. It’s a very odd description and is quite possible he may not have been forthcoming. He also stated later on that he thinks some of his family did not know about his affiliation or tried to keep his involvement unknown to others, but I find it unlikely that he would have actually fooled anyone considering his family is gang affiliated and he engaged in many behaviors with peers. For whatever reason, he was willing to go into detailed definitions and knowledge more than other youth about gang operations, but does was careful to not label himself as a gang member. Part of this could be that he just doesn’t trust me,
obviously understandable, and is trying to self-protect. In any case, he still provided a
detailed interview and discussed his motivations to leave and his emotional process.

The back and forth style was seen here as in other interviews, contradicting
himself regarding emotion. Once I probed further, I found he was scared after leaving due
to threats he may encounter, and having to work on breaking gang ties and making up
excuses for why he couldn’t engage in criminal activity with peers. He struggled to label
emotions or personal experiences, similar to others, and frequently described things as
“weird.” He experienced early childhood trauma and emotional loss and actual loss via
death of friends etc. due to gang violence. He has career goals to become a nurse. He
works with GRASP to become a mentor and has a home healthcare position. He feels
good about his future even though leaving was hard and he felt some empathy about
leaving friends behind who are in the gang.

P8

P8 was the only youth who did not want his interview recorded. Notes were taken
instead which led to a shorter interview overall. He said he was about four or five years
old when he became aware of gangs in his neighborhood. He felt like he could “gain
knowledge from gang members and family. Particularly family” even if the topics were
not gang related. He expressed wanting a different future for himself and was motivated
to leave the gang due to the chance of going to jail and losing friends. He also clarified
that he may be able to be less active in the gang, but not leave the gang. “In my gang
people don’t leave, but they aren’t active. They have priorities – family, work, etc.”

When asked about his education and career goals, he had various interests including:
“Entrepreneur, barber, construction, running my own business. Buying properties.”
This interview is the longest I’ve conducted at about two and a half hours. The interview stood out amongst all the rest because it was with an older individual who was very expressive and was able to reflect more extensively on her experience leaving the gang. She has also left gang life behind for some years and stated she does not consider herself to be an active gang member presently. Speaking with her felt more like hearing a complete story of someone who has successful left the gang, whereas the other youth I have interviewed seem to still be more in the process of trying to leave. The actual content was varied from other interviews in that she also spoke to her experience with gang tattoo removal, abuse of women in gangs, rape, as well as her opinions about how therapist may perceive her and getting therapy in general, for herself and her son. Overall the interview felt like it offered some of the richest data, due to many factors, including length, her ability to speak in greater detail about her experiences, and offer new insights into areas previously not covered in earlier interviews. I remember leaving that day feeling like it was both draining to conduct and an amazing interview. It almost felt similar to some longer and more intense therapy sessions I’ve conducted, but without being actual therapy of course. I don’t think it was therapeutic for her, as she described herself as being a very open person and willing to help out. The overall openness of the youth has continuously surprised me along the way. There have been moments where they chose not to disclose things of course, but overall the response style has been as forthcoming as I think it can be with a relative stranger.
This interview was with a young female who attends group when she can. She has a history of addiction/drug abuse problems and is currently in treatment. She described a history of gang involvement without officially being “put on.” Another case that adds confusion to the definition of “gang member.” She described her family as first generation gang members (mom and dad side, aunts, uncles, grandmother) and wanting to join at age 13 after viewing her father as a role model. This perception seems to change later after becoming more gang involved. She also referred to family as her bloodline but also in a broader sense, the block or the neighborhood, since she witnessed the growth of her family’s gang. She was sent to “put in work” for the gang, but her father ultimately did not want her to join. She believes he was building her up to be “put on” and then “just letting me fall.” She also described him as “sucky” and that he was not in the right frame of mind due to drug use. Some key areas that stood out during this interview are: youth’s newborn daughter as a reason to get out of the gang lifestyle, female experience in the gang – alluding to witnessing family members rape other women, at least one clear turning point/specific event that led to her decision to leave the gang. Her narrative of the specific event is more detailed than any other interview and is both quite compelling and disturbing. After working with clients from similar disadvantaged backgrounds, once and awhile a narrative will transpire that makes me freeze and feel pain in my heart. This is probably the 3rd or 4th time it’s happened. I don’t say this to be dramatic, but I literally feel something physically change inside my body. I end up thinking that it is in these moments that what I am feeling may be the closest I will ever get to understanding the lived experience of the individual I am interviewing or working with. I then think if what
they are sharing has caused this reaction in me, I can only begin to imagine how much worse it must be for them.

P11

P11 has a family gang history and indicated that first he was involved in a “clique” that was “off of the gang.” He described it as “We weren’t no gang, we was little kids. So it was like a clique, it was just friends, we was all friends, but it was basically a gang because we was all friends but it was just us little, my school, it was at.” He wanted to join the gang to make money and also expressed an interest in guns from a young age. He eventually joined the gang through a “quote session” at age 13. He also described a time where he went to school in a wealthier area and felt “safe” and like he “didn’t have to worry about nothing.”

He was motivated to leave the gang after witnessing violence and feeling like the gang didn’t support him. The death of friends took an emotional toll on him: “I started seeing like people who was close to me in the gang, die. Started seeing them die. They was gone. So it was breaking me.” He was also warned by OGs to not persist in the gang. When asked about the future he expressed goals of becoming wealthy and “changing the world in a positive way.” Specifically, “I see me owning my own boxing gym. And just helping, just youth like get their anger out, and bring a whole bunch of youth together.”

The Model

Open Coding

Open coding was conducted using a line-by-line format to begin organizing the data. See Appendix: Table 1 for examples of this initial coding.
Axial Coding

The constant comparison analysis, memoing, and notes were used to create axial codes(categories from the initial open coding analysis. See Appendix: Table 2 for these results.

Selective Coding

After axial codes were analyzed, a core category emerged that was linked to eight of the ten codes addressing the central research questions: What is the psychological process a former gang member experiences after deciding to leave the gang? What is the psychological process a former gang member experiences after deciding to end their ties to the gang? The core category that emerged was: Living with Continuous Internal Struggles and Emotional Discord (See Appendix). The psychological process of leaving the gang and ending gang ties was then represented by the following model:
Figure 1. The Model

CORE: Living with Continuous Internal Struggles and Emotional Discord

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

JOINING PROCESS
(Jumped in, Blessed On)

EXITING PROCESS
(Turning Point)

INTERNAL STRUGGLE
(Bittersweet Feelings)

PERSONAL RESILIENCY LEVEL

PROCESS OF RE-LEARNING
(Identity)

OVERCOMING ADVERSITY
(Cutting Gang Ties)

EMOTIONALITY OF JOINING
(Loyalty, Power)

NEGATIVE IMPACTS ON MENTAL HEALTH
(Anxiety, Stress, Depression, PTSD, Substance Abuse, Grief and Loss)

PROMISING FUTURES
As is shown, the core category of Living with Continuous Internal Struggles and Emotional Discord is experienced throughout the joining and exiting process. It may also lead to negative impacts on mental health and may impact a youth’s ability to overcome adversity, such as cutting gang ties.

**Axial Code 1: Joining Process**

This category describes a combination of what motivated youth to join their gang and the method in which they joined. While a majority of participants came from families with pre-established gang involvement, levels of participation and affiliation varied. Some youth reported being “jumped in” in order to join the gang, while others reported being “blessed on.” (See Appendix for gang terminology definitions as explained by youth being interviewed.) One participant described being affiliated with a “clique” at school that had some gang affiliation but was not a formal part of the gang. This is an interesting example of the struggle in the literature to define the term “gang member.”

Well I wouldn’t call myself a member of like the official but I would call myself a member of my friend’s official clique. You know how we make like little cliques for High School and stuff like that? I guess I could say I was a part of that. But it wasn’t a real gang but a made up gang for our friends. But they were all real gang members except me. (P2)

**So what do you mean “made up gang?”**

Clarified during Member Checking: [Made up gang is where someone else creates their own gang because they are too young to join the real gang. Too young to get jumped in. Some people get jumped in around 14.] (P2).
One participant described his process of forming a gang with his friends in which the youth created their joining process, which included being jumped in.

We went to his house and ... to his basement and hung out. They wanted to see what I had in me. So they just caught the heads, you know. Just to see you know. Just to see just to make sure like I’m good you know. And then the next thing they started messaging me on Facebook and we just got together. As soon as we hung out more, we started getting bigger. Going to X. And we started getting big at X, going to parties, then, there you go, they had this gang, we joined in (P5).

**So you founded a gang?**

Yeah (P5).

Another participant was recruited to join the gang after an older “OG” (Original Gangster) gang member befriended him.

Started hanging out with him and found out he’s an OG for the *****s. He wants to put me on so I can be his little homie, so we could make moves together. (P2)

Motivators for joining the gang varied, with some youth feeling a sense of family pride and obligation, as this was what they knew growing up, and others modeling their behavior after their siblings. The emotional aspects of joining also play a large role, and will be expanded upon in the next category.

**Axial Code 2: Emotionality of Joining**

This category was selected to further elaborate on the emotional aspects youth associated with joining the gang or participating in a gang related groups, such as “cliques.” Many youth described feeling the gang possessed a sense of power and status, and if they joined they would be able to partake in these things as well. Some described
feeling “untouchable” and “invincible” (P4) while they were in the gang. Others felt power came from multiple sources, specifically the sheer number of gang members in their gang: “but really the power, cause they’re pretty big.” In this case, big also refers to being well known. Being able to simply “feel power” was also stated. Status, on the other hand, seemed to come more from the desire to make money and increase upward mobility. P5 and P11 describe their desire to make money:

What made us wanna start the gang is we were out there. Partying, girls, doing crime. Just selling drugs and stuff. Getting money and stuff. We just started the gang because we were doing the crimes (P5).

What made me wanna join a gang? It was just for the money. I seen a lot of like grown men havin’ money. So I was like ‘Oh they’re making money’ and I wanted to make money (P11).

Family and Friends is a key open code within this category, as a majority of participants came from families with a history of gang affiliation. In some cases they described their uncles as being the OGs of the gang, and therefore were well-known, automatically making the youth well-known within their peer group. Others reported hearing about the gang from a cousin and “tagged right along.” Many youth appeared to be attached to their families, driving influence from them, modeling their behavior, and wanting to prove themselves by joining the gang. This is where the open code Loyalty many times would overlap with Family and Friends, as youth discussed feeling the need to be loyal to the gang and their family:
I seen how strong my family was together and their loyalty, and how they really did take care of each other. Just as family … so that’s what made me really want to be a part of the family. (P10)

In this case the youth used the word “family” during their interview interchangeably to describe blood relative and non-blood relative who were also gang members. She described everyone as being “family” in order to describe her perception of group mentality. Together, the four open codes; Power, Family and Friends, Status (Money, Upward Mobility), and Loyalty form the most salient areas of the emotional aspects youth reported in their decision making process to join a gang.

**Axial Code 3: Exiting Process**

The Exiting Process has been summarized by the open codes: Motivators to Leave, Turning Point, Methods of Exiting. All youth described their initial motivators to leave the gang, while others also described a significant impacting event and/or resulting feelings that pushed them to leave - their personal turning point. Methods of exiting varied, as did methods of entry, with some youth requesting to leave the gang, and other being jumped out of the gang, to name some examples. There was also a noticeable difference in the pattern of exiting for three of the women compared to the rest of men. While these women experienced similar stress in their overall exiting process, their decision to leave was better received by their families. They even felt more support from the OGs or certain cousins to leave.

P4 summarized his motivators to leave as wanting a “better future” and to “better himself.” He went on to say he felt as though he has “wasted” his time being in the gang and “wasted a lot of opportunities.” His motivators to leave were also reflective of
wanting to be perceived more positively by his family, and to be alive for his future son, who was not yet born at the time of the interview. Youth who already had children, or who were expecting children, always stressed the importance of family and wanting to leave the gang in order to be alive for their children and to keep them away from gang life. In some cases, children were the primary reason to leave the gang:

Yeah it’s just, I think my kids, my kids play a big role in that. I don’t think if, I honestly, the honest decision, I think if I didn’t have kids, I would probably be in the same situation (P9).

A few participants also explored how religion/spirituality helped them leave the gang. P4 described being very inspired by the “testimonies” from former gang members at his church when he was trying to leave the gang. He thought “Well if they can do it, I can do it.” He indicated he also began going to church “a lot more” when “I did decide to leave the gang” and that he wanted to “walk with God and just be a better person.”

Some youth described a significant event and/or feelings that gave them the extra push to want to exit the gang. For some this was a traumatic incident that shook them and created a severe fear response. For others it was the general feeling of betrayal of the gang, and often felt when the youth was reflecting on what took place after going to prison for a gang-related crime.

P10 described a significant traumatic event that involved a retaliation murder of an innocent person. In her re-telling of the event, P10 reflected on the fragility of life and how she would feel if someone in her family was murdered in the same fashion:

And I have family and I have brothers and sisters, what if that was my mom? And I started to think about it like that and it made me sick.
Her strong emotional response prompted her to want to leave the gang:

To the point where I just, that’s when I started to not want in. And I would say I didn’t want it.

While all of the youth had experienced trauma, certain events impacted them more than others, causing them to want to exit the gang. The manner in which leaving the gang varied, but included approaches such as: requesting permission, walking away/avoiding gang contacts, and being jumped out. Additional turning points for youth included things like having children and going to prison and feeling betrayed by the gang.

**Axial Code 4: Internal Struggle**

The category Internal Struggle is used to reference both the Bittersweet Feelings and Emotional Struggle youth experienced as they tried to leave the gang. Bittersweet Feelings represents a constant tension between how youth felt about their decision to leave the gang, alternating between feeling both positive about their choice and sad to be leaving behind something so defining as the gang: “I felt disappointed but I felt like I’m doing the right thing.” (P1). P4 reflects on the role the gang played in their life:

Umm, it is kind of sad in a way because it did play a big part in my life. But uh, it’s really relieving because it makes me happy to be able to let go of all the negative things in my life (P4).

The Emotional Struggle is used to capture the ongoing sentiment youth experienced throughout their time in the gang and the process of exiting. P4 describes a time of distress and the impact of dealing with death in the community:

I don’t even know. I guess I just lived my life. I lived my life day to day. I wouldn’t really think of the future, or what would happen next. I guess I would
say I was emotionless at the time. Cause I wouldn’t cry, but I would feel hurt. So I guess there wasn’t really a way I coped with it, but I just lived with it in my heart (P4).

P3 describes the emotional struggle that is felt even after a decision to leave the gang is made and a youth may be engaging in positive behaviors to keep their distance from the gang:

I think everyone especially around my age trying to leave still battles with it. Cause I do get in my moods when I have a lot going on. I sometimes do wanna go back and do something. So I battle with it still. I know it was the best choice and that’s not what I want for my life, but then at the same time there’s times where I just think like “whatever, might as well, that’s the image everyone has of me, so why not?” It’s a struggle but I just try and do everything I can. Be involved so that I don’t go back down that path. (P3)

The Internal Struggle will vary among youth. In some cases, youth were able to discuss this in greater detail. Some also discussed their mental health history, which is very helpful when thinking about interventions for this population.

**Axial Code 5: Negative Impacts on Mental Health**

The Mental Health category was chosen to summarize the codes most mentioned during the interviews related to mental health concerns. One of the primary codes was Grief and Loss, as all participants had experienced some loss. Depression, Stress, and Anxiety were also experienced, in addition to Complex Trauma and Substance Abuse.

In her reflection on some of the hardest parts about being in a gang, P9 states:
That’s probably the hardest thing. Those are your homies. Those are the ones you never forget. I don’t know. I’ve seen my friend get murdered, like right in front of me.

The participant continued by discussing how she would try to keep herself busy to cope with death and to keep from getting “depressed.” Many youth experienced multiple mental health concerns at one time. P10 for example indicated using “drugs” to cope with grief and loss. Her interview reflects both a battle with trying to leave the gang as well as multiple attempts at substance abuse treatment.

**Axial Code 6: Personal Resiliency Level**

The category Personal Resiliency Level reflects the qualities youth explored that aid in continuously pursuing exiting the gang, despite challenges that arise along the way. Resiliency level varied across youth, as they were from various age ranges, developmental stages, and had different gang experiences. It is also important to remember that the youth in this study will naturally have a higher Personal Resiliency Level since they are already participating in or have participated in gang intervention programing, such as GRASP. As P3 explained in her interview, when she began attending group meetings at GRASP, her/peers did not wish to attend and made fun of her for going. Her desire to attend overpowered listening to her peers, demonstrating strength and a desire to change early on. The subcategories for this axial code are as follows: Strength and Confidence, Desire to Change, Coping Skills (use of), Future Oriented Thoughts, Thoughts of Others.

P9, who again has been out of the gang for years, described hopefulness in her interview for youth wanting to leave the gang, while also being realistic about the type of
person who will succeed: “It took a lot. It took a long ways. So I mean you have to be really strong to do it, and some people aren’t. Some people are. There’s just those soldiers.” (P9).

P1 who had just begun working with a mentor at GRASP and attending GRASP programming at the time of his interview, exuded much confidence, desire to change, and future oriented thoughts. “My belief is I can do anything…in this world as long as I set my mind to it. So I believe that if I’m still breathing I can do it.” (P1). He went on to describe how he wanted to improve his life: “So I was like ‘Yeah I need to do something better with my life, I need to change it now. Can’t keep doing this reckless shit’.” (P1).

Some youth were already aware of coping skills (listening to music, taking walks, boxing, writing, among others) and practicing them on their path to exiting the gang. P1 was very passionate about rapping and used this as a primary coping skill. Many youth also expressed future oriented thoughts and thoughts of others, primarily family. Those who had children were highly motivated to leave to provide a better life for their children away from the influence of gangs. Others wanted to set an example for younger siblings to stay away from gangs. Future oriented thoughts often took place in the form of career and life goals. Some youth made broad statements about wanting a “better future” (P4). Career specific goals will be discussed in a later category.

**Axial Code 7: Support Systems**

Support Systems was chosen as a category to label the numerous ways youth felt they had support in some capacity to leave the gang. Individual mentorship, whether from GRASP or another source, was expressed as the most helpful. The quality of the relationship, and feeling as though one person cared about the youth, was very impactful.
Many youth mentioned my community partner as a motivational mentor and someone who they could trust. Others drew influence from a family member, such as older siblings, who tried to discourage them from joining the gang. When asked about GRASP, all youth had positive responses. Some appreciated the individual mentoring, while others also mentioned the support groups. Overall, GRASP was described as a positive influence and, for some, the reason they persisted in their process of leaving the gang.

Other sources of support included family, employment, and religion/spirituality. In the case of P1 for example, his family provided the initial introduction to GRASP, whereas P7’s older brother discouraged him from joining the gang. One youth is from a gang affiliated family and the other is not, yet in both cases family served as motivational to their processes of leaving the gang. Employment was a good support as it provided youth with ways to stay active and away from gang activities. In the case of P10, it also provided somewhat of a social outlet for support, as she felt comfortable reaching out to her boss when she was having a hard time. In this way her employment served as supportive in more than one capacity. Finally, religion and/or spirituality were also mentioned by some youth as being helpful to their process of leaving the gang.

**Axial Code 8: Overcoming Adversity**

Overcoming Adversity was chosen to represent the numerous obstacles youth faced throughout their lives and during their process of leaving the gang. Temptations is used to describe the general sense of feeling tempted or longing to return to the gang. Youth may have wanted to return for different reasons, but regardless of motivation, they felt similarly “tempted” throughout their process of trying to leave. Gang Tie Challenges is used to reflect the difficulty youth face when deciding to cut ties with the gang. While
ties could not be fully cut, youth instead described a process of avoidance of peers and/or “homies” who would attempt to reach out and engage youth in gang activities. Cutting gang ties also impacted relationships with some family members and when family gatherings took place, there were individuals they could no longer speak with about gang activities like they once did prior to making efforts to leave the gang. It appears the cutting of ties among peers and family members in the same age groups are what impacted youth the most emotionally, and made it challenging to leave the gang and to avoid certain individuals.

Street Lifestyle reflects the lifestyle described by youth where they grew up and became familiar with gangs. P1 describes this lifestyle as a very traumatic environment:

You see shit, you get it when you’re young. Cuz I’ve seen shit that would scar you, scar people. So you know, it’s just something that the streets, they’re always looking for the youngins. The streets are the young people, at this point (P1).

Other youth referred to “the streets” as “crazy,” making them seem like a dangerous living entity with power. Some youth were better at verbalizing their experiences and used more expansive vocabulary, while others struggled or repeated phrases such as “I don’t know how to explain it.” The youth who were able to verbalize with more intentionality also appeared to have a slight advantage with overcoming adversity. Many youth also felt impacted by the last category – Judgment. Judgment in this case was felt from outsiders that youth felt were looking down on them, in particular being judged for their outward appearances with relation to gang tattoos. It is a feeling that occurred more often when travelling or working in new wealthier neighborhoods without the immediate presence of gangs. P9 in particular mentioned judging during
several places throughout her interview and discussed her gang tattoo removal process. 

Judgment in this and other cases led youth to feel dehumanized and poorly about themselves. Despite growing up in hostile environments, coping with the judgments of outsiders is another, perhaps less expected area of Overcoming Adversity experienced by many youth.

**Axial Code 9: Process of Re-Learning**

The Process of Re-Learning is used to describe a process within a process. Youth acknowledged salient aspects about themselves that they were starting to change during their process of exiting the gang. The open codes that form this category include: Trust, Forming Stable Relationships, and Identity. Many youth had to work to build trust and form stable relationships due to feeling betrayed at different points by the gang. Nearly all youth described the gang as “meaningless” currently. Youth also felt they were working on forming a new identity without the gang. P4 describes the sensation of feeling lost:

> I felt like I didn’t know myself. I knew who I was from doing all the things I did for so long. Just trying to change my life, I felt like I was a complete stranger to myself. Now I know who I am, I’m proud of who I’ve become for leaving. So, I’ve found out a lot of different things about myself in the process too. (P4)

**Axial Code 10: Promising Futures**

Promising Futures encompasses both the feelings of hopefulness and goals youth expressed for their futures. The following open codes make up this category: Optimism, Career Aspirations, Role Modeling/Mentorship, and Goals. Optimism summarizes how many youth felt both “good” and “positive” about their futures. Working in the helping
professions was a popular career aspiration, as youth took an interest in helping others from similar backgrounds as themselves. Role Modeling and Mentorship was also mentioned by some youth, specifically with regards to gang exiting mentorship. Youth expressed being inspired by their mentors from GRASP, and wanting to do something similar in the future. The open code, Goals, is included in this category to indicate additional goals some youth had, such as educational goals and parenting goals.

**Summary**

This chapter presents the results of 11 in-depth interviews with youth who were in the process of leaving gangs. The following research questions were explored: What is the psychological process a former gang member experiences after deciding to leave the gang? What is the psychological process a former gang member experiences after deciding to end their ties to the gang? Interviews were analyzed according to the cross-comparison method and coded using open, axial, and selective codes. From the open codes, 10 axial codes were produced: Joining Process, Emotionality of Joining, Exiting Process, Internal Struggle, Mental Health, Personal Resiliency Level, Support Systems, Overcoming Adversity, Process of Re-Learning, and Promising Futures. From these axial codes, the core category Living with Continuous Internal Struggles and Emotional Discord emerged. Finally, a model was created to visually demonstrate the psychological process of leaving the gang and ending gang ties.
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The purpose of this study was two-fold: first to develop a model explaining the psychological process former gang members experience after deciding to leave the gang and end their gang ties; and second to better understand the specific mental health impacts for this population. This was achieved by interviewing youth associated with the gang prevention program GRASP, and who identified as former gang members or were in the process of leaving the gang.

Participants were recruited through GRASP with the help of a community partner, Jason McBride. Interviews took place at GRASP youth group meetings in a separate room or at the GRASP office. All youth participated in an initial interview. The length of time for each interview varied from 30 minutes to 2.5 hours. Five youth also chose to participate in the optional member checking follow-up interview. These interviews also took place in the previously mentioned locations.

Interviews were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Each interview was subjected to the same in-depth analysis. First, each interview was listened to and reactionary notes were taken. Open coding took place in an unstructured line-by-line format. Interviews were coded using axial and selective coding. Interviews were listened to once again and notes were taken on the emotionality of each
interview. Shorter memos were written throughout the process, as well as an additional longer memo that was written up as the last step to the listening and coding process.

After axial codes were analyzed, a core category emerged that was linked to eight of the ten codes addressing the central research questions: What is the psychological process a former gang member experiences after deciding to leave the gang? What is the psychological process a former gang member experiences after deciding to end their ties to the gang? The core category that emerged was: Living with Continuous Internal Struggles and Emotional Discord (See Appendix). A model was then created to address processes referred to in the research questions.

**Research Question One: What is the psychological process a former gang member experiences after deciding to leave the gang?**

The core category that best describes the psychological process a former gang member experiences after deciding to leave the gang is Living with Continuous Internal Struggles and Emotional Discord. That is to say, it is not quite a linear process. Youth reported ongoing emotional struggles from the time leading up to joining the gang, their journey in the gang, their decision to leave, and the exiting process. There were various motives for exiting the gang, yet some youth additional experienced a Turning Point, which was one salient event and/or realization that led them to want to leave the gang. Anxiety and stress was experienced by many, whether they asked to leave the gang or began initiating avoidance behaviors. This is represented in the model under Negative Impacts on Mental Health. Many youth attributed their success to GRASP or someone serving a mentor role in their life. “Someone who truly cares” (P3) was helpful to all youth trying to exit the gang. GRASP is represented under Support Systems. Youth
described feeling “good” and “positive” for leaving the gang behind. Those who were further along in the gang exiting process described feeling like a different person. The element of re-learning a new identity without the gang is represented by Process of Re-Learning. Promising Futures also points to the levels of hopefulness youth felt about their futures.

Research Question Two: What is the psychological process a former gang member experiences after deciding to end their ties to the gang?

The core category that also best describes the psychological process a former gang member experiences after deciding to leave the gang is Living with Continuous Internal Struggles and Emotional Discord. In particular, this second research question is represented in the model under Overcoming Adversity. Youth described a constant struggle when they had to cut ties with the gang. However, these terms are misleading as many youth did not simply cut ties but changed the relationship they had with other gang members who were still active in the gang at the time of their efforts to exit. Overcoming Adversity is representative of the process youth went through to resist certain “temptations” to keep engaging with their gang ties. Essentially those who were able to stay on their path of desistance without going back to the gang, interacting with members, and potentially engaging in criminal activity with their peers, exuded a strong individual ability to overcome adversity. The psychological process of ending gang ties was also described by some as “the hardest part” and “lonely.” Many described an Internal Struggle between wanting to leave but feeling like they would miss the gang and their friends. Again, because the processes are not linear, they have been represented within
the model as an important portion of what youth experienced during the overall timespan spent in the gang and engaging in the desistence process.

**Mental Health Research**

In the model, Negative Impacts on Mental Health falls under the core category Living with Continuous Internal Struggles and Emotional Discord. Youth described various negative impacts on their mental health, including experiencing stress and anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, trauma symptoms, and the impact of grief and loss. While there are few studies on the mental health impacts on gang affiliated youth, the symptoms and diagnoses that were present in this study were consistent with previous research. For example, youth gang members have been found to have increased rates of PTSD and substance abuse (Harris et. al., 2013). Anxiety Disorders have also been noted in male gang members (Coid et. Al., 2013), and problems with drug abuse or dependence in older gang members (ages 27, 30, and 33) (Gilman, Hill, & Hawkins, 2014).

Other areas of previous gang research, such as methods of joining and exiting (Bolden, 2013), were consistent with this study’s findings. Youth’s reasons for exiting the gang that included being a role model to younger family members and/or taking care of a child were also consistent with reasons for leaving the gang that has been noted in prior studies (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002). Relocation which was also a factor in previous studies as helpful for exiting the gang (Bolden, 2013), proved to be the case for some, but not all youth, or perhaps working temporarily before the youth returned to the gang.

**Contributions of the Study to Counseling Psychology**

This study makes two contributions to the field of counseling psychology. First, it is the only grounded theory study to date that addressed the mental health needs of gang
affiliated youth from a counseling psychology perspective. It is also the only grounded theory study to date that addresses the process of exiting and cutting gang ties from a counseling psychology perspective. As gang research is often conducted by other academic fields (e.g., criminology, sociology), this study provides a different perspective and aims to inform counselors, social workers, mentors, and others working in youth gang prevention.

Second, little qualitative research has been conducted on gangs. This may be due to the difficulty in obtaining a community sample and/or the willingness of youth to disclose their personal experiences to an outsider. A major strength of this study involves the in-depth interviews with several youth who felt comfortable sharing their stories with the researcher. This was due to the relationship that was established between the researcher and the community partner, who is well known and trusted by many youth involved with GRASP.

**Limitations**

The primary limitations of this study are the participant sample and the broadness of criteria for participation. The criteria began with male only participants and grew to include male and female youth of varying ages as it was becoming difficult to obtain interviews throughout the data collection process. A self-identified transgender youth was also interviewed, but not included in the data analysis, as it was revealed during his interview that while he grew up around gangs, he never joined a gang or became affiliated with a gang. Instead he described feeling as though his identity was likely protective from being recruited to join a gang. Therefore, gender identity as a protective factor from joining gangs may prove useful for future studies. Another limitation is the
location of the study and the organization I worked with to collect my data. The results demonstrate validity within Denver, and for GRASP specifically. Given that this is also a qualitative study with a small sample, the results are not generalizable to other gang contexts.

Other limitations of the study include youth’s priority in protecting their own information and identity. Therefore some of them may not have fully disclosed many personal details about their experience, making for a less impactful interview. It was quite clear which youth provided more data rich interviews. While some youth may have been protecting their personal information, others may have found it difficult to articulate their feelings regarding this sensitive topic. Future research and treatment with this population may benefit from asking youth to express their feelings in other non-traditional forms, such as through art (e.g. song, dance, poetry, spoken word, etc.), and alternate forms of treatment (e.g. art therapy, adventure therapy, animal therapy, etc.).

**Recommendations**

**Research**

Some of the feedback I received while conducting interviews was that youth are becoming gang-involved at younger ages. Studies should therefore target younger youth in the future (e.g., middle school students). Since many youth expressed their appreciation for GRASP and the mentorship they received, thus mentorship studies are warranted. As was mentioned earlier, gender studies may also be a new topic of research, specifically gender identity as a protective factor from joining gangs.

With regards to counseling, further studies on treatment, preferred methods, and treatment outcomes of gang affiliated youth are also needed. Grief and Loss and PTSD
are areas that may also be given more consideration. Further qualitative work that explores tattoos and the meaning of tattoo removal is another area of future study that may add to understanding the lived experience of this population. Religion and spirituality, while supporting some youth to exit the gang. Thus, the role that religion and spirituality play in gang desistance may be worth studying with a larger participant pool, to determine if there are any trends worth noting, particularly in youth are involved in specific gang prevention programing that incorporates religion and/or spirituality.

**Treatment**

This study was conducted from a counseling psychology perspective, and consequently provides recommendations for providing treatment to gang affiliated youth. Of great importance is including mentorship and community gang prevention programing like GRASP in treatment planning whenever available. Youth found the mentorship through GRASP to be extremely helpful and often credited it as the reason for being able to maintain their progress in exiting the gang. When working with gang affiliated youth, it will be helpful to note their preference for group versus individual therapy. Developing a positive relationship with the counselor should be the primary goal before treatment intervention, as it is important to build trust and rapport with gang affiliated youth. This may be achieved by using open questions and engaging in discussion prior to treatment planning and intervention. Sensitive discussions about medications should also take place as some youth may be turned off by this option. From a policy perspective, counselors may also support this population by advocating for policies affecting gang affiliated communities and schools. For example, counselors can support policies creating positive changes in alternative schools attended by gang involved youth, whether or not they have
a client who attends one of these schools, in order to show their support for this neglected population.

Counselor self-education about gangs, listening to clients, and checking biases and assumptions are also important. Making efforts to learn more about the individual’s gang perspective without assuming all gangs operate in the same fashion will be helpful to any counselor working with this population. Demonstrating some knowledge and awareness of gang culture may help build trust with gang affiliated clients, as well as enhance understanding of gang terminology, making it easier to communicate with clients. Careful discussions about gang exiting need to occur, as youth may not perceive this to be possible. In this study, P5 described specific avoidance strategies (e.g. ways to avoid gang involved peers) in order to help with exiting the gang: “I just avoid it,” “I’m with my probation officer, text them that,” or “I gotta stay home” or “I’m eating with my family.” “Just try and make up a little quick lie, keep them off my back.” Discussing potential behavioral strategies such as these may further a therapeutic discussion of exiting the gang.

As was seen in this study, some youth did not exhibit as wide a vocabulary as others and therefore struggled at times to communicate their feelings. Using tools such as feelings charts and other methods to explore emotions during sessions will be useful with this population. Additionally, discussing confidentiality and ways to talk about important topics in therapy so that disclosures remain private may benefit the client-therapist relationship. For example, the counselor may provide their clients with gang specific examples of what can and cannot be discussed during sessions, and what would need to be reported. This would allow counselors to advocate for their clients by providing
information on how to discuss sensitive topics during sessions. This may also reduce the need for counselors to make a report, which sometimes surprises clients and can lead to them feeling like they are unable to trust the counselor. Youth may speak in therapy sessions quite freely while forgetting about their confidentiality agreement; therefore reminding them and providing gang related examples may be helpful.

**Reflection**

This project took years to complete and while it wasn’t easy, it was well worth it. I was initially inspired after attending a gang training during my practicum year providing therapy at a jail. While I proposed my dissertation prior to leaving for internship, I was unable to collect my data prior to completing my internship year. During my internship year, I moved to Wisconsin to work at a youth correctional facility. This experience informed how I conducted my interviews upon my return. I felt more comfortable speaking with youth, and at times disclosed my previous work in youth corrections during interviews, which allowed for some other discussions to take place.

I also switched community partners in the research process, as my first community partner decided to leave GRASP. I submitted at least ten IRB addenda while I was collecting my data, primarily adjusting criteria to increase my chances of getting more interviews. There were many times I felt like giving up, depressed at the thought of how long I was taking, but I persisted. Scheduling participants was hard, and eventually I started conducting interviews at the weekly group meetings I had been attending. Everything took longer than I wanted or planned for. I found myself being slowed down both by the challenges that came with recruiting participants, and my own negative
thoughts that I might never finish my dissertation. There were many frustrating times, and so I tried to reminded myself who I was interviewing and why.

The research was approached naturally from a counseling psychology lens, while avoiding conducting interviews like a therapy session. Some youth happened to be more self-aware and well versed in mental health topics. I found this to be very helpful, as I was hoping some treatment recommendations would emerge from the data, and am glad they did. Some youth also asked me questions about the research, my education level, and mental health treatment. They appeared pleased to participate knowing it might help other youth and/or those working with youth in the future. It was very meaningful for me to know that they believed in my study and were supportive of my efforts. My counseling psychology training also helped me connect with GRASP and discuss mental health issues with my community partner. At one point I was asked to participate in a community event to talk about PTSD. Buy-in and maintaining good relationships with mentors was also important. My role as a researcher and experience as a counselor also adds a layer of credibility to this study.

It is impossible to do this type of work without immersing oneself into other aspects of the organization and community, such as the community events I attended after being invited at group meetings. I found myself enjoying the weekly group meetings for youth that I continuously attended. I would sit in the circle and participate, and some nights get some emotional relief myself. The way I would summarize this project is that it is more than a series of interviews, but also an immersion into a community experience. It is certainly one I will never forget.
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APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Age-graded informal social control:

Age-graded informal social control has been conceptualized as one of the “factors that describe[s] desistance from crime” (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011, p. 418). It focuses on an individual’s bond to society, such as to family, peers, schools, and institutions (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Howell & Griffiths, 2016). Sampson & Laub (2005) argue that gang interventions can be most effective by making these relationships stronger in an effort to increase social capital.

Axial Coding:

Axial coding is defined by Corbin & Strauss (2008) as “crosscutting or relating concepts to each other” (p. 195).

Constant Comparative Method:

To invoke constant comparative methods has been defined by Charmaz & Henwood (2008) as “involves making comparisons at each level of analysis, including data with data, data with codes, codes with codes, codes with categories, category with category, category with concept” (p. 242).

Continuity:

Continuity has been defined as “behaviors during active periods of [gang] membership” (p. 492), as well as noted for receiving the most attention in the literature (Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2014).

Desistance:
According to (Pyrooz & Decker (2011), “Desistance can be conceived as the declining probability of gang membership—the reduction from peak to trivial levels of gang membership” (p.419).

**Gang Ties:**

As operationalized by Pyrooz & Decker (2011) are social and emotional attachments to the former gang that persist despite having departed. Other studies have indicated that without geographical distance or replacement with an alternate support structure, former gang members are at greater risk for being drawn back into the gang environments due to strong emotional ties (Bolden, 2013).

**Onset and Termination:**


**Open Coding:**

Open coding has been defined by Corbin & Strauss (2008) as “Breaking data apart and delineating concepts to stand for blocks of raw data. At the same time, one is qualifying those concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions” (p. 195).
APPENDIX B: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Background

How did you hear about the gang you decided to join?

Were you thinking about joining any other gangs?
   Probe: What made you want to join this gang in particular?

Motives & Methods for Joining the Gang

What made you want to join a gang?

Could you describe your process of joining the gang?
   Probe: How did you become a member?

How would you describe your experience or involvement in the gang?
   Probe: What meaning did it have for you?

Psychological Process of Leaving the Gang

What made you want to leave the gang? OR What led you to your decision to leave the gang?

*How did you feel about your decision to leave the gang?

*How would you describe the psychological/emotional process of leaving the gang?
   Probe: What situations, beliefs and/or feelings led to your decision to leave the gang?
   What were you thinking or feeling when you made the decision to leave?

How did you leave the gang?

*How did you feel after leaving the gang?

Psychological Process of Ending Gang Ties

*Are you still in contact with anyone from the gang?

*How has keeping or cutting off these contacts impacted you? OR *What has it felt like to keep or cut off these contacts?
   Probe: How has it impacted you emotionally?

Did you have any gang tattoos when left the gang?
   Probe: Have they been removed since leaving the gang?
   If your tattoos were removed, what meaning did that have for you?
Current Psychological State/Emotions about Decision to Leave & Towards Gang

*How do you feel today about your decision to leave the gang?

What meaning does the gang have for you currently?

How has leaving the gang impacted your life today?

Feelings About the Future/Future Aspirations

What are your thoughts and feelings about your future?

What do you see yourself doing in the future?

* Indicates questions that will always be asked during each interview.
APPENDIX B: TABLE 1

Gang Definitions

2011 National Gang Threat Assessment

National Gang Intelligence Center

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GANG</th>
<th>DEFINITION</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Street</strong></td>
<td>Street gangs are criminal organizations formed on the street operating throughout the United states.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prison</strong></td>
<td>Prison gangs are criminal organizations that originated within the penal system and operate within correctional facilities throughout the United states, although released members may be operating on the street. Prison gangs are also self-perpetuating criminal entities that can continue their criminal operations outside the confines of the penal system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outlaw Motorcycle (OMGs)</strong></td>
<td>OMGs are organizations whose members use their motorcycle clubs as conduits for criminal enterprises. although some law enforcement agencies regard only one Percenters as OMGs, the NGIC, for the purpose of this assessment, covers all OMG criminal organizations, including OMG support and puppet clubs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>One Percenter OMGs</strong></td>
<td>ATF defines One Percenters as any group of motorcyclists who have voluntarily made a commitment to band together to abide by their organization’s rules enforced by violence and who engage in activities that bring them and their club into repeated and serious conflict with society and the law. the group must be an ongoing organization, association of three (3) or more persons which have a common interest and/or activity characterized by the commission of or involvement in a pattern of criminal or delinquent conduct. ATF estimates there are approximately 300 one Percenter OMGs in the United states.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Neighborhood or local street gangs are confined to specific neighborhoods and jurisdictions and often imitate larger, more powerful national gangs. The primary purpose for many neighborhood gangs is drug distribution and sales.
Four major types of youth gangs as summarized by Franzese, Covey, Menard (2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Youth Gangs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retreatist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
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<td>Criminal</td>
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APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT (PARENT/GUARDIAN)

Parent or Guardian Consent Form
for Son/Daughter’s Participation in Research
Gang Experiences Interview Project
The University of Denver

Title of Research Study: Gang Experiences Interview Project
Project Director: Alana Liskov, M.A., University of Denver
Project Supervisor: Ruth Chao, Ph.D., University of Denver
Interview Location:

Purpose
Your son/daughter is being asked to participate in a research study. The goal of the study is to understand more about your son’s experience leaving the gang, and how this experience had impacted them emotionally. Males and females between the ages of 13 and 29 years old and who self-identify as a former gang member are invited to participate in the Gang Experiences Interview Project. Alana Liskov, M.A., is directing the study under the supervision of Ruth Chao, Ph.D. This study will help us understand more about the issues former gang members face, stress and coping, and any emotional challenges. We plan to interview about 20 - 30 former gang members.

Participation in the Study
If you agree to let your son/daughter participate in this research study, your son/daughter will be asked to answer some brief questions and complete a questionnaire at the time of the interview. We will schedule the interview on a different day. During the interview I will ask about your child’s experiences joining and leaving the gang, and how this has impacted him/her. At the end of your child’s participation, I will ask him/her about his/her reactions and feedback on his experiences in the study. The interview will last about 1.5 – 2 hours. He/She may take a break at any time. You do not need to attend the interview, but you may if you are interested in doing so. We will ask your permission to audiotape your child’s interview. Audio recording is used to ensure that we can accurately recall your child’s experiences. If he/she likes, he/she may give us permission to contact him for member checking.

Member Checking
Your son/daughter may choose to be contacted after the interview to participate in member checking. Member checking is a process that is used to make sure I have captured each participant’s answers and experiences accurately. I can meet in person or talk over the phone with your son/daughter to do this. If your son/daughter would like to participate in member checking, I will attempt to contact him/her at the phone number he provides to either set up a follow-up meeting or discuss his/her answers over the phone. I will attempt to contact him/her twice, once after his/her answers are written up, to make sure they are correct, and a second time after I have time to analyze his/her entire interview. His/her phone number will be destroyed once this process is complete or if I am unable to reach him/her within four weeks of the initial phone call. Once all follow-up interviews, known as member checking, have been completed, there will be two drawings for a $25 gift card at each drawing. All participants will have the same chance of winning a gift card. If a
winning participant is no longer available (has moved, is no longer participating in GRASP, is in jail or prison, etc.) then a new name will be drawn for a new winner who is available.

**Compensation**
Your child will receive a $20 gift card for their participation in the study. Gift cards will be for area stores and restaurants such as Wendy’s, McDonalds, Wal-Mart and Starbucks. Your child will receive their gift card at the time of the interview.

**Voluntary Participation**
Your child’s participation and/or your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw your son/daughter and yourself from the study at any time without penalty. Your son/daughter may still participate in the interview process even if he/she decides not to do the member checking or does not want to be audio-recorded.

If your son/daughter chooses not to be in the study:
- Your son/daughter will not be penalized. Your son/daughter will not lose any benefits or services.
- No one will be upset or angry with you or your son/daughter.

If your son/daughter chooses to be in the study:
- Your son/daughter can skip any questions (written or oral) that he/she does not want to answer or end the interview early, no matter what the reason. He/she just needs to tell the interviewer.
- You or your son/daughter may change your mind and stop the scheduled interview meeting at any time.

**Risks and Benefits**
Some people find answering questions about stressful or traumatic life events, such as previous gang experiences, troubling or difficult. The interviewer knows about this risk and is ready to help your child if needed. For example, your child may skip any question(s) he/she does not want to answer. He/she can take as many breaks as he/she wants during the interview. He/she may stop the interview if he/she no longer wants to participate.

If needed, your child may contact the following places for information and support:
- If you have concerns about suicide, call 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433) or 1-800-273-TALK (8255). Visit [http://www.endteensuicide.org](http://www.endteensuicide.org) to access further resources about suicide and warning signs.
- **Colorado Crisis Services:** Provides mental health, substance use or emotional crisis help, information and referrals. 24/7 Crisis Line: 1-844-493-TALK (8255). 24/7 Walk-In Crisis Services/Stabilization Units: Visit [http://coloradocrisisservices.org](http://coloradocrisisservices.org) for a list of locations in Colorado.
- For concerns about substance abuse: **Metro Crisis Line:** 1-888-885-1222. Metro
Denver's free, confidential, 24/7 telephone hotline for mental health or substance abuse crisis help, information, and referrals.

- Visit [http://www.teenhealthandwellness.com/static/hotlines](http://www.teenhealthandwellness.com/static/hotlines) for more teen hotlines listed by subject.

Your son/daughter may not directly benefit from being part of this research. Your son/daughter may enjoy being able to reflect upon his/her gang experiences and how this has impacted him/her. He/She may find that answering questions about his experiences is helpful in some way. Yet, this study is not counseling or therapy. The potential benefits from this study will be to future active gang members, those who are in the process of leaving a gang, and those who consider themselves former gang members. By participating, you and your child are helping us learn more about the experiences of former gang members so that we can understand what services may benefit this population.

**Confidentiality**

All of your child’s answers will be kept confidential (private). However, if you or your child tells us about suicide, homicide, or child abuse and neglect, we must report these concerns to the proper authorities. Child abuse and neglect includes any personal abuse history your child may have experienced, as well as those of other children/minors. For example, if your son/daughter were to describe instances of child abuse that took place during his/her gang involvement, or at any point in time, for himself/herself or someone else, or discuss knowledge of individuals who may be recruited as a gang member while a minor, this would need to be reported. Any information about child abuse and neglect needs to be reported. In addition, should any information contained in this study be the subject of a court order, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena.

We will store your child’s records in a file that does not include his/her name. Instead of using his/her name, we will assign him/her a pseudonym (fake name) to be used with a numeric identification code that will be stored with his/her answers. The code will never be linked to his/her name or identifying information and his/her name will not appear on any of our records. All forms and records will be kept in a locked room in either a locked cabinet or on a secured computer. All records will be kept indefinitely. Research reports will use only the pseudonyms of participants. Reports will never identify any single individual. The University of Denver Institutional Review Board can have access to the information from the study to ensure the welfare of study participants is protected. If any publication results from this study, your son/daughter will not be identified by name. All data will be retained for 7 years and then destroyed.

**Termination from Study**

If your child is currently on probation and/or in the event that he/she becomes detained or incarcerated while participating in this study, his participation will be terminated.

**Invitation for Questions**

If you have any questions about this project or your participation, please feel free to ask questions now or contact Alana Liskov, M.A. at (240) 676-1813 or Alana.Liskov@du.edu or Ruth Chao, Ph.D. at (303) 871-2556 or Chu-
Lien.Chao@du.edu at any time. Alana Liskov is a doctoral student in the Counseling Psychology Department at the University of Denver supervised by Dr. Chao, who is a member of the Counseling Psychology faculty at the University of Denver.

If you have any questions or concerns about your research participation or rights as a participant, you may contact the DU Human Research Protections Program by emailing IRBAdmin@du.edu or calling (303) 871-2121 to speak to someone other than the researchers.

AUTHORIZATION
Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like your child to participate in this research study. If you decide to allow him/her to participate, his/her completion of the research procedures and witness signature indicates his consent. Please keep this form for your records.

I have read and understood the above description of the “Gang Experiences Interview Project.” I have asked and received a satisfactory explanation of any language that I did not fully understand. I agree to allow my son/daughter to be a part of this study. I understand that my son/daughter can stop being in the study at any time. I understand that my son/daughter will receive a $20 gift card during the interview.

I understand that confidentiality of my child’s responses is strictly maintained. I understand that the researchers are required to report any risks for suicide, homicide, and child abuse or neglect to the proper authorities. I understand that the University of Denver Institutional Review Board can see the information gathered from the study. I have received a copy of this entire consent form.

BY CHECKING BELOW, I AGREE TO LET MY SON PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.
☐ Yes, I agree

___________________________________  ________________________
Witness’ Signature  Date

___________________________________  ________________________
Interviewer’s Signature  Date

I have read and understand that the interviewer requests permission to audiotape my child’s responses during the interviews. I understand that these audiotapes will be used for data analysis, and that no person aside from the researchers will listen to these recordings.

_____ I agree to let my son/daughter be audiotaped

_____ I do not agree to let my son/daughter be audiotaped

___________________________________  ________________________
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Witness’ Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>Interviewer’s Signature</td>
<td>Date</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Age: 18-24  25-34  35-44  45-54  55-64  65-74  75 +

Gender: Male  Female  Transgender
Other:_____________________

Sexual Orientation: Heterosexual  Gay/Lesbian  Bisexual
Other:_____________________

Race/Ethnicity: White/Caucasian  Black/African American
Hispanic/Latino/Latina/Chicano/a  Asian/Pacific Islander
Biracial/Multiracial  American Indian/Alaskan Native
Other:_____________________

What, in years, is your highest educational level?
Some High School  High School Graduate  Associate's degree  GED
Some college  Bachelor's degree  Graduate degree
Other:_____________________

Which college year are you in, if applicable?
Freshman  Sophomore  Junior  Senior
Other:_____________________

What is your occupation, if applicable? ______________________

What is your religious or spiritual affiliation, if applicable? ______________________

Please answer the following questions about the gang you joined and left.

Name of the gang you joined: ______________________

Age when you joined the gang: ______________________

Duration of your gang membership (If unsure of exact time period, please estimate in months/years): ______________________

Were you involved in any illegal activity during your time as a gang member? (Please Circle): YES  NO

Age when you left the gang: ______________________

Did you get any gang tattoos after joining the gang? (Please Circle): YES  NO
How many? ___________________________

Where are they located? (For example: Face, Neck, Chest, Arms, Legs, Shoulder, Back, etc.)

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Have any of these tattoos been removed since you left the gang?
(Please Circle):       YES       NO

If so, which ones? (Please state where located):
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Did you witness or experience any violence, assault, victimization, or trauma during your time as a gang member? (Please Circle):       YES       NO

Below are some examples of things you may have experienced yourself or witnessed someone else experiencing while you were a gang member. (Please circle all that apply):

Physical aggression/assault                                      Violent aggression (use of weapon)
Sexual aggression/assault                                        Rape
Emotional or psychological aggression/abuse                      None
Other: ____________________________
APPENDIX E: CORE CATEGORY DIAGRAM

Living with Continuous Internal Struggles and Emotional Discord

- Joining Process
- Emotional Integrity of Joining
- Exiting Process
- Internal Struggle
- Promising Futures
- Process of Re-learning
- Overcoming Adversity
- Support Systems
- Personal Resiliency Level
- Negative Impacts on Mental Health
- Overcoming Adversity
- Support Systems
- Personal Resiliency Level
- Negative Impacts on Mental Health
- Internal Struggle
- Exiting Process
- Emotional Integrity of Joining
- Joining Process

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APPENDIX F: OPEN CODING TABLE

Table 3. Open Coding Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open Code</th>
<th>Descriptive Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Methods of Joining</td>
<td>“Jumped in”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Blessed on”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gang Recruitment</td>
<td>“Started hanging out with him and found out he’s an OG for the ******s. He wants to put me on so I can be his little homie, so we could make moves together.” (P1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivators to Join: Generational</td>
<td>Um, my family members it’s like a generational thing. My family members are all gang members. My uncles are like OGs so kind of been around it my entire life. (P3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivators to Join: Modeling</td>
<td>“I was not. [thinking about joining another gang]. I guess I planned on that one, that gang because I guess I wanted to be like my older brother.” (P7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>“The meaning it had for me…it made me feel like I was untouchable.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Untouchable?</td>
<td>“Yeah. Invincible, you know? Because I had all these people behind me, ready to go, do whatever, to whoever. I just felt like I was at the top of the word because there was a lot of people that were scared of me, and I thrived off that. I don’t know. I think back on it like man, that’s not me now.” (P4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power, Loyalty</td>
<td>“Yeah just the power, loyalty, um the money, the entertainment you know. The thriller, but really the power, cause they’re pretty big. Just</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Motivators to Join</strong></td>
<td><strong>Selected Text</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Family and Friends</strong></td>
<td>“Um, everyone around me was doing it. All my friends and all my family. And so um, like when you join a gang you feel like, like that’s your family or you have power. You feel power and stuff. That’s why I wanted to because I felt like I have people who cared about me, and who would always have, like be there for me. So that’s why.” (P3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Power</strong></td>
<td>“I seen how strong my family was together and their loyalty, and how they really did take care of each other. Just as family, and I seen that so that’s what made me really want to be a part of the family.” (P10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family (lack of) and Friends (support)</strong></td>
<td>“I don’t know, I didn’t have a family or no food for nothing. My homies were there so rather be there with my homies than be with there with nobody.” (P2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Status (Money, Upward Mobility)</strong></td>
<td>“What made us wanna start the gang is we were out there. Partyng, girls, doing crime. Just selling drugs and stuff. Getting money and stuff. We just started the gang because we were doing the crimes.” (P5)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>“What made me wanna join a gang? It was just for the money. I seen a lot of like grown men havin money. So I was like “oh they’re making money” and I wanted to make money.” (P11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Motivators to Leave: Better Future</strong></td>
<td>“Better future. I just want to make the people around me proud, and I want to be successful because I feel like I wasted a lot of time being in the gang, not going to school and just selling drugs, and not having a...”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivators to Leave: Religion/Spirituality</td>
<td>job. Yeah I wasted a lot of opportunities. Just to better myself. For me, for my family. Plus I got a kid on the way and I don’t want him around that, cause something could happen, I cold get shot. I wanna be able to see my kid grow up you know? I wanna be able to experience that.” (P4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivators to Leave: Children</td>
<td>“Um I’m actually Christian so, um, I did start going to Church a lot more when I did decide to leave the gang. So I guess that kind of played a part in leaving it too.”</td>
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<td>Turning Point</td>
<td>Ok “I just wanna walk with God and just be a better person. A lot of uh, I heard a lot of the testimonies. A lot of the testimonies inspired me, because, a lot of people that would talk about their testimonies - they were ex-gang members as well. And they changed their life. And I seen that other people can do it, so, I guess, I thought, well if they can do it, I can do it.” (P4)</td>
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</table>
were looking for, it wasn’t, it wasn’t that person.

I see, ok.
And that person lost their life, and she had kids, she had a family you know, and they took that away from her kids. And you know, and it was an accident, but, not really. Cause it was like they went to go do it, but they got the wrong girl. And, I, almost seen it all. And it disgusted me, because that could have happened to anyone.

Yeah, like an innocent person.
And like I have family and I have brothers and sisters, like what if that was my mom? And I started to think about it like that and it made me sick.

Ok
To the point where I just, that’s when I stared to not want in. And I would say I didn’t want it. And my homies were like “well you don’t just chose when you want it and when you don’t want it.” So I thought I was stuck. I’m not really in the gang and I’m stuck. And it made me feel even more sick. But I wasn’t stuck.” (P10)

But not only that, I mean it sounds like you just weren’t acknowledging like the other feelings of people. Like there was maybe some turning point, would you say, where like you started to realize this is impacting my family.

“I think I came to that realization when uh, I started going to church.”

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<tr>
<td>“Yeah those sermons, they teach you a lot.” (P4)</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Methods of Exiting</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Requesting Permission</td>
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<tr>
<td>Walk Away/Avoidance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jumped Out</td>
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</table>

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<tr>
<th><strong>Bittersweet Feelings</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I felt disappointed but I felt like I’m doing the right thing.” (P1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I feel like I’d be disrespecting, but I feel like I’d be, I’d be making a positive change for myself.” (P5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Umm, it is kind of sad in a way because it did play a big part in my life. But uh, it’s really relieving because it makes me happy to be able to let go of all the negative things in my life.” (P4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Like it kinda makes me like, I don't know, like almost sad. Like not sad like but like kinda sad. It’s like leaving the people that you grew up with and you knew for a minute and they got your back basically.” (P5)</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Emotional Struggle</strong></th>
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<tbody>
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<td>“Um I think everyone especially around my age trying to leave still battles with it. Cause I do get in my moods when I have a lot going on. I sometimes do wanna go back and do something. So I battle with it still. I know it was the best choice and that’s not what I want for my life, but then at the same time there’s times where I just think like “whatever, might as well, that’s the image everyone has of me, so why not?” It’s a struggle but I just try and do everything I can. Be involved so that I don’t go back down that path.” (P3)</td>
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</table>
| “I don’t even know. I guess I just
lived my life. I lived my life day to
day. I wouldn’t really think of the
future, or what would happen next. I
guess I would say I was like
emotionless at the time. Cause like I
wouldn’t cry, but like I would feel
hurt. So I guess there wasn’t really a
way I coped with it, but I just like
lived with it in my heart.” (P4)

| Grief and Loss | “That’s probably the hardest thing. Those are your homies. Those are the ones you never forget. Um, I don’t know. I’ve seen my friend get murdered, like right tin front of me.” (P9) |
| Depression, Stress, Anxiety | “Good. It’s reliving. Because uh, it comes with a lot of stress and having to constantly watch your back. Or if you go to the wrong neighborhoods, gotta be careful you know. Doing all kinds of dumb things. Am I gonna get caught? What happens if I get caught?” (P4)

“Or like I said, when you have to watch your back constantly. It’s just like, oh am I gonna get shot today, is something gonna happen, or am I gonna get robbed? I don’t know. I wanted to stop having to constantly have those things on my mind because it was so stressful.” (P4)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Substance Abuse</th>
<th>Complex Trauma</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Umm, so how did or do you feel about that decision?</em></td>
<td>“I feel good. I feel good about myself. I feel like I’ve grown a lot since. And I’ve changed like a lot of my thinking, and a lot of my behaviors have changed. The only thing was being involved with all the drugs and stuff. So like, I got really heavy into drugs. And that kinda like, that was bad. But like I’m not doing drugs anymore so.” (P10)</td>
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</table>
| Strength and Confidence | “It took a lot. It took a long ways. So I mean, but you have to be really strong to do it, and some people aren’t. Some people are. There’s just those soldiers. But, I don’t know, but like I always tell everybody, I’ll talk to anybody that needs help, or even advice. Whatever it is.” (P9)  
“My belief is I can do anything…in this world as long as I set my mind to it. So I believe that if I’m still breathing I can do it.” (P1) |
| --- | --- |
| Desire to Change | “So I was like yeah I need to do something better with my life, I need to change it now. Can’t keep doing this reckless shit.” (P1)  
“Yeah. Commitment. Dedication. That’s all it takes. You gotta want it bad. If you’re not at the mindset that I need this more than I need to breathe you know. If I need this…” (P1) |
### APPENDIX G: AXIAL CODING TABLE

**Table 4. Axial Coding Table**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Categories</th>
<th>Open Codes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joining Process</td>
<td>Methods of Joining</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gang Recruitment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Motivators to Join</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotionality of Joining</td>
<td>Power</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Family and Friends</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Status (Money, Upward Mobility)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Loyalty</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exiting Process</td>
<td>Motivators to Leave</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Tipping Point</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internal Struggle</td>
<td>Bittersweet Feelings</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Emotional Struggle (Distress)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative Impacts on Mental Health</td>
<td>Grief and Loss</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Depression, Stress and Anxiety</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Complex Trauma (Generational Trauma)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Abuse: Substance Abuse</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal Resiliency Level</td>
<td>Strength and Confidence</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Desire to Change</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coping Skills (use of)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Future Oriented Thoughts</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Thoughts of Others</td>
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<td>Support Systems</td>
<td>Family</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Larger Systems: GRASP</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mentorship, One person who cares</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Employment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Religion/ Spirituality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overcoming Adversity</td>
<td>Temptations</td>
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<td>Gang Tie Challenges</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Street Lifestyle</td>
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<td>Judgment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Process of Re-Learning</td>
<td>Trust</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Forming Stable Relationships</td>
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<td>Identity</td>
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<tr>
<th>Promising Futures</th>
<th>Career Aspirations: Helping Professions</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Role Modeling/Mentorship</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Goals</td>
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<td>Optimism</td>
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