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Abstract: In recent years there has been an increased focus on gang desistence and exiting strategies, yet little is known at present regarding the experiences of women exiting the gang lifestyle. The current study, based on semi-structured interviews with twenty-four formerly gang-affiliated Chicana women involved with a prominent gang prevention/intervention organization, sought to understand how these women negotiated their disengagement from the gang. Consistent with previous literature, we found that disengagement from the gang lifestyle is neither linear nor immediate. Five primary themes that emerged from the interviews included: (1) the process of identity transition; (2) motherhood and its responsibilities; (3) generational shifts in gang culture; (4) burning bridges; (5) impacts of prison; and (6) support services. The women's narratives offer an alternative lens through which to understand women's negotiation of their own identities through the process of disengagement from the gang.

Introduction

While past and present gang research has focused largely on motives for gang entry, violence and victimization, and intra-gang dynamics, until recently little attention has been paid to the process of exiting the gang (Berger et al. 2016; Pyrooz and Decker 2011). The research that has been done has focused on gang desistance and the disengagement process within predominantly male samples, and thus has focused on men's experiences of leaving the gang lifestyle and acquiring a new identity (Berger et al. 2017). However, Chesney-Lind (1989) argues that it is not sufficient simply to use existing theories that explain male delinquency and "add women and stir." Instead, we require a feminist approach that acknowledges the disparate socio-structural factors women experience, and how these factors are implicated in the disengagement process for gang-affiliated women.

Quantitative research that has investigated gender (e.g., Bjerregaard, 2002; Esbensen et al., 2001; Thornberry et al., 2003), has provided invaluable information about self-identifying self-nominated gang members regarding membership, composition, and desistance; however, there have been strict parameters defining "desistance" as complete cessation from offending and breaking ties from the gang. Vigil's (1988) ethnographic work and other more recent analyses, in contrast, have led some researchers (e.g. Berger et al., 2017; Decker et al., 2014; Pyrooz and Decker 2011; Pyrooz et al., 2010) to argue that exiting the gang lifestyle is a process that is neither linear nor immediate, and that "desistance" requires a more nuanced conceptualization. Decker et al. (2014:270) affirm there exists a "grey area" for gang members who have left the gang but maintain ties with it. They, and others (e.g., Decker and Lauritsen, 2002; Decker et al., 2014; Pyrooz

and Decker, 2011), argue that there are a series of "push" and "pull" factors involved in the decision to exit the gang and disengage from the gang lifestyle, and create a new identity. However, these studies have not specifically focused on the process of gang disengagement for female gang members. This begs the question of whether the disengagement process among gang-affiliated women mirrors that of gang-affiliated men.

Literature Review

Within the gang context, push factors refer to negative situations such as victimization or trauma (Maruna, 1997), the desire to distance oneself from criminal justice involvement (Pyrooz and Decker, 2011), and aging/maturation (Decker et al. 2014; Thornberry et al. 2003), that push the individual away from the gang and the gang lifestyle. Pull factors, on the other hand, draw the individual towards a more normative, pro-social lifestyle. Pull factors may include healthy intimate relationships, establishing bonds with pro-social individuals, and gainful employment (Decker et al. 2014).

Violence and victimization have been cited by former gang members as one of the primary "push" factors for gang disengagement (see Carson et al. 2013; Decker and Lauritsen 2001; Pyrooz and Decker 2011; Watkins and Melde 2017). Research has consistently shown that gang-affiliated men and women are more likely to engage in violence and to be victims of violent crime than non-gang affiliated individuals (Coffman et al. 2015; Moule and Pyrooz 2014; Pyrooz et al. 2016; Thornberry et al. 1993; Watkins and Melde 2017). Physical and sexual victimization at the hands of male gang members are primary reasons specifically cited by gang-affiliated females for leaving gang life (Miller 1998, 2001).

Research also has consistently shown that gang members tend to naturally "age out" of offending in general, and the gang lifestyle specifically (Thornberry et al. 2003), with the average length of affiliation approximately two years (Pyrooz 2013). Like their male

counterparts, former female gang members often cite that the maturational process led them to see their peers as disloyal (Berger et al. 2017), become disillusioned by or tired of the gang lifestyle (Decker et al. 2014), and simply to get "tired" of cyclical involvement in the criminal justice system (Berger et al. 2017).

Studies that specifically address "pull" factors for young women have noted the importance of motherhood as an impetus for leaving the gang lifestyle (see Hunt et al. 2000; Hunt et al. 2005; Miller 2001; Moore 1991; Moore and Hagedorn 1996, 1999), though the exact role of motherhood in the exiting process appears unclear at this time (Fishman, 1999; Hagedorn and Devitt, 1999). In their more nuanced explanation of parenthood and sex-differences as turning points in the gang exiting process, Pyrooz et al. (2017) explain that motherhood plays a significant role in the transition process, particularly for first-time mothers. They suggest that female gang members are more likely than their male counterparts to transition out of the gang lifestyle because they are more likely to be single parents, and "living with one's child may be an indicator of both parental involvement and responsibility" (890).

Still, many studies say nothing about the complex gendered process involved in disengagement and its implications for identity (Decker et al., 2014), specifically identity transition and (re)construction among female members. As such, it is problematic to assume that gang-affiliated females' experiences completely reflect those of their male counterparts (Chesney-Lind 1988). The current research sought to contribute to our understanding of the exiting process among women, and the uniqueness of women's experiences. As such, this research describes and illuminates the disjointed paths that one sample of women had to navigate in order to move away from their former lifestyle and identity to a new identity that was consistent with their values, beliefs, desires and circumstances. Their narratives reaffirmed that gang desistance for Chicanas is a process that takes time, is fluid, is highly dependent upon the individual and her perception of her experiences, and needs to be understood contextually.

To our knowledge, this is one of the first studies to critically examine the gang disengagement process using an entirely female sample.

Methods

The Sample

The data for this study were obtained through in-depth interviews with 24 self-identified formerly gang-affiliated women who were involved with a prominent gang intervention organization in East Los Angeles. We approached this organization because of the large, diverse clientele they serve. Clients are either self-referred or referred through the criminal justice system in order to learn alternatives to the gang lifestyle. We received approval from the Simon Fraser University Research Ethics Board (REB) to conduct this research.

We used a purposive criterion sample of women who self-identified as formerly gang-affiliated. Participants had to be (1) female; (2) Chicana; (3) a current or former gang member; and (4) at least 18 years of age. The first five participants were referred to us by permanent staff at the organization; these participants then began referring others and the sample snowballed from there. At the request of the organization and because interview time detracted from the women's ability to engage in paid work, participants were compensated for their time with a Visa gift card.

The final sample of 24 participants included every woman involved in the organization who met the sampling criteria and wished to participate. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 56. All participants identified as second or third generation Chicanas (Mexican-American), though one young woman was born in Mexico and raised in Los Angeles. Interviews ranged from one to three and a half hours, with an average of two hours, and occurred during one or more of three different visits to the Los Angeles area over a one-year period, which also allowed re-interviews with those who continued in the program.

Though the majority of the women in this study suggested that they were deeply entrenched in the gang, they denied being jumped out, or beaten up by their peers for leaving – a process that may be referred to as "blood in, blood out." For the purpose of understanding the exit process involved for Chicanas in gangs, these women's perceptions of their status or role in the gang was taken at face value. Decker et al. (2014) argue that using self-identification is a valid means for assessing an individual's level of embeddedness in a gang. As such, these women provide insight into the complex process of gang disengagement and the multifaceted factors involved in this process.

The Interviews

Participants were asked to explain how they perceived their environments, major events in their lives, their social interactions, and themselves based upon their social positioning at various points in their lives. All interviews were minimally structured in order to facilitate a conversational-type interview process. Consistent with critical race and feminist epistemologies, this process allowed participants to talk about whatever they felt comfortable sharing, and follow-up questions were asked in order to encourage elaboration.

Although we took participants' reports of former gang membership at face-value, we also took steps to address potential inconsistencies in participants' narratives. During the interviews, questions were rephrased, or participants were asked to elaborate on certain statements that seemed inconsistent with other participants' narratives or within their own.

All interviews were conducted by the first author, recorded with permission from the participants, and transcribed verbatim. Participants chose pseudonyms in order to anonymize the data and were guaranteed confidentiality. Once the transcripts were completed, they were uploaded to qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) where they were coded and analyzed based on themes addressed throughout the participants' narratives. We used line-by-line coding (Charmaz 2006) to analyze each sentence, and then assigned

descriptive labels. We reviewed our coding for accuracy and clustered our themes based on similarities. Despite some variation in individual narratives, general themes regarding gang life for these women emerged from the data. The five primary themes that emerged involved: (1) the process of identity transition; (2) motherhood and its responsibilities; (3) generational shifts in gang culture; (4) burning bridges; and (5) impacts of prison. These are presented and discussed in the next section.

Results and Discussion

Transition of Identity: "I'm not gonna forget where I came from".

Most of the participants reported that they were no longer engaged in the gang lifestyle. However, it became apparent during the interviews that disengagement from the lifestyle did not necessarily mean that the women no longer identified as a gang member or former gang member. As Pyrooz et al. (2010) point out, disengaging from the gang does not necessarily mean that individuals shed all ties to the gang. Some of the participants affirmed that they did not regret their past—and even embraced it. Vanessa, 37, talked about her long history of gang affiliation, and the struggle to forge a new identity. She stated that she was "proud of who I am. I'm proud of what I went through because if I wouldn't have went through it I wouldn't be here now." In other words, Vanessa's past experiences participating in the gang lifestyle helped inform her current identity, and work towards a more pro-social lifestyle; one to which she had never been exposed.

Alma, 18, argued that once a person was jumped-in and considered a homegirl (see Kolb and Palys, 2016), she would always be a part of the gang even if she was no longer gang-affiliated: "I mean I think you're always gonna be from it." Natalie, 25, helped explain the difference between being "affiliated" and "associated":

> 'Affiliated' is you're with us. If you're not jumped in, then you back us up. You throw up T [the gang sign representing her hood], just like, I'll throw up a T. You're affiliated: you kick it with us; you drink with us; you party with us; you have my back like I have yours. 'Associated' is you got family members. You're associated with the neighborhood, not by choice; it's because you got family members, or you grew up there, but you don't kick it. You're associated by blood, not by choice. Or, you know about it, but you don't want to go that route [any more].

Remaining associated with the gang demonstrates that at least some of our participants continue to embody a gang identity even if they are no longer "doing gang" (Garot 2010) or engaging in gang behavior. This finding is consistent with Bolden's work (2012) that argued individuals who consider themselves to be associated (even though they no longer affiliate) remain part of the "gang landscape" (215). Similarly, Pyrooz and Decker (2011) noted that "it is possible to leave one's gang and retain ties to the gang" (p. 423). Some of the participants admitted that they no longer went to their hood to "kick it" with the homies, were beginning to meet new friends, and were engaging in different lifestyle choices. However, others expressed reservations about leaving the lifestyle and their homeboys behind. Among the latter was Arlene, 25, who admitted she was having a difficult time reconciling her current situation with her gang identity:

> Well, right now I'm not gonna lie. I'm kinda struggling. I still talk to a few of my good friends - those who I call my friends; those are who I rolled with....Regardless, I'm not gonna forget where I came from, and I still keep in contact. It's just that now I'm not out there doing stupid shit like robbing people. I've got a job now.

Pull factors, such as recognizing alternatives to gang activity such as gainful employment, helped Arlene slowly begin to move away from the gang lifestyle.

Despite disengaging from the gang lifestyle, many of the participants in this study continued to live in poverty, experience social exclusion because of their

race, class, gender and former gang-affiliation, and live in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Though they made the choice to stop affiliating with the gang, they continue to be surrounded by the exclusionary social structures implicated in and associated with joining gangs in the first place. It is not surprising, then, that some of the women feel ambivalence at the idea of complete disengagement from their gang.

Motherhood and Its Responsibilities: "If this kid can see something in me, then I need to do something with myself".

Consistent with previous literature that suggests motherhood plays a significant role in young women leaving the gang lifestyle (Hunt et al. 2000; Hunt et al. 2005; Miller 2001; Moore 1991; Moore and Hagedorn 1996, 1999; Pyrooz et al. 2017), many of the participants cited their current role as mothers as more important than their role as homegirls, even though this identification with motherhood took time. When women become pregnant, they tend to decrease their frequency associating with their homeboys and homegirls (Hunt et al. 2005). Participants with children, including those who had children who were no longer in their custody, explained that becoming a mother was not necessarily an immediate incentive for leaving the gang, or at the very least, "kicking it" with their homies. While some of the women stated that their involvement with the gang slowed down during their pregnancy, they reported that they resumed gang activity shortly after they gave birth. Melissa, who was in her late-30s and was a strongly entrenched, second generation gang member, reported that she still identified as a homegirl even after having three children, but that she had stopped affiliating with the gang. During her first pregnancy, she began to decrease the time she spent with her homies, but she still attended her gang's get-togethers, "I would still go over there. Like they would have little barbecues or little parties that I would go. I would go just to show my face. But I was pregnant, so it's not like I can really do much." A number of participants, however, reported that they continued to

kick it with the homeboys and homegirls and used drugs and alcohol during their pregnancies.

Many of the participants, as a result of their involvement in gang activity and subsequent prison sentences, lost custody of their children. For example, Vanessa spent the majority of her teen and adult life affiliating with her gang, placing herself in dangerous situations, and engaging in heavy drug use. As a result of her lifestyle, she decided to relinquish custody of her six children and left them in the care of family members who were not gang-affiliated and able to provide them with a safe and stable lifestyle. It was not until Vanessa was threatened with the permanent removal of her seventh child (then, an infant) that she began to move away from the gang lifestyle and create a more stable life for herself so that she could care for her daughter.

> [My main] turning point was my baby getting taken away [by the] system...you feel helpless. I just cry. But what's crying gonna do? I had to make myself strong....Ever since they tried to take my baby away... I left everything behind and it's just a whole different world for me now. I care now. I have feelings now. She's the one who keeps me going.

While she had experienced significant traumatic events, including the fatal stabbing of one of her homies during her period of gang affiliation, Vanessa remained ambivalent about changing her lifestyle. Even though she had six children she could not care for, Vanessa was heavily involved in the gang lifestyle and heavily involved in her addiction. It was not until she had her seventh child and almost lost the ability to make the decision about where and how her daughter was raised that she decided to leave the lifestyle and seek help for her substance abuse. As Natalie also suggested, being able to make a decision about when and how one leaves the gang lifestyle plays an important role, especially for individuals who have such little control over their lives in the first place. Agentic expression, such as deciding how to live one's life and raise one's children, was important, particularly for these women, because it allowed them some control over their lives.

Collins (1994) argues that social and political exclusionary practices impact poor women of color, in particular, and work to further marginalize their existence. However, that does not mean that they do not push back against those systems that constrain them. As Vanessa explained, retaining control over decisions regarding motherhood was one way that she was able to exert agency.

Delilah, a third-generation gang member who was deeply entrenched in the gang lifestyle, admitted to engaging in violent behavior during her gang-affiliation. She reported that she was a well-respected homegirl and was in and out of prison for selling drugs and "putting in work" as an adult. Between prison terms, she had two children, both of whom were removed from her custody. While she was on the streets, Delilah was busy engaging in the gang lifestyle, and it was not until her son wrote her a letter during one of her prison terms that she realized she no longer wanted to be part of the lifestyle:

> [The letter from my son] had a big impact on me because on one of my prison trips my kids' father (I have two kids)... On one of my prison trips I had a daughter who was a couple weeks old before I went back to prison, and my son was like, eight. Their dad got shot in the head, and he passed away while I was in prison... The kids got taken away. And when I was in prison my son wrote me this letter. I can never forgive myself for not being there for my son when he needed me. I felt like my son needed me at that time the most, and I can never forgive myself for not being there for him.

> So my son wrote me this letter and he tells me, "Mom, I love you. I want you to know that no matter what, you're the best mom ever. I'll always love you no matter what." [He told me that] I was the best person in his world, and that I meant everything to him, and that he loves me and forgives me for everything. And, I'm thinking, 'How the hell can I be the best mom ever when I really wasn't ever there for

him?' So I just kept reading that letter... thinking about life and thinking, 'How can this kid forgive me?' So that's what really changed my life... I felt like, dang, if this kid can see something in me then I need to do something with myself before I ended up killing myself.

The letter Delilah received from her son while she was in prison was the catalyst for her to change her life.

In fact, our findings on motherhood were similar to Moloney et al.'s (2009) findings on fatherhood: while becoming a parent is a defining point in gang members' lives, it is not the defining reason they disengage from the lifestyle. In other words, while motherhood was not necessarily a primary motivation to leave the lifestyle, it did – when coupled with other factors – eventually impact their decision to disengage. For example, the trauma of losing her newborn baby because of her pre-natal substance abuse sent Nicole into a depression, and she became further involved in drug use and, thus, street life. Despite wanting help, she was surrounded by the lifestyle, exposed to more traumatic events, and thus became more entrenched in the lifestyle.

Many of the participants reported that having children was a major turning point in their lives to eventually "grow up," though identifying with "motherhood" was not immediate. Indeed, motherhood has been cited as one of the strongest motivators for girls and women to decrease gang activity and make different lifestyle choices (Hunt et al. 2005; Miller 2001; Moore and Hagedorn 1999; Taylor 1993).

Generational Shifts in Gang Culture: "Gang banging ain't what it used to be".

Another frequent theme regarding exiting the gang was that the lifestyle changed with each new generation. This meant the dynamics of the gang were constantly in flux. Many reported that it became hard to "keep up" with the "youngsters." In addition, they reported becoming disillusioned by the lifestyle due to the

youngsters' differing ideas about acceptable gang behavior. Some of the participants referenced a major change in retaliatory action as the presence of younger gang members increased. They stated that in the "old days" the honorable way to retaliate against an enemy for being disrespectful was to fight them physically or, in more extreme circumstances, confront them and shoot them directly in the head or fatally stab them. This, they argued, was the respectful and dignified way of confronting an enemy's transgression and sending a message to the rival gang. Now, however, the method of choice is the drive-by shooting.[1] Chela, mid-30s, reported that she was so traumatized by being an unsuspecting passenger involved in a drive-by executed by her homeboy, that she decided to leave the lifestyle. "When we got out of the car I thought, fuck! What if we hurt someone? And then I knew that there was no way I could be a part of this. There's no way. And that was the end of it." The participants who discussed the change in retaliatory gang dynamics reported feelings of sadness and regret after being involved in drive-bys because of the possibility they had hurt innocent by-standers as opposed to just the intended target. As Arlene disapprovingly stated about the new generation: "Y'all niggas just do it because ya'll do it. If you're gonna do it, do it right because gang banging ain't what it used to be."

Participants reminisced about the "good old days" and cited major changes in gang dynamics as a result of various factors such as: the introduction of methamphetamine, lack of collective identity, and younger, more ruthless youth joining the gang. In addition, as they aged, they lost a part of who they thought themselves to be. They were developmentally different than when they entered the gang, and had trouble identifying with the "youngsters." This is consistent with the literature that argues there exists a natural aging-out/maturational process (Thornberry et al., 2003). Aside from the frequently cited pull factors such as family and employment (e.g., Decker et al. 2014), our participants realized that they no longer fit in with the current gang culture.

Burning Bridges: "It hurts me to keep my kids away from my family".

Most of the participants vacillated between leaving and remaining part of the gang, and they described the process of deciding to leave as being related to many complex factors and experiences. Many of the women cited geographical relocation as the primary factor that enabled them to stay away from their neighborhoods and their homeboys and homegirls. While some of the women relocated because their families moved from their old "hood," relocation for others was a strategic move to ensure they would not be tempted to re-engage in the lifestyle. Leaving the neighborhood in which they were born and raised presented challenges for some who now had to navigate new geographical space and negotiate new interpersonal relationships within new communities.

A major transition from her former lifestyle to prison and from prison to a new neighborhood and a supportive organization made Delilah question and re-evaluate herself and what she wanted for her future. Similarly, Veronica cited myriad traumatic events that led her to move away from her neighborhood and spend less time with her family. She reported that her transition was particularly difficult because she was raised in a tight-knit family that was still very active in gang life. Veronica discussed the challenges inherent in negotiating her identity as a loyal family member, influential gang member, and a mother who wanted to expose her children to a different lifestyle.

> It's just so hard. I think because my struggle is that I just want better....I've just grown. Nobody was really there for me when I went to prison. I didn't get mail. I mean, my family took care of me....I can't break that connection. I can't. I tried. Now the only thing that I do is that I don't live their lives. I can't carry what they're going through because I need to do me. I'm tryin' to do me.

A variety of factors led Veronica to the decision that she needed to leave the gang lifestyle. It was clear that she was deeply impacted by her relationship with her

family members and appeared uncomfortable with their assertion that she had changed drastically. This presented problems for her family because they did not understand her transformation.

Other participants such as Kimberly, 38, echoed these sentiments. She acknowledged that she had to move away from her neighborhood in order to maintain her new identity, which was still fragile. Geographical relocation was positive for many of the participants because it insulated them from the dangers involved in the lifestyle, allowing them the breathing space in which to create more hopeful futures and provide a new and safer life for their children.

Serving Time: "When you get busted nobody does shit for you".

Serving time in prison was cited as being an important factor in terms of leaving the gang lifestyle. Three separate sub-themes were identified: (1) abandonment; (2) broader horizons; and (3) a forced discontent.

Abandonment

Spending time in prison created a physical and geographical boundary between the women and their homeboys that gave them time to contemplate their lives on the streets and make decisions about where they saw themselves in the future. It was not until they were incarcerated that participants realized that they had been abandoned by their homeboys, who reportedly did not write, visit or send money for commissary. Arlene, 25, explained that she began to re-evaluate her lifestyle when she went to prison because she was neglected by her homeboys:

> When you get busted nobody does shit for you. It's like they forget about you – like you don't even exist, and you get tired of that. Once you come out of it they're like, 'Hey, we were looking for you.' [But they don't even care about you] when you're in jail.

Likewise, once Syria was released from prison she decided to avoid the neighborhood and her homeboys.

She reported that her homeboys did not visit or write her while she was in prison. Once she was released, however, gang members began to show interest in her once again and encouraged her to return to the neighborhood. She decided to move to a different community and stated: "I stay away. They call me; I don't answer."

Broader Horizons

While participants commonly made reference to the physical separation from their homies through incarceration, Marissa, mid-20s, spoke to the psychological separation that came through her time in prison. Spending time in prison led Marissa to realize that she wanted to create a better life for her children, while also forcing her to engage with people from diverse backgrounds who exposed her to possibilities that were beyond anything her previous experience had allowed her even to imagine.

For Marissa, exiting the gang was a complex process that involved many diverse experiences and exposure to a variety of people and events. She was not deterred from the lifestyle by her multiple arrests as a youth but rather by the various experiences she faced during her long, adult incarceration. Interestingly, Marissa's decision to leave the gang lifestyle, pursue gainful employment and other ambitions was influenced by white, middle-class women who were serving time for white-collar crimes. These women, she stated, exposed her to life possibilities to which she had never before been exposed and which she could never have imagined had she stayed in the barrio:

> It's tiring to be fighting all day and I want more out of life. I met people in there that have traveled the world, that are in there for white-collar crimes—and I would talk to them, and it would fascinate me, and I'm like, 'Shit, I want to do that.' So I was like, man, there's so much shit out there that I don't know about that I want to do. So it just kind of motivated me....it was taking the time in the process. It made me learn about myself most of all—who I am. It made me more confident; it made me less scared of the world, 'cuz I knew that if I could

face prison—if I could face all this—then why am I so scared to face the regular world?

A Forced Disconnect

Finally, some gang-affiliated individuals' conditions upon release from prison stipulated that they would be placed on a Civil Gang Injunction (CGI). Despite questions of constitutionality (see Myers 2008), CGIs were one means for compelling some of the women to stay away from their neighborhoods, from other known gang members, and to avoid gang-related activities such as "throwing up" (flashing gang signs) and wearing gang-related colors. While some of the participants on CGI reported avoiding these facets of gang life, most had only recently exited gang life, making it difficult to know how effective the CGI was in the long-term. For example, Natalie—who was ambivalent about giving up the lifestyle and contact with her homies—stated that she continued to kick it with her homeboys once in a while despite the CGI; however, she avoided doing this at their old hangout.

While there have been mixed results about the effectiveness of the ever-popular execution of CGIs (Hennigan and Sloane 2013), there has been increasing evidence suggesting that CGIs are generally ineffective in disrupting gang violence in the long-term. While gang injunctions appear to have immediate community-based effects, such as fewer incidences of reported gang violence, they are not effective at decreasing gang presence or violence in the long term (Maxson et al. 2005). As suggested by the participants, one major challenge involved in exiting the gang life is disassociating from those with whom one shares common experiences and a common identity.

Support Services: "They carried me when I couldn't walk".

At one point or another, virtually every participant acknowledged the importance of support services, or their absence, in both prison and the broader community. Consistent with other research (e.g., Decker et al. 2014), the participants in this study reported a lack of gang prevention and intervention programs, as well as a general lack of programming, services, and treatment to help young women who are associated, affiliated, or considering joining a gang. Marissa argued that the correctional system failed to address young women's needs:

> So if you put in all these people - and we're already all fucked up, traumatized - a lot of us grew up in a fucked up situation or whatnot, and you're just throwing us in there and keeping us away from the family, you're not doing nothing else but hurting us. You're not making anything to improve our lifestyle, to improve us.

The same was true of life on the street. Marginalized women, such as those in this study, are often traumatized from their experiences in their homes and from life on the streets, and they rarely received preventative services, intervention and rehabilitative treatment (including skills training and education). Because of limited community-based resources, many of the women were not aware of how to locate them and receive necessary services during crucial formative periods in their lives. When asked what types of supportive services they thought women needed in order to avoid gang life or to cease affiliating with gangs, participants were vocal about allocating more community-based resources and providing rehabilitative services in prison and the community. For example, as Kimberly explained,

> More outreach in the community... More homes. More of the help that is out here that can be mailed or something into the institutions. Maybe if people go into the institutions and let us know about the programs that are out here because we really don't get none of that. I mean, we have NA and AA... that goes in there, but it's not the same like, 'Hey, we have this program for you when you're ready to come.' Shelters. I don't know. Shelters. Reunification with their kids when they're still incarcerated because that's hard. They don't have that privilege as a

parent when you are incarcerated. You're like, just a number. You're just a number.

Despite its considerable gang population, in Los Angeles there are surprisingly few organizations that address the needs of gang-affiliated individuals in general and women specifically (Decker et al. 2014).

Conclusion

This research has contributed to the underdeveloped literature on the gang exiting process among female gang members. To our knowledge, this is one of the first studies that specifically focuses on the complexities of the disengagement process for gang-associated and formerly gang-affiliated women. Qualitative interviews were conducted in order to explore participants' narratives about exiting the gang lifestyle. While many of our findings complement previous research, it adds more nuanced analysis of gender-specific factors involved in the process.

While no sample of twenty-four women from one gang intervention program can claim to be "representative" of all (former) female gang members, our findings are consistent with the extant literature in every respect. We, too, found a variety of push and pull factors associated with gang desistance. Factors that pushed women in our sample away from the gang included a personal history often marked by violence and victimization at the hands of other gang members, having had their fill of criminal justice system involvement, and simply aging/maturing and looking for an alternative to gang life. Factors that pulled women away from the gang and into more pro-social roles included healthy relationships, bonds with pro-social others (even when those encounters occur in prison), and gainful employment. Indeed, our research adds nothing new to the list of factors already identified in more quantitative studies; its strength lies in the strength of qualitative methods to shed further light on what those stories look like on the ground, which shows how multiple factors combine and can cancel each other out or combine for greater strength – whether toward the positive or the negative – revealing them also to be more fragile, more uncertain, and showing

the importance of fostering agencies such as the one we visited that foster and allow the transitions of identity to complete. Perhaps not surprisingly, given that the sample of women we interviewed were at an organization known for empowering former gang members by removing many of the obstacles that stand in the path of social re-integration – e.g., providing job skills and histories where none previously existed; offering free tattoo removal to reduce obvious signs of former gang affiliation – the importance of supporting such organizations is reaffirmed. At the same time, given inconsistent access to such resources, future research should focus on community members who went through this transitional process without the assistance or support of an organization.

Traditionally, criminologists have defined "desistance" as a decrease, and eventual termination in criminal offending (Sampson and Laub, 1993). In this sense, gang desistance suggests that the individual is no longer involved with the gang, and no longer participates in gang-related activities. However this definition does not adequately explain the complexities involved in the process of disentangling oneself from the identity created through gang-affiliation, even after a member has ceased to affiliate (Berger et al. 2017; Decker et al. 2014; Pyrooz and Decker 2011). Much of the literature on crime desistance in general, and gang desistance in particular shows that people who engage in criminal behavior tend to mature, or, "age out" (Esbensen et al. 1999; Hirschi and Gottfredson 1983; Moffitt, 1993; Pyrooz and Decker 2011; Thornberry et al. 2003) of the lifestyle. The current study revealed results consistent with this life-course perspective. However, the idea of simply aging out of the gang lifestyle does not adequately convey the importance of other complex factors within the communities that are simultaneously responsible for changes in behavior and women's feelings about being part of the gang and help seal a commitment toward life transition.

Changes within the barrio over decades create changes within the community that lead to changes in street politics. New, up-and-coming gang-bangers in the neighborhood bring values and behaviors representative of the time that change gang dynamics.

The influx of new drugs also affects gang dynamics. As beliefs, values and dynamics change among the homeboys and homegirls, so, too, did these women's understandings of their place in the gang.

For participants in the current study, as in other recent studies (e.g., Berger et al. 2017; Decker et al. 2014), disengagement from the gang and gang lifestyle was a complex process that was neither rapid nor linear. Leaving was often influenced by myriad factors. The women explained how it was often only the cumulative effect of these factors that slowly eroded their identities as homegirls, their desire to participate in gang activity, and engage with their homeboys.

Participants explained how they exhibited a constrained form of agency by actively making the decision to become involved in their children's lives. Becoming a stronger presence in their children's lives was accomplished by distancing themselves emotionally and geographically from their homeboys and homegirls, from drugs and alcohol, and from engaging in the gang lifestyle, in general. While traditional discourse on mothering often labels women who abuse substances and engage in street life as "bad mothers," (Baker and Carson, 1999), we fail to try to understand the experiences that have impacted their decisions.

Some participants remained ambivalent about complete disengagement from their homeboys and homegirls, and their previous lifestyles. Arlene and Natalie, for example, explained the challenges they faced after they were placed on a civil gang injunction and forced to disengage from their gang and from their homeboys. They talked about how they vacillated between "kicking it" with their homeboys and trying to live a life that did not involve gang affiliation. Destiny, Alma, and Laura explained that once a person becomes part of a gang, they remain a part of it for the rest of their lives, even if they stop affiliating.

The idea of continued association may be the result of two factors. First, as Pyrooz and Decker (2011) suggest, it may be that after they disengage from the gang or move, they maintain contact with their friends or family members who still reside in the neighborhood or who are gang-affiliated. The other implication of continued association is that these women have, in part, internalized a gang identity. This is not to suggest that they continue to identify as gang members per se, but rather that their perceptions of their interactions and experiences are necessarily implicated in how they come to understand themselves, both past and present, and how they see their futures. Despite the crimes they committed, witnessed, and to which they were victims, substance abuse in which they engaged, and prison time served, the women explained that these were all part of a learning process. As one participant succinctly stated, "I'm proud of what I did because it made me who I am today."

Participants reported that, on one hand, they were presented with the idea of a healthier, safer lifestyle through their interactions with various people along the way. Some women were exposed to treatment while in recovery houses; some were provided treatment and programming in prison; some were offered the opportunity to participate in parenting and self-help programs; and some were encouraged by other's with whom they came into contact to strive for a better, pro-social lifestyle (Berger et al. 2017). These findings are consistent with the current literature regarding pull factors and gang disengagement (Laub and Sampson 2001). On the other hand, participants reported that many of these delivery systems were punitive and diminished the women's agency to make decisions for themselves about their own lives. Rather than waiting to address the structural inequalities that are responsible for fostering the conditions that, in part, create these problems, it would be far more constructive to provide individuals residing in marginalized communities with preventative services (Decker et al. 2014) such as reproductive education, substance abuse education, and after-school programming, and resources to cope with the challenges of pregnancy and parenthood.

Gang-affiliated Latinas/Chicanas are arguably constrained by the larger raced, classed, and gendered social structures within which they reside. However, they

also exhibit their ability to push against those systems which constrain them and perform their identity in a socially relevant way. In other words, these women are active agents in (re)constructing their own identities based upon various push and pull factors. In addition to identity (re)construction, participants offered their own expression of agency by making a decision to exit the gang. They exemplified the constant push and pull to remain in or leave the gang. They explained how they eventually made a choice that was relevant for them and their lives at a particular time and under specific circumstances. Finally, they demonstrated the ways in which they exhibited agency through the negotiation of their new lives and new identities. On one hand, they expressed an ability to see themselves in a new light—

living a lifestyle that they had never experienced before. On the other hand, they continued to struggle with their old identities which were so deeply entrenched in their self-image.

Footnotes

1.) While this was one example provided by some of the older women about their experiences, most participants, young and older, were nostalgic for "the old days" and made reference to the past and the idea that the homeboys and homegirls, during the time they were active, were more respectable.

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